

Funeral

Carmen is the one who finds Sarah's body. It is in the shed beside the dock behind the blackened burnt shell of a house in the field where they like to laugh. Sarah baked a blueberry pie that afternoon and the scent must've clung to her because three bees linger over her chest, her neck, her stomach. Carmen takes a black marker and writes, "majic" on the inside of Sarah's left wrist. She wonders why no one has thought to move her.

Al, the pastor who was Sarah's dealer and will lead her funeral, watches UFC. He considers jacking off, but doesn't know where the remote is. The last time he got off to men hitting each other it felt like sinning. His hookah is packed with majic. Doug, from two streets down, comes over and wants to buy some. The men watch UFC. Al considers his Sunday sermon and decides it will be about Abraham.

Carmen takes a single light bulb from her basement that day. The shed where Sarah died has no power. Carmen leaves the lightbulb on the dirt floor in the curve Sarah's bent leg makes. Sarah's brown hair, with its sun-faded blonde streaks, is not tangled. There is a spot of blueberry filling still smeared on her right cheek. One of Sarah's pies got first place in the county fair last August, and she considered the award an order from the community to bake pies for everyone. Carmen decides to fill the shed with light.

It takes Carmen half an hour to drive to the station for questioning, on her first day of summer. A country song chronicling a woman killing her lover plays in the waiting room. The brochures about "How to Know if You Are an Alcoholic" are ready on the table for the drunks brought in to sleep a night in jail. The officer is big bellied and red haired. He sits across from Carmen at a desk he shares with other people, judging by the collection of assorted family photos.

He says, "Tell me what happened."

"I was walking over to meet her. There's a field between our houses. It's kind of a forest too at parts I guess. And it's not right between, it's my house and then the field and then two more houses and then Sarah's house."

He says, "Okay. So what happened?"

"I went to meet her. She wasn't in the field."

"Why were you meeting?"

"To see each other."

"What happened?"

"She was on the floor of the shed. She was dead."

"And you did what?"

"I sat there awhile and then I ran next door and called you."

He says, "Do you know what killed her?"

"No."

Carmen thinks it was probably majic.

When the officer first called Rae, Sarah's mother, to tell her, she didn't believe that Sarah was dead. He said that it could have been the majic, a drug Rae hadn't heard of before. The officer tells her it's new, too new to be illegal, a local herb that no one ever thought was fatal. When it's fresh the leaves are deep purple, but dried, they become almost black. When the leaves are brewed for tea, the water turns crimson. It might have been majic combined with some stronger, unrulier drug. It could have been that her daughter's body just gave in to its seventeen years. The officer suggests suicide. Rae suggests that he shoot his balls off. If he does so willingly, she might believe that her daughter would die willingly.

The mothers of Sarah's friends, and women from the church, have all been texting her: "God has another angel now." "The world has lost a beautiful, kind young woman." "I am thankful every moment for Sarah's life."

Since the afternoon the officer told her, Rae has smashed six plates, burned every dinner she's tried to cook for her son, and called her ex-husband, who is eight states away and can't afford to fly in for the funeral, to yell. She hasn't showered, but took one bath that lasted several hours. She calls the officer every day. When he suggests anything: that Sarah had an aneurysm, that Sarah had an allergic reaction, that Sarah was drugged, Rae is furious that he's guessing.

Rae's boyfriend arranges the funeral. Rae knows she should be grateful, but she'd prefer it if there was no service. It will not be for Sarah. It will be for the community to come and pay their respects so that they can feel better and get on with things.

When Al learns that Sarah is dead, he prays. It is the first time in weeks. He asks for her back. He then asks why. He asks if it was him and God's drug that did it. He asks for heaven. He remembers seeing Sarah for the first time at his doorway, her asking for a glass of water because she is on a bike ride and thirsty. Her arms with a deep farmer's tan.

"Pastor Al!" she says. "I didn't know you lived so near the church."

