

Prologue

ANGIE

Behind every man now alive stand thirty ghosts, for
that is the ratio by which the dead outnumber the
living.

—ARTHUR C. CLARKE, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*



The living are catching up with the dead. Back when Arthur C. Clarke was writing in 1968, they had us outnumbered by thirty to one. But now, we living humans have multiplied so quickly, we're down to fifteen ghosts apiece. Angie knows the facts: there are over 7 billion people alive, and 107 billion who once were.

Angie's dad is one of the dead, or so she'd believed. She'd often imagined him beside her, the leader of her little ghost tribe, fifteen strong. She pictured him the way he is in the photograph with her mom. He looks the same age she is now: seventeen. His smile wide and bright, his skin dark and his teeth white, his body muscular and long. He wears a backward baseball cap, like a '90s dork, she thinks. In the photo, he and her mom, Marilyn, are at the ocean, on a boardwalk. Her mom's wearing overalls over her bikini, hoop earrings glinting, long sun-gold hair falling around her pale face. She's leaning against him like she belongs there, her head thrown back in laughter, his arm draped over her shoulder. All that blue water behind them, seeming to go on until it meets the sky.

She first discovered the picture a year ago, while she was getting ready for Sam Stone's sixteenth birthday dinner.

She'd been rifling through her mom's drawers looking for lipstick while Marilyn was at work, and at some point the search expanded. She found herself digging, though she didn't know for what. Then, at the back of her mom's underwear drawer, she found a wooden box. Inside was a worn manila envelope stuffed full and sealed, and beneath it, the photograph.

Angie stared down at the grinning black boy who was staring back at her, and though she'd never seen him before, she knew her father instantly. For a split second, she wondered who he was with. As it came into focus, Angie saw that, of course, the girl was her mom. She looked so carefree. Young. Full of possibility. Happy.

Suddenly Angie's chest felt hollow. She wanted to pull the boy out of the photo. To make him grow up into a man, to make him be her dad. To make him make her mom smile like that again.

Instead she tried to put herself inside of the picture—to imagine what it would have been like to be there with her parents—how the sun would have felt, how the ocean might have smelled. And though she's never even been to the beach before, she could almost hear the far-off sound of the waves under their bright laughter.

Angie has one more year of high school, and then comes The Future. She has no idea what she wants to “do with her life,” where she belongs, or how she'll ever be enough to make good on everything her mom has given up for her. When she finds herself struggling to breathe, her chest tight, the



anxiety nameless and uncertain, Angie thinks of the seven billion humans and counting living on earth. The unfathomable numbers ease the panic, and she starts to feel light—the kind of light-headed that you get from laughing too hard or staying up too late, or both at once. She’s smaller than a drop in an ocean. So what does it matter what one girl—Angela Miller—does with her life?

She considers herself average, unremarkable: she likes history and science (particularly biology), running hard, grilled cheese with burned edges, soccer, coffee with soy cream, vinyl records, hip-hop blasting in the privacy of her headphones; she comes armed with lists like this, prepared for the necessary profiles, meant to give some practiced but tenuous definition to “herself,” whoever that is. The feelings that loom inside her, threatening to spill over, she had diligently learned to keep at bay. But today, everything will change.

Angie holds the photograph of her parents in her hands now, listening to Janet Jackson sing “I Get Lonely” on a Walkman she found at a Goodwill for \$2.99. The song plays from a mixtape labelled for MISS MARI MACK, LOVE, JAMES in faded blue pen. The early-morning sun is already turning too hot, piercing, chasing Angie into the shaded part of the porch. Flecks of cotton drift through the warm air, pooling in the gutters like summer snow. In front of her sits a duffel bag with T-shirts and socks, underwear, and her two favorite dresses carefully folded inside, along with the envelope from her mom’s drawer and the listings for Justin Bell between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-five, or of unknown age, living in the Los Angeles

area. Marilyn left for work almost an hour ago. When she comes back, she'll find her daughter gone.

