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BURN

I'M CONSIDERING BURNING MY JOURNALS. I've been flipping through the pages for the past hour, skimming entries and I've realized I don't really like the main character. She's shallow sometimes, and petty, far too obsessed with boys. I roll my eyes at her simplicity, smirk at the way she misunderstands, and yes, I think I just might set fire to it all. Or bury it? But cremation seems more fitting. I could find a match in the kitchen, strike and burn, watch how ashen time can be.

I grab a match, flip the pages.

January 6, 1991. Today Peanut Butter died. She was my model horse, my favorite. The dogs chewed her up.

I hold the match still; I remember the little horse. Toffee brown, small, her front leg poised mid-step. Teeth marks covering her plastic body. *I gave her a funeral. I put all the other horses around Peanut Butter, and wrote her a gravestone: 'This horse died by the chewing of two deadly dogs.'* Peanut Butter lies on her side, surrounded by a circle of toy horses, a strange variation of Stonehenge on my green carpet. There's a sacred moment of silence as the horses hang their heads. I allow them to grieve and watch over them like a benevolent child-goddess. I can see it clearly, standing over my journal, match in hand.

On the table, my other journals are stacked like wood for a pyre, all dog-eared, their edges wrinkled and worn. They deserve some memorial, maybe, some rite of passage, before they're gone for good. Read them, one last time: but afterwards, cremation.

Everything deserves its last rites.

Death

It's like watching a time-lapsed video where changes are swift yet incremental: where seeds burst into stems and explode into bloom that opens out and soaks the sun and then begins to curl, begins to brown and wither and the petals fall and the flower

is a skeleton that shatters into dust -- all that glory born and dead in less than ten seconds. This is what it's like, reading my journals one last time. I read through 1,652 pages of entries, spanning 22 years, covering over 8,000 days. I watch people and places come and go, my life ebb and flow, my self constantly in flux. What took me years to write takes me hours to read.

My first journal was a gift from church leaders when I was eight, after my baptism, and their handwritten note is still glued inside the front cover: "Your journal is your personal scripture. You should record here your daily dealings with God as you prepare to return to His presence." A lined piece of paper lies stuffed between pages: a talk I gave in church on Father's Day when I was 10, one year before my dad was diagnosed with leukemia. I stood behind the pulpit in a blue dress with a Peter Pan collar picked for this moment, and I read slowly and carefully to the congregation. *I'm grateful for my dad because he always comes home and plays with me. He calls me Worm and I call him Snake, and he makes me laugh.* We used to sit in the pews at church, me settled into the nook of his shoulder. I keep reading and only pages later, he is gone: *Dad died today.* The words are written in a daze, the handwriting shakes. *It doesn't sound believable, but it's true.* He had died only twelve hours before, died in his bed while I sat downstairs eating cereal; my mother and my sister and I rushed to his bedside and everyone was crying, the telephone was ringing, the coroner came and took him and people came to tell us how sorry they were, and the hours rushed by and I couldn't comprehend it, couldn't quite believe it. But the days are carried by the tide of words and time takes no breathers. I read on and in each journal I talk about the church we went to. Born and baptized into Mormonism, I find God inked into every page. I see in the green journal a warning scribbled in red: *I need to stay on the right path. I can't imagine my life without the Church. It's more important to me than anything else.* I follow the pages of that path and reach my fiancé, the moment I meet him at college and tell my journals he is *a walking cliché*: a tall, dark, handsome man, but more than that, he is a Church member with such deep faith. He'd served a mission, he is kind and honest, and so a few months later — or is it minutes? — I read our engagement, gushed in cursive in the white journal: *Brandon and I are so in love. We always want to be happy, and we both believe that by staying true to the Church and keeping our covenants and always doing what's right, we will be forever in love.* I want to reach for the match again.