He sees Sarah taking off her tennis shoes and leaving them by the doormat, her feet young, with pink toenails. He sees her sitting in his living room drinking a glass of water as if it's been blessed, but the holiness will leave if she doesn't drink it quickly. He sees her coming back the next week, wearing frayed white shorts and a folded handkerchief around her head. He sees her noticing the majic he's left on his living room table.

"That doesn't look like weed," she says.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

He sees her drinking majic tea with him every week. She is the only adolescent he will sell to. He has morals. Sarah is not really an adolescent. She is instead like a Belden woman of two short generations ago, those who married and had children young, not by accident or economic necessity, but because by fifteen, they had no growing up left to do. Many of Sarah's classmates will have children young, but before they understand, like Sarah does, that they are not meant to be happy all the time.

Whenever Al gets pixied alone, it is with tea. This is when he writes his best sermons. It is the only time he believes he can feel the spirit. He lets God pass through him. He works from whatever pages in the Bible he happens to flip to. For this Sunday's sermon, he hopes the Bible will reveal what Sarah is telling him from her new home with Jesus. He opens to Judah telling

Onan to lay with his brother's wife. Onan knows the child won't be his and so wastes his seed on the ground whenever he goes into his brother's wife. Then the Lord slews Onan for wasting his seed. Al isn't sure what to make of this and so he shuffles through the songs on his computer at random. The songs tell him that he will have a child, and go to Montana before he dies. Sarah will find him in Montana.

The funeral is in the white clapboard Methodist Church, which has dirty blue carpet and a board at the front of the room with numbers that change with every service: a count of how many people are in attendance, that week's offering. The numbers 117 and \$1,008 are left over from last Sunday, when there were fewer people in the church. Today Sarah's admirers pack the sanctuary, lining the walls, sitting in the aisle. Everyone always wants to have been friends with the dead girl. Carmen always wanted to have a friend die, to have license for real sorrow.

In her coffin, Sarah is unfairly beautiful. Carmen looks at Sarah's left wrist. There's a layer of makeup covering "majic," but the word is there. Sarah's wan skin is lavender-tinted now, and glowing. Her mother has bought her a new dress, white and stiff. Carmen hates it.

Pastor Al leads the service. He talks about how everyone loved Sarah because Sarah loved everyone. A low vibrato whistle sounds twice from the train tracks that run behind the church twice as Pastor Al speaks. Carmen sits beside her parents and flips through a black-bound Bible, crosses out the name "Jesus" and replaces it with "Sarah" whenever she sees it. She wants Sarah to sit up and hit Al.

Rae does not cry because once she begins she will do so for hours. Her boyfriend keeps circling a spot on her upper left arm with his fingers. She would like him to stop. Sarah's brother, Ryan, sits with his friends in the back of the sanctuary. He doesn't cry either, even when two of his friends do.

In the church basement, with its cheerful posters of scripture and a pink painted bathroom with two stall doors that don't shut, members of the congregation serve chili and potato salad from big plastic tubs. A paper-mache Christ puppet from Sunday school hangs in the corner. He kicks his legs and arms out when you tug the string dangling from his robe. A sign reads: Jesus Ascending to Heaven! Pull the string and Jesus goes to heaven! Cut the string and Jesus goes to hell!

A photo board is set up next to the desserts—the kind Rae would have made for Sarah's graduation party one summer later. Sarah as a baby, a toddler, a first grader, a softball player, a gymnast, a dancer. Sarah on homecoming court, Sarah with boyfriends. A photo of Carmen and Sarah in an aboveground swimming pool, each holding a new kitten. Photos of Carmen and Sarah sitting in the hunting tree stand, in the rusted frame of the pickup truck, on the frozen-over pond between their two houses.

Sarah's friend, Luke, gets a blow job in the parking lot during the reception party. This is what everyone will talk about the next day. In the woods back behind Luke's car, people drink vodka and beer.

"Hey Carmen. Want a beer?"

"No."