Angie has lived in this house with her mom since the day Marilyn picked her up from fifth grade and told her she had a surprise.

"What is it?" Angie asked, when Marilyn didn't produce any of the usual treats—a Milky Way, gummy bears, a chapter book, or a new set of colored pencils.

"Just wait," her mom answered, "this is the best surprise yet."

She got on I-40, then pulled off and drove through Albuquerque's Old Town, a part of the city they visited only when Angie wanted to go to the natural history museum. Were they going now? But no, her mom was weaving through streets with huge cottonwood trees and ivy-covered houses. And then, as they reached the edge of the neighborhood and the houses started to get smaller—little flat adobes with nicely kept yards—she parked in a driveway. The house was short and squat, with a blue roof.

Angie turned to her mom. "Come on!" Marilyn urged, girlish excitement in her voice.

Angie followed her mom up to the front door as Marilyn fumbled with her key ring. Whose house were they at?

As the lock clicked open, Marilyn looked at Angie and said, "Go on, go inside. It's ours."

She was only ten, but Angie understood then that her mom had given her what she herself had never had—a house to grow up in. The two of them painted it together: blue in the living room, yellow in the kitchen. Ocean green in Angie's bedroom.

Angie's always loved the thick walls that stay cool through

the summer mornings, the rounded archways, the worn paisley couch where she and Marilyn would stay up on weekends watching romantic comedies, eating popcorn sprinkled with Parmesan or frozen root beer float bars.

When she was little, Angie believed she had the kind of mom other kids ought to be jealous of—one who packed the best lunches, with carefully made sandwiches cut into triangles, and made the best brownies for bake sales. She'd wake Angie in the mornings when Angie didn't want to get out of bed by blasting "Dancing in the Street," and together they'd spin around the house laughing in their pajamas. Her mom decorated for the holidays, including New Year's and Halloween. Every Fourth of July she'd make red-white-and-blue cupcakes and cook hot dogs in the pan. She'd buy sparklers, and once it got dark enough, Marilyn and Angie would stand outside in their garden, writing their names with the glittering wands. It didn't strike Angie as strange then, when she was a kid, that it was just the two of them. That they didn't go to other people's barbecues, that when her mom would drop Angie off at friends' houses, she never stayed to socialize with the other mothers, who often spoke to Marilyn in patronizing tones. That at parents' nights at Montezuma Elementary, she was the youngest mom by far, and though Angie would notice some of the dads being nice to her, Marilyn always turned away to search for her daughter. Even when her mom eventually shut the door on Manny—the first (and last) man to come to their house for dinner—Angie had learned to accept the loss.

Ever since Angie was a little kid, Marilyn has told her she's her beauty, her light, her reason for life. Her precious little angel. But sometimes, when she thought Angie was busy with a coloring book or the television, Angie would see her staring out the window, tears running down her cheeks.

As Sam's Jeep turns the corner and parks in front of the driveway, Angie presses stop on the Walkman and pulls off the headphones. She thinks of her mom coming home to an empty house tonight, and she almost turns to go back inside. But instead, she picks up her duffel and heads toward the car.

Sam wears a rumpled white T-shirt, a pair of cutoff sweatpants that hang on his tall, narrow frame, and mirrored aviator shades. His hair is the same kind of messy it's always been.

"Hey," Angie says, wishing she could see his eyes.

Sam merely nods in greeting, takes her bag from her, and stuffs it into the back seat. Angie climbs into the car, which smells vaguely of marijuana and seems to be storing several weeks' worth of breakfast burrito wrappers. The '90s Cherokee that Sam named Mabel gives an unhappy rumbling noise as it starts.

As they roll down Angie's street, Sam remains wordless and turns up the music.

