

Before you die, offering half the sandwich you made yourself that morning to the younger, quiet girl at the edge of your table, you catch the eye of a boy entering the cafeteria.

Without a thought, you smile.

A minute after you die, your brain continues to hum, aimless and gray and not-yet aware that the body it directs and inhabits has ceased breathing, that the heart has stopped beating, and that you have stopped being.

The doctor, soaked calf to sternum with blood that has grown tacky and stiff in her scrubs, leaves the table long enough to change before finding your mother and sister in the waiting room. She tells them that, despite the stents and transfusions and stitches, you couldn't be saved. Your family crumples into the chairs they had refused upon arrival. Neither screams or wails, but they press their faces into their palms, their knees, and each other, and the stains will eventually wash out of your mother's blouse, but she never wears it again anyways.

An hour after you die, the tension in your muscles that have bound them since they formed in the womb fades. Your pupils dilate, a mockery of what you had only just learned was a sign of attraction. Your veins begin to collapse as the blood splits and settles and drains away. In the metal drawer where they store your cooling body, you grow as frigid and white as porcelain.

In that hour, your sister and mother move for the first time in years. Their joints are stiff from the blue plastic seats and ache as one rises to get a drink from the metallic-tasting water fountain. The other's hand hovers over the call button on her phone. The background hasn't been your picture in some time.

Some part of them knows he is there, at the hospital with you.

A day after you die, the stiffness in your body has come and gone. Your back is mottled with dark, pooling blood, the only lightness remaining on your shoulder blades and hips and heels, points of bright white against the bruised purple and maroon, dead stars in a dead sky.

That day, your sister rises early, and your mother hasn't slept at all. One makes breakfast for both with shaking hands, calling out when it's finished. Your mother doesn't respond, and your sister seeks her out through the winding, nonsensical halls of the duplex-turned-ranch house. She finds your mother in your room. The bed is unmade, the light off, and the mint green accent wall is sickly yellow in the early morning light. Your mother lays at the foot of the bed, staring up at the little plastic stars you glued to the ceiling when you were eight, and the tears leaking from the corners of her eyes slip into the graying hair at her temples.

A week after you die, you're embalmed. The soft, warm parts within you are scooped and scraped and sucked out through a stainless-steel trocar stabbed into your abdomen and pushed sluggishly from your veins down a drain. You are painted and sewn shut and slid with care into nylon stockings and the mauve lace dress you were going to wear to high school graduation.

At your funeral, your sister steps up to the podium, only to find her throat and lips and eyes dry. She has cried herself out, in the quiet corners of the house, in her car, in the hallway behind the chapel. She reads a passage from the last book you called your favorite, one in a long, long line. She looks out over the room when she's finished. Family and friends only take up the first few rows of seats, heads slung low and eyes downcast and stitches holding. This isn't the first funeral some of them are attending this week.

A month after you die, the chemicals that had been pumped through your veins had slowed the natural process but hadn't stopped it. The little things in your gut that had helped you eat now eat you, carving out what was left of the soft muscles beneath your skin and filling the cavity with gas. The wood cracks and caves and lets in the dirt, and from the long, y-shaped cut in your chest and the puckered wounds that litter your arms and legs sprout wriggling, pearly maggots that gnaw away the meat. The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out. The dirt around you is dead and still, yet bursts with life – bugs and beetles and roots and blooms.

The suitcase your sister has been living out of disappears under the bed, the clothes tucked neatly back into the dresser she never thought she'd need again. Your mother cooks constantly, egg bakes and cookie-topped brownies to share with the neighbors. Your friends and family come over on the holidays – the doctors say loneliness kills.

He's on the news that morning. Fresh out of the hospital and ushered to a squad car. The next time he's on the screen he's wearing a suit.

They're holding a trial for the boy who killed you.

A year after, what skin you have left is as dry as paper and tough as leather. The cartilage in your knees and your twice-broken nose harbors knots of eggs where the larvae will spring forth and feast upon what little remains. There are tattered bits of lace around you, blending in with the dirt.

That year, the first memorial vigil is held in the cafeteria. Your mother and sister attend and cradle your youngest friend as her wails bounce off the empty rafters and bricks and drywall-patches, begging for a trade.

That year, he's on the news just twice: once to announce the sentence, once to see him disappear behind dead, gray cinderblock walls.

Ten years later, you are bones, white and clean in the dirt. The bugs and beetles have eaten their fill, carved out the secret pockets of marrow within and left nothing but calcium to the earth, and the indigestible nylon stockings, full of holes.

Your mother still lives in the house, not the nursing home she will eventually relent to, and your sister comes and goes with the seasons. Moving on has been a contentious topic, one that will eventually chase your sister from beneath the weather-worn eaves. Nothing is more contentious than your closed door, the dresser and books and knick-knacks gathering dust. Your sister thinks they should donate them, start a fund. Your mother will never let them go.

He's on the news again. He died in jail.

Your sister closes the article and sets her phone down on the counter like that one motion can put him out of her life once and for all. It can't. Your mother passes in the night. The corners of her mouth are curled, tight, into her cheeks. Her hair has gone full gray and spreads against the pillow like a dull, dead halo.

In the dirt, you're little more than dust.