"We were gonna light some candles now, and maybe a bowl."

Mindy, who is pregnant, shouts "Hey! I still have some majic Sarah sold me!"

“Let’s smoke it!”

“Didn’t she die from that stuff?”

“No, I think she mixed it with something.”

Carmen gets a beer. “She didn’t fucking mix it with anything.”

Rae takes home the flowers, drugstore spring blend bouquets. She places them on the kitchen counter, then the dining table, then the floor of her daughter’s room. She shuts the door.

Ryan is at a friend’s house. Rae knows this should upset her, that perhaps she should have made him stay home, should have tried harder to help him feel happier, or sadder. But he’s old enough to understand, on his own, that his sister is dead. She wonders if he thinks Sarah’s death is her fault. She wonders if she’s lost him too.

Rae’s boyfriend comes over. She didn’t ask him to. They have sex. It is the first time after the death, and Rae can’t enjoy it. It reminds her that Sarah will not have children. Her boyfriend is careful about touching her. The sex takes a long time. After, he holds Rae like she’s crying. She doesn’t, until he leaves. She sits on the back porch, looking at the paint-stripped wood board fence she knows she will never repaint, rattling out long body harrowing sobs.

Carmen comes home from the service. Her mother has cut out a newspaper article about Sarah, and left it at Carmen’s place at the kitchen table. As if she’d need to remember Sarah’s death with the help of the Rural-Urban: Your Free Community Weekly.

The weekly Belden police blotter is on the opposite side of the article about Sarah:

2:36 p.m.— Main Street, report of an “elderly man in his car hunched over.” Officers located the vehicle and saw the man was scratching off lottery tickets.

7:20 p.m.— State St., a woman called advising there was “smoke” in her freezer. It wasn’t smoke, but condensation.

12:33 a.m.— Hickory Street, caller advised of a woman dancing in the roadway.

Sarah and Carmen came across majic together two Julys ago. With its mottled leaves and tiny pinkish white flowers, it smelled lovely, a hint of verbena. It stood in the field, surrounded by thickets of tall grass and Queen Anne’s lace. Sarah knew it by its crinkle-edged leaves.

The day after the funeral, the sky is hazy and the field is muddy. Carmen decides she’ll get pixied without Sarah for the first time, to see if Sarah seems to be less missing that way. Carmen brewed the leaves into tea in her microwave that morning, and now drags long sips of the bitter liquid from a thermos. Majic is a body-undoing feeling. Carmen gets migraines when she isn’t pixied that are a sort of pain high. Light hurts, sound hurts. She tries focusing on a single part of her body that doesn’t throb, her inside right ankle. Tries thanking the pain gods for not descending there too. She stops being able to see when it’s bad. Majic is a migraine of liberating goodness.

Carmen once took a shower while pixied and realized joyfully that her skin was melting. Majic is holding a toy kaleidoscope over your eyes and tongue. The single spotlight in town, the

one that flashes yellow all night, bursts into refracting arcs of gold edged with purple. Water tastes like dandelions mixed with pawpaw fruit with pop rocks. A magnification of how it feels to return to a place you haven't been to for years. You recognize everything and know what it is called, but in your absence the world has been endowed with some unreal glowing sheen. You take a needle from your sewing kit, black thread it, and draw it through the callus of your heel. You love your mother.

When Sarah and Carmen were pixied together, everyone else had a hard time being around them. The two would be perfectly content to sit and watch heated rainbows curl out of the black asphalt driveway. They got pixied in an exactly complementary way. When Sarah wanted to go and dance at a metal concert in the high school gymnasium, Carmen wanted to. When Carmen wanted to dip spoons in butter and then brown sugar and lick them, Sarah wanted to. When Carmen started to cry, Sarah would stop her.