Angie glances back at her home disappearing behind them, and then she looks down at the girl in the picture with her dad. The one who must have sped through the night with the windows down and the music loud, inhaling the scent of the sea, the one who must have known the feeling of freedom and air

rushing into her lungs and a life, a new life, about to start. The one who must have known the way that falling in love brings the world closer, as if everything were in reach. At least that's how Angie imagines it.



MARILYN

18 Years Earlier



Marilyn is seventeen today. She stares back at her own eyes reflected in the car window, transposed over the man on the corner wearing a cash for gold sign and a woman pushing a shopping cart full of clattering bottles. They pass an Arco station where a crew of boys with backward baseball caps carry away cigars and sodas. The backs of her thighs stick to the seat, and she can feel sweat beading around her hairline. The classic end-of-summer Los Angeles heat wave has hit. It has to be at least a hundred degrees out, and the '80s Buick, loaded down with boxes, has no working AC.

"It's just for a little while," her mom, Sylvie, rambles on. "Until we get another break, you know. You have your appointment with LA Talent in a couple weeks."

Marilyn nods without turning her mother's way.

Her last audition (where she was to be one in a family of four out to buy a television) was a downright disaster. She'd understood the stakes, and all morning, sitting in the waiting room with the other girls, her chest had felt tight, her stomach queasy. She tried to concentrate on her book—*The White Album* by Joan Didion—but she'd been stuck on the first paragraph, unable to focus, rereading the same opening sentence: *We tell ourselves stories in order to live*. As she'd

gotten in front of the camera, she found she could hardly breathe.

When her mother came to pick her up, Marilyn didn't mention the sense of panic, the dizziness, or the casting assistant who'd brought her a glass of water and shot an *oh god* look to the director across the room. She endured Sylvie's look of deep disappointment—brows arched in tension—when a week later their supper of Lean Cuisines was interrupted by the news that Marilyn had failed yet again. As Sylvie hung up the phone and stared out the window at the pool and its plastic lounge chairs, Marilyn pushed a piece of wilted broccoli around her plate.

After a long moment of silence Sylvie poured herself a third glass of white wine and turned to Marilyn. "It's a wasteland around here, really. I've been thinking we should move up near Hollywood, get closer to it all," she said, too brightly. "I mean, who knows, you could run into a casting director in the grocery store." As if they weren't fleeing the apartment they hadn't paid rent on in months.

Marilyn knows her mom would let her go ass-first in a photo (like the girl sprawled on the billboard over the freeway, advertising jeans) if it meant the money that would get them into a shiny new house in the hills above the city, above everything, where she believes they belong. As far as Sylvie's concerned, a new and better life is just around the corner, the revolving door to the future a mere step away.

As a child, perhaps Marilyn believed in Sylvie's dreams of a better place, but by now, she's given up on ever walking through the door in her mother's fantasies. She holds tightly to the thought that it's only another year until she'll be eighteen,

moving away for college, beginning a life that belongs to her. She sees the future like a little diamond of light at the end of the tunnel; she's learned to fix her gaze on it, to struggle toward it, to keep that diamond in her mind.

A car honks at Sylvie as she holds up traffic behind her to make a left turn onto Washington Boulevard. Marilyn takes in the sunburned look of the streets, the smell of meat drifting from a taco truck mixed with the faint scent of the ocean, the bright bougainvillea growing up a chain-link fence.

Sylvie ignores the honking and navigates the Buick onto South Gramercy Place. Marilyn vaguely recognizes the residential street lined with dilapidated apartment buildings. LOW DEPOSIT advertises one banner. She notices a red flower box hanging out of a window, a laundry line where clothes wave like flags. A man leans against the building below, dragging from a cigarette.

"Marilyn, look. You can see the sign from here." The car swerves through the middle of the road as Sylvie turns around in her seat to point to the white letters: H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D on the mountain in the distance, standing stalwart through the haze of smog that comes with the summer heat.

"Mmm-hmm." Marilyn does her best to ignore the dread building in her chest as they continue down the block and pull up to 1814—a two-story duplex at the corner, with crumbling pink stucco and an unkempt yard, where a few orange trees survive nonetheless.

* * *

Lauryl Hill's voice drifts up from a radio in the apartment below: *How you gonna win . . .* Sylvie fumbles for the key under the mat, the curls in her dyed blond hair falling loose in the heat and sticking against her pale cheeks. As they enter, Marilyn is transported back in time by the familiar scent—some odd mix of cigars, Febreze, and cooked meat.

Pieces of furniture lie haphazardly about the room—the couch slightly askew from the wall, the coffee table butting diagonally against it, holding a candy jar filled mostly with butterscotch wrappers. Late-afternoon sun streams through barred windows, casting spots of light on the shag carpet.

For a moment they both just stand there.

"Well, this could be worse," Sylvie says with forced cheer. Marilyn wishes that somehow she'd been able to do better. That she could have managed just one more commercial, one more success that would have kept them away from here.

In the tiny bedroom that was once hers and will be again, Marilyn opens the windows, letting in a burst of hot air. It's already past five o'clock, but the heat hasn't let up. She stares out at a distant line of skinny palm trees, their tops wavering. She thinks they look like scattered soldiers, the last ones still standing in the battleground of the city, and raises her hands in two opposing L shapes in front of her eyes—the frame of a photograph. With a blink—her imaginary shutter—she freezes the image in her mind.

"You're so beautiful." Sylvie's voice startles her. She turns to see her mom watching her from the doorway, as the radio from below goes to commercial and a voice instructs her to *double your pleasure, double your fun*. Marilyn wants to

collapse on the floor, suddenly exhausted.

As Sylvie moves to wrap her arms around her, Marilyn remembers the day—almost ten years ago now—that they left Woody's and moved into the then-brand-new apartment they've just left behind in Orange County. Sylvie loved the pool and the fresh carpet, but Marilyn's favorite part was the air that didn't smell like anything. She'd been in her bedroom putting her clothes away neatly in a new pink dresser when she heard her mom scream her name.

She rushed into the living room to find Sylvie in tears and her own face on the TV. Marilyn-on-screen opened the top of a My Little Pony and pulled out a jeweled bracelet, exclaiming *There's a surprise for me!* before kissing the top of Twilight Sparkle's head. The image of herself gave Marilyn an uneasy feeling—that wasn't her, was it? Not really. No. She found herself wanting to back away from the screen, but when Sylvie pulled Marilyn to her and said, in whispered awe, "You're so beautiful. My baby girl. You're on TV," she couldn't help but revel in her mom's pride.

Marilyn now lingers in Sylvie's arms, engulfed in her perfume—Eternity by Calvin Klein? Sylvie's scent is a rotating kaleidoscope of samples from the counter at Macy's, where she spends her workdays convincing customers that a bottle of Chanel or Burberry is a potion powerful enough to transform them into the kind of women they want to be.

"It'll all work out. You'll see," Sylvie says, almost to herself.

She releases Marilyn from her grip just as suddenly as she'd embraced her. "Let's unload now, so we have time for birthday dinner."

Marilyn can see her mom is working, even harder than Marilyn herself, not to crumble.

“Great,” Marilyn replies, and kisses her on the cheek.

Moving boxes up the flight of stairs goes slowly. By the time the sun drops and the day starts to give up, the Buick’s two-thirds empty and they’re both sticky, struggling with one of the heaviest boxes in the load, containing Marilyn’s books.

As Marilyn backs up the stairs, the muscles in her arms burning, she sees a man’s figure—tall, broad-shouldered, dark-skinned, head down—crossing the street toward them. She blows a strand of hair away from her face and regrets that her hands are full, because she wants to lift them into a frame, to take a picture of him in her mind as he steps beneath a jacaranda tree and into its puddle of purple petals collected in the gutter.