Carmen walks into the burnt-down house in the field. The man who lived there had the property up for sale for years, but his asking price was too high for a house with rotting floors and a shed out back where he kept chickens, for meat, and three dogs chained. Now, inside the house, it is hard for Carmen to tell what was damaged in the fire, what was broken and dirtied before, and what decayed beneath time and a leaking roof. The house smells like charred tire and the pile of composting egg shells, banana peels, and grass clippings in Carmen's backyard. She lies down between a blackened coffee table and a stack of telephone books with molding page. She feels the places where her body presses into the floor. Her forearm is still scratched from when she sprinted away from Sarah's body, and fell in the field into weeds with thorns. She looks at the red swollen marks on her skin, touches each one. The house is far back from the road but Carmen can hear motorcycles. She imagines they are gigantic bumblebees bouncing along the asphalt.

Rae calls the officer and he tells her that the autopsy results are finally inconclusive. Rae will never know why her daughter died. She laughs after she drops the phone onto the living room carpet. That morning she saw a news story about the accidental death of a two year old; his four year old brother was playing with the gun kept beneath their Daddy's pillow. Their Daddy was convicted for manslaughter. Rae wonders if they should blame her. If she was keeping something under her pillow that she shouldn't have, selfishness. If nothing physical killed Sarah, then maybe she killed Sarah.

Carmen drives to Al's house. The entire landscape of the town spreads out before her, except it doesn't need to be spread out really, because when you are on one road, you are on all the other infinitely repeating roads, the great rolls of hay upright in the fields, the dead raccoons sprawled on the pavement.

Al's house, the parsonage, is small and yellow, two doors down from the church. There's a kiddie pool in the side yard, the same one the church uses for parking lot baptisms during Vacation Bible School.

Al opens the door wearing a Cleveland Indians jersey, emblazoned with the bright red face of Chief Wahoo. Wahoo has triangle eyes and broad white teeth set against each other like fence boards. Al is shoeless. He's wearing white socks.

"Hello Pastor Al."

"Hello Carmen. Are you all right?"

Carmen smiles. "I know you were her dealer."

He nods like a child playing a wise man in a Christmas pageant, "Come in."

They sit in his living room with the television muted on a talk show. A cereal bowl left over from the morning sits on the coffee table in front of them. Al must be bad at pouring the right amount of milk—there's enough to feed a cat in the bottom of the bowl.

He says, "I sold Sarah majic, but only majic, a God given remedy. I am convinced of that. I found the herb myself one sparkling day. Then I found God. I grow it as I work to grow this community's faith."

Carmen stares at him.

He says, "You know the Native Americans used to use drugs in religious ceremonies? The peace pipe?"

"You're a Methodist preacher."

"And we Methodists are not known for abstinence."

"Right."

"Majic did not kill Sarah," he says.

"I don't care." Carmen says, "I came here because I want—"

"You're here seeking guidance. I know, child. Would you like to pray?"

"No. I want to sell."

Carmen wants to know that if she died, people would think of her as they do Sarah. She walks to the shed holding a light bulb. It's useless, unlit. One-fourth of the shed is missing. Carmen thinks of Sarah's body that afternoon. Tries lying on the dirt floor of the shed just as Sarah had. Stacks her knees one over the other, pulls the bottom one close to her stomach.

Carmen suspects someone could die from the majic she sells, could choke on the yellow dust that comes from the leaves once you crush them. She sells because she doesn't mind this possibility. She doesn't like the idea that no one but Sarah has ever died from it, that God chose only Sarah.

Rae wants to try majic. It was the last thing her daughter experienced and Rae is desperate to feel something other than numb rage.

Although the walk to Carmen's is short, Rae considers driving. Walking over, she'll feel like she's pretending to be her daughter. Remembering that the car is low on gas, she walks anyway, carrying a hooded sweatshirt of Sarah's, an excuse: "She would want you to have this." The sweatshirt is plain grey, paint splatters on the right shoulder and elbow. Rae knows she should have grabbed something better, but she didn't want to go into Sarah's room. She hasn't opened the door since the day of the funeral. The sweatshirt had been left slung across a stool at

the kitchen counter. There are dozens of uncomfortable objects all over the house: Sarah's favorite potato chips in the cupboard, her shoes under the couch, pencil graffiti Rae had stopped noticing until this week—the words “Ryan is a HOG BRAIN” above the bathroom mirror. She does not blame Ryan for retreating to friends' houses.