As he walks quickly up the pavement toward their building, she can see that he must be close to her own age: though he looks physically grown, he still has the wide eyes of a boy. He wears basketball shorts, sneakers, and a white T-shirt, soaked down the front with sweat. Tattoos cover his left arm.

“Marilyn! Stay with it! The time to go on one of your little journeys is not while we’re carrying a load of your bricks,” Sylvie complains. And, perhaps hearing the noise, he turns and sees Marilyn staring. She watches him as she struggles with the weight of the box, manages a backward step up the stairs.

He looks away, but after a moment, he’s climbing toward them.

“You need help?” His voice is different than she would have imagined. Softer, shyer. The sound of it seems to match the gentle blue of the early-evening sky.



"My goodness, yes! What a darling. Someone must have sent us an angel." Sylvie immediately drops the box, never one to refuse the charity of others.

"I'm Sylvie, and this is my daughter, Marilyn. It's her birthday."

Marilyn is grateful for the exertion, which has undoubtedly already turned her cheeks pink, disguising her blush.

"Happy birthday," he says simply. She thinks she can feel the heat radiating off his body.

"Thanks." She lets her eyes drift upward to the gulls floating high against the pink clouds. She tries not to look at his shirt sticking to his muscular body.

"And you are?" Sylvie prompts.

"James."

"James. Good to know we have a strapping young lad in the building."

"You guys moving in?"

"Yes yes. We're up there. My daughter's an actress, we thought it would be better if she were closer to Hollywood."

Marilyn knows how silly this must sound—she's obviously not an actual actress, or they wouldn't be moving here. But James just nods and lifts the box, his body so close to Marilyn's that for a fleeting moment she can smell his skin. Though she can hear the effort in his breathing, his face doesn't indicate any strain as he carries the books into the apartment.

"We've got a few more in the car, you wouldn't mind terribly would you," Sylvie says (more than asks). Marilyn winces.

"Sure," James says, and she can't tell if he's irritated.

Sylvie stays inside, making a show of looking busy as she

starts to unpack, but Marilyn follows James up and down the stairs with the lighter boxes, determined to do her part. He laps her on every round and doesn't make much eye contact.

When they've finished, Sylvie thanks James again and Marilyn follows him downstairs so she can lock up the car. The sky's beginning to darken, and the heat of the day has suddenly given way to the empty cool of desert night. She feels a chill, her clothes still damp with sweat.

At the bottom of the staircase, he turns to her. "So, how old?"

For a moment, Marilyn's confused, before she remembers it's her birthday. "Seventeen."

He nods. "Me too."

She looks out at the sidewalk, littered with scattered trash—a Coke bottle, a crushed beer can, a Carl's Jr. bag, of all things. Carl's Jr. was the last commercial she'd booked, five years ago. Residual checks don't last forever.

"So where you guys coming from?"

"Orange County. We're staying with my uncle again. We lived here when we first came to LA."

"You're an actress?"

"No, not really. My mom wishes I were. I was in a couple of commercials forever ago . . . it's her thing, but I've been playing along for so long I guess it's become routine."

"Yeah, I feel that. I mean, you gotta be what you gotta be for the people you love. It's not always you, unfortunately."

Marilyn nods. She can smell someone's dinner cooking, can hear a distant siren.

"Thanks again for helping us."

"No problem."

She smiles at him and for the first time he seems to be really looking at her.

"Later," he says.

As Marilyn watches him disappear into the apartment below her own new home, her skin feels prickly, her senses uncannily acute. The building at 1814 South Gramercy suddenly seems beautiful.

Marilyn's uncle does not look happy to see them when he comes in an hour later to find Marilyn unpacking dishes and Sylvie on the phone with Domino's. Woody's a slight man, with long graying hair pulled back into a ponytail and a tiny gut.

"Hello, ladies," he says dryly. "Welcome back."

Sylvie hangs up the phone and turns to him. "Thank you for letting us stay," she gushes in her best Sweet'N Low voice.

"You were my brother's wife," he says remotely.

Sylvie hides her wince fairly well, but Marilyn catches it. To Woody's credit, he did agree to give up his bedroom for Sylvie and sleep on the couch. Marilyn's tiny room, it seems, had mostly been storing boxes, which now litter the hall.

"Like we talked about," Sylvie adds quickly, "it will only be for a bit. In the meantime, we'll make lovely housemates. The place will be spic and span. You won't have to worry about a thing."

"I do love your mashed potato casserole," Woody hints.

"I'm planning on making it for you tomorrow. I've just ordered us a pizza for this evening. You know, it's your niece's seventeenth birthday," she prompts.

Woody looks at Marilyn, sizing her up. Since they moved out, Marilyn has seen him only a handful of times, the last of

which was two Christmases ago when he came down to the OC with a twelve-pack and passed out on their couch.

"Well," he says, "you sure have grown up since last you were here. Even since the last time I saw you. Grab me a beer, would you, doll?"


She goes to the fridge and pulls out a Miller Light, briefly pressing the cold bottle against her cheek. She feels vaguely feverish. Though it's cooled down outdoors, Woody's apartment seems to have caged the day's heat.

"Get one for yourself if you like, it's your birthday," he says. Marilyn does not.

When the pizza arrives, Sylvie insists they put birthday candles in, which she's managed to fish out from one of the unpacked boxes. Marilyn leans over the flames that are starting to drip spots of pink wax onto the cheese: *I wish that by this time next year, I' ll be far away from here, in college in New York City, beginning a life that belongs to me . . .* But as she closes her eyes to blow out the candles, it's James she sees behind her lids, the image of him tugging at her like an undertow.

Lying awake atop the creaky single bed, between the worn My Little Pony sheets her mom bought her years ago, Marilyn hears muffled voices floating in through her window. One of them sounds like James's, and there's another, a kid's voice. She strains to hear what they're saying, but they talk softly and she can only make out words: *Nana . . . shoes . . . school . . . promise . . .* A faint bit of laughter.

The voices go quiet, and she's alone with the emptiness of the room where she once spent her first sleepless nights in the



city. She stares up at the familiar patterns in the ceiling as a helicopter circles overhead. Then, moments later, there's music. She thinks she recognizes the melody, and the sweet voice that comes in from the night. *Try me, try me . . .* She imagines James in bed listening, and the sound becomes an invisible bridge between them. She finally drifts off, sharing his song.



Marilyn wakes in a sweat to early-morning light flooding in through her window. Outside an ice cream truck plays its song, over and over. She surveys the boxes strewn around her, her chest tightening. She takes a deep breath and holds her hands up to frame a photograph of the detritus of her life, blinks, and takes a picture.

She'd discovered her love of photography when she joined yearbook last year, mostly as a means of having a worthwhile extracurricular to add to her college apps. But instead of simply photographing her fellow students, she soon found herself using the school-issued 35-millimeter camera at every chance she got—capturing a child struggling to be released from his father's grip, a girl tucking a white rockrose behind her ear, the streaks of a plane left behind in the pale blue sky, Sylvie on a plastic lounge chair at the apartment pool leaning down to paint her toes. As Marilyn looked through the lens, her surroundings had become something worth watching. Worth keeping. She began to go to the library to look through photography books, studying the work of Robert Frank, Carrie Mae Weems, Sally Mann, Gordon Parks. She'd discovered that by learning to click the shutter at the right moment, you could make art out of anything. But, of course, she'd had to return the camera

to school at the end of the year. In its absence, she's begun taking mind-pictures—an effort to salvage the much-needed connection to the world around her.

When Marilyn slips out of her room, she finds Woody shirtless, smoking a cigar, planted in front of an old computer with a Planet Poker logo on the screen, above a green card table and several animated players.

"Morning," she says.

He coughs. "Dear," he replies, an edge in his voice, "you'll have to make yourself scarce when I'm working. Can't afford to break my concentration."