Carmen answers the door. Rae has never come to her house without Sarah. Carmen gives her the same quick smile, all in the mouth, that she has given every middle aged woman who has looked worried about her since Sarah died. Rae does not look worried, but tired. Her coral manicure is chipped and her T-shirt is wrinkled.

“Hello Carmen. I just thought you might want to have—this is Sarah's sweatshirt.”

Carmen takes it from her, and steps back, a gesture that Rae can come in. Rae hasn't entered anyone else's house since Sarah died.

“Thanks,” Carmen says.

“If you want anything else,” Rae says. “I don't know what to do with it all.”

Carmen wore Sarah's clothes a lot when Sarah was alive. Doing so either felt like she was trying a little of Sarah on, or like she and Sarah were the same—like they could flip back and forth between each other's jeans, laughs, and weariness. They stayed over at each other's houses often, and when they were in bed talking, one would always be more tired than the other. But if it was Carmen who was tired first, Carmen would gradually wake as Sarah neared sleep. Then, Sarah would wake and Carmen would feel her eyes closing. Back and forth until they'd balanced the seesaw and they could sleep.

“Here, do you want to sit down?” Carmen asks.

Rae follows her into the kitchen with linoleum modeled to look like real tile, and a clock shaped like a fish that makes the sound of a faucet dripping when it ticks. They sit at the table.

“I haven't seen you much recently,” Rae says. “Not as much as I'm used to.”

“Yeah, I miss you.” Carmen says. She realizes that it's true.

“I've been thinking about trying magic,” Rae says.

“Really?” Carmen has friends whose parents drink and smoke with them. Rae wasn't strict, but she wasn't like those mothers. The ones with so little distance between them and their children that they might buy their daughter a bottle of absinthe, might kiss their son's best friend, might fall into the shower curtain with tiny yellow ducks painted onto it into the bathtub, breaking the shower curtain rod and bruising their sternum, might do all these things in the same night. Rae wasn't like those mothers.

“I don't know what it feels like. She was on it when she died,” Rae says.

“Probably.”

“I want to know what it felt like for her.”

“You're sure?”

“Yes.”

“I'll make you tea,” Carmen says. “That was Sarah's favorite way.” Carmen isn't sure if this is true, but it feels more polite than smoking it.

Carmen walks to her room and retrieves a palm's worth of leaves from the red case that held her retainer before she lost it. She heats water in the microwave and pours it into a plastic pitcher, over the leaves.

Rae knows that this is an unacceptable way to grieve, trying the drug that probably killed her daughter with her daughter's seventeen-year-old friend. But she's not ashamed of this small failure. This morning there was a dead deer in the front yard. She sat next to it and wept. She hasn't yet called anyone to take it away.

Rae could be a better, kinder mother, made sure Sarah did not do magic, gone to PTA meetings. She might have worked harder to stay married to Sarah's father. Sarah never talked much to Rae's boyfriend; Rae should have left him if Sarah didn't like him. When Sarah said she didn't like winter, Rae should have moved the family to Louisiana. Rae should have been home that morning, cooked pancakes with cranberries in them, rubbed lavender lotion onto her daughter's newly sunburnt shoulders. The night before, she heard Sarah come in at four in the morning. Instead of yelling at her, she stayed in bed.

"How's Ryan?" Carmen asks.

"He's fine. Not home a lot."

Carmen gives Rae her tea in a mug with a picture of a cat on it.

"You just drink it," Carmen says.

"I didn't know this was the magic," Rae says. "I thought you were just making tea."