"No prob—" she starts to say, but the look on his face suggests it would be better to opt for silence.

Woody's made money at cards for as long as she's known him, but apparently "work" now extends to online poker. When he first moved to LA he'd landed a job at the Ford factory, her mom once explained, but when it closed down he gave himself over to gambling full-time, hoping to become the next Amarillo Slim—onetime winner of the World Series of Poker who appeared on talk shows, charming the country with his slow Texas drawl.

Marilyn pockets the twenty-dollar bill Sylvie had slipped under her door along with a list of groceries to pick up for dinner. She steps outside, relishing the slightest lift of a breeze against her skin. The hot air smells of a mix of faint flowers and exhaust. She has no idea where the nearest store is, so she sets off wandering and finally finds a bodega, where she purchases her mom's dinner ingredients plus a Mexican Coke



and a banana—her breakfast. By the time she makes it back to the apartment an hour later, she's sweaty and sticky. As she crosses the street toward 1814, she sees James step outside, his shirt off, carrying a hummingbird feeder. As he moves to hang it near a window, she notices a tattoo of the dark outline of a bird on the back of his left shoulder. Without thinking, she sets down the heavy bags and lifts her hands, framing his V-shaped back, the shadow-bird on his shoulder, a real live hummingbird hovering uncertainly some distance above it. Just as he starts to turn, just as his eyes become visible, she blinks and snaps the imaginary photo.

It takes her a split second to reemerge into reality and realize how odd she must seem, standing at the edge of the driveway staring at James through her rectangular hands. She quickly drops them and waves. He frowns and does the same. His gaze leaves her feeling naked, as if with a single glance he could strip away her layers of defense.

As he turns and goes inside, the hummingbird that was hovering descends on its feeder, tiny wings fragile and fluttering.

Marilyn tiptoes past Woody, who's exactly as she left him, and spends the rest of the day cleaning and unpacking. Still looking at the image of James behind her eyes, she scrubs away the layers of dust on the sills, the hidden grime on the floors. She scours the bathroom with bleach, and is oddly soothed by the smell that erases the scent of the house, creating a blank chemical slate. She puts her mom's clothes into drawers and then unpacks her own. She lines her books in neat, single rows

against the walls and tapes up her photographs— favorites she'd copied on the Xerox machine at the library.

From the bottom of the last box she pulls out a stuffed lion with matted hair, holding on to a red heart, now just by a thread. Though she doesn't remember getting him, she knows Braveheart (as she'd named him long ago) was a gift from her father. She tries to recall his face, as she often does, and feels the usual sense of vertigo. He can't be seen head on; he's like a turning kaleidoscope, a boat drifting farther out to sea. Her memories of her youngest years all feel that way—fuzzy and fleeting, as if she were recalling a childhood that hadn't belonged to her.

When Marilyn thinks of her father's death, it's Sylvie's scream she hears. He'd had a heart attack while he was at work. In the following weeks—or months, she couldn't know—there was the murmur of the television, their small Amarillo home filling with the scent of Sylvie's Salem Lights, possessions sold off at a yard sale, neighbors with uneasy smiles who came to wish them farewell. The quiet dread that crept in and nestled in Marilyn's chest as she stared out the window of the car moving over the sun-bleached, wide-open desert landscape—an earth without borders. On the second day of the trip, she fell asleep beside the boxes and woke in the night as the car climbed a dark road, revealing an ocean of dotted lights spread in the distance. For a moment, in her half sleep, she was disoriented, thought she was seeing stars. Were they upside down? Had the sky fallen to the ground? The touch of her mother's hand, squeezing her own. "Look, baby. We're here. City of Angels."

* * *

Sylvie's starting supper—the mashed potato casserole Woody's so fond of—when she turns to Marilyn, who's sitting at the table peeling potatoes. "You forgot the milk!"

"It wasn't on the list," Marilyn says, sure of it, because she'd checked the basket against her mother's scrawl twice.

"Yes, it was. Now what? Woody will be back any minute . . ."

"I can go get some," Marilyn offers, though she resents being blamed for the oversight.

"There's no time. It'll take you half an hour at least. Go ask that boy—the one who helped us with the boxes."

She's embarrassed by the thought of knocking on James's door asking for milk, but Marilyn knows her mother's worried Woody will have had one too many drinks during his "shift" at the casino, that she hopes to keep things calm with the promised casserole.

So she steps into the sticky twilight and hurries downstairs. As she stands in front of the door next to the hummingbird feeder and knocks, she's surprised by the intensity with which her heart pounds against her chest.

A few moments later a boy answers. He looks maybe eleven—on the very precipice of adolescence, without having yet crossed its border. His features are a near-perfect copy of James's, minus the self-possessed reserve, plus a layer of baby fat.

"What's up?"

"Hi. I'm Marilyn. We just moved in upstairs."

"I know. My brother said."

"Oh." Her heart rate doubles. What exactly had James said? Enough for his brother to recognize her at least.

“You live with the weird old dude.”

“Um, yeah. He’s my uncle.”

“Justin? Who’s there?”

A man’s deep voice comes from inside.

“The girl!” And just like that, Justin takes her hand and pulls her through the doorway.

An older man in his late sixties sits on the couch watching *Jeopardy!* He’s tall, broad-shouldered, with a bald head and a warm smile. Their grandfather, Marilyn guesses.

“Hi, um, I’m Marilyn. We just moved in upstairs?” For some reason it comes out as a question.

He nods. “Alan Bell.”

“James! The girl’s here!”

Justin calls out. He drops Marilyn’s hand, leaving her standing in the center of the living room, smells of dinner drifting in. The colorful furniture is worn in a nice, lived-in way. The bumpy walls, so ugly at Woody’s, are hardly noticeable beneath the family photos, children’s handprints in clay, and carefully arranged artwork.

Alan looks at her expectantly. “You’re here for James?”

“No, I—I was just, um, I forgot milk at the store today and my mom needs some for her recipe, just a cup and a half. I didn’t know if you had any . . . we could borrow.”

“Of course,” Alan says, just as James emerges. The way he eyes her makes Marilyn feel like an intruder.

“James, get her a glass of milk,” his grandfather instructs. A woman in fuzzy pink slippers and a matching pink robe shuffles in from the next room, her eyes creased with smile lines, hands covered in flour.

“And who’s this?” she asks. Marilyn’s surprised by her voice, which is soft and high, like a young girl’s.

“Marilyn. She’s just borrowing milk,” James says.

“You’re a pretty girl. Don’t let him get after you.” The woman grins as James disappears into the next room. If he heard his grandmother’s comment, he doesn’t acknowledge it. “I’m Rose,” she offers, and then calls out to Justin to set the table while Alan calls out to the television: “Gin!”

Marilyn turns to see the clue on the screen: *It’s the liquor you might drink while playing a card game of the same name.* When a bespectacled contestant guesses the same right answer, Alan slaps his hand on his knee.

Marilyn feels a hot kind of longing arise in her chest. Longing for a family like this one, a family that laughs and shouts and sets the table for dinner together, a family that lives in a place that smells good, that feels like a real home. She can’t help but let her eyes drift toward the photos on the wall. There’s one of James and Justin as young boys, with a woman in a red flowered dress and a brilliant smile.

James approaches with the glass of milk and catches her lost in the picture.

“Here.”

“Thank you.”

As his hand brushes hers, she feels a spark. But he looks away, toward the TV: *A fisherman tricks one of these creatures into letting itself be trapped in a bottle.*

Alan is stumped.

“What is a genie,” James says quietly.

Marilyn studies his face.

“Later,” he says.

“Bye!” Justin calls.

“Nice to meet you,” Marilyn stutters out to the room, but James is already opening the door to let her out.