Rae knows she is pixied, because her mouth tastes like honeysuckle and rust. The pustules of poison ivy rash on the ball of her palm look like they're melting. She feels that she has been placed back into the physical world for the first time since Sarah's death. Because the tiny beehive knit of the place mats, the holes at the top of the salt shaker are announcing themselves. Each thing asks her to touch it. She understands that all of these objects have wants and rituals which must be followed. Rae has never broken a bone and would like to. She would like to break each of her bones, compare the ways the cracks feel.

Rae asks, "Did Sarah hate me?"

There is a clear need to hold Rae. Carmen takes Rae's wrist and says, "No."

"I wish someone had shot her. Or that she'd been in Adam's car last year. I want to be mad."

A summer storm starts. Sarah always counted when she saw lightning, up to the sound of thunder, to tell how far away the lightning was.

Rae wants Sarah to be alive. Being pixied has not changed this. It has only made Rae realize that this want will repeat until she is left holding a sculpted wish for what she would have done if Sarah hadn't died.

"Do you want me to make you dinner?" Rae asks Carmen.

They walk through the storm to Sarah's house. In the field they see lightning, and can only count to four before the thunder comes. The house is dark when they open the door—a power outage. Rae starts laughing.

"Sarah always loved power outages," Rae says. "We would all gather in the living room and light all the candles in the house. Play euchre."

Rae sits down on the floor of the living room.

"What is wrong with everyone?" she asks.

"Wrong?" Carmen asks.

“No one cares about Sarah. Everyone tells me God just wanted to see her sooner! That she is such a beautiful angel, that they can’t wait to see her again soon. I can’t go to the grocery store because it makes me cry.”

“Would you like us all to stop going to the grocery store?”

“I would like all of you to wake up.”

“Everyone else did already. They decided majic was better.”

Later that night, Carmen walks into Sarah’s room. The flowers from the funeral are still on the floor, blossoms brown and stems smelling of mildew. Carmen feels a need to take something. She opens the top drawer of Sarah’s nightstand. There’s a lighter, a pocket knife, a Bible, a piece of paper. It’s Sarah’s writing—print sometimes looping into cursive. The lines drop off in the middle—maybe it’s a poem. But Sarah did not write poems unless they were pie recipes, like hold the egg in your palm before you crack it.

Carmen realizes it’s a list she and Sarah made when they were twelve, of all the things they needed to do. “Sleep on the front porch all week” and “Hunt deer (no need to really shoot the deer)” and “Go on the Top Thrill Dragster and do not cry” and “See show at The Grog Shop” and “Love.” Those were meant for that summer. “Sew Dresses” and “Drink” and “Learn the Constellations” and “Horses” and “Drive tractor to each others’ houses.” Maybe Sarah had kept this list near her always. “Go to California” and “Get in a real fight with a bloody nose” and “Make yourself the brightest thing there is.” Sarah wrote that one jokingly but Carmen loved it. It was the one item on the list that could only ever be done by one of them.

Carmen walks to the field and sits in the shed and smokes majic. There are hundreds of lightbulbs now, lining the walls like the frame of a lovely actress’s dressing room mirror. There are conventional bulbs. There is a long rectangular light she stole from the elementary school basement. There are lights taken from churches and wastebaskets and the lamps in Lu’s Pizza.

They are all wired by a snake of power cords threaded to the burnt-down house. She called the electric company earlier that day and had the power turned back on. She plugs the cord into an outlet. It works. Even from the burnt house, a few hundred feet from the shed, the shed’s light is brilliant. She runs to the shed, and goes inside. The dirt floor on which Sarah died is turning hot as summer asphalt. Maybe the shed is out-shined by Cleveland, seventy miles away. This display is nothing more than a lit-up reindeer pulling a sled on a rich person’s lawn, nothing grander than the fluorescent security lights bouncing over and across the prison yards and the corn fields beyond them each night. It’s less than a flashing billboard. But Carmen made this light, she made it freckle the field grass. This is the place where Sarah died. Carmen wants it to be visible from space.