I know how this story ends. But I read on, compelled by the way I wax and wane, a moon trapped in orbit. Deep inside the pages of the green journal I've turned nineteen and *it's been seven years since Dad died. That feels like forever. I can't even remember how it was before that.* I can pull up an image of my father and me side by side on a church pew, but where once it was hard to believe that he had died, now it's hard to believe that he was ever alive. Only my journals still live that side of the story. The years rush forward and soon I am twenty-seven. *I just can't invest myself in the Church anymore. I go because I hope it's true; I go because I'm afraid it's true. I go because I'm in a state of inertia.* Almost three thousand days after the red warning of an hour ago. There have been years of quiet questioning and doubt in between, a dissatisfaction that hangs in the spaces between words. *There are so many religions and so many beliefs, how strange to think that Mormonism is the only right one.* And in just a little while I will reach the present, where Mormonism will be only artifact, exist only in my journal, like my father, like Brandon. For in the blue journal, the eighth one, past the early years of my marriage, into the turbulent middle, there are foreshadows of that loss too. *It's not that I completely regret marrying Brandon, but it's been seven years. And everyone who depressed us when we were engaged by saying "oh, it will change," was right. We're no longer star struck. It takes work. Work and more work. I just wish — oh, what's the use of wishing.* The pages, white waves, carry me onward.

Embalming

It is like visiting a wax museum — I see myself at ten, at twelve, at twenty-two, each self a still life, a wax figurine. They are lies, these figurines; they pretend to be alive, but if you look too closely, or touch them with your fingertips, you'll see the colored paste and scar the delicate surface.

In the white journal I find waxen words, entries that have been cleaned up and disguised. *It's been a hard week. Brandon and I went through a difficult experience, but it's much better now.* The rest of the entry is silence and I want to close the cover, shroud the past in cardboard and cloth. I know what the experience is. I am twenty-two, a year married. Brandon and I come home from church one day, and he sits on the couch with his tall dark handsome face in his hands and suddenly from some place in him I didn't know existed, he tells me that he has a sex addiction, that he's

been looking at porn and going to strip clubs and lying about it. For the next week we barely talk because I'm stewing, confused and hurt, wondering why I am not enough. I am so mortified that I can't find the courage to tell my journals that my husband — the man I lauded as *faithful and honest* — has a sex addiction, so year after year, I don't write about it at all, at least not outright; occasionally I allude to it, coding it in elusive words. I lie, in silence and omission. Pages and years pass quietly and I read: *Brandon has not been doing well at certain things, and I'm becoming very frustrated to deal with a problem that has been going on for more than two years now. I'm tired of it, and tired of having no one to talk to. But I digress. Today I went to see a movie.*

A few years later, I find an abandoned attempt: ~~*For the past few years Brandon has been*~~

There's fear in the silence. Maybe it began back there, in the brown journal, this terror of telling too much. Keep a journal, I was told in church. Keep a record of your life for posterity, so your children and grandchildren will know how you lived and what you believed. And so, I believed I was supposed to live an exemplary life and write up a legacy of righteousness. So, long before my first child was born, I began lying to my descendants.

Lie: To tell an untruth. To intentionally misrepresent. To purposely omit.

I page through the script of my white journal, every line packed with words — packed, but empty, here in the depths of my marriage. Words float on the surface and so much is lost. I told myself as I wrote that I lied for my posterity, that I omitted things for their sakes, because I didn't want them to be disappointed.

But that's just another pretense. Really I lied for myself. I obscured the truth because to write it was to admit some sort of failure in my marriage and religion, in myself; to write the truth was to reveal a part of my life that I did not want to look too deeply into. I was afraid that if I wrote it, something would tear apart.

Lie: To exercise self-preservation.

After death, it is said that a body is embalmed for three reasons: sanitation, preservation, and presentation. The embalmer washes the body with a cloth and cleanser, to rid it of any disease or infections that might pass on to the living. She empties the veins of blood and refills them with embalming fluid, to prevent decay and putrefaction. She closes the eyes and mouth and paints the face with life so that the body, on its last display, will look picturesque — like something it once was, but is not.

And so I embalm myself in words: My handwriting paints the page, dressing it in pretty words and happy phrases. I sanitize my husband's addiction so that my descendants won't be stained; I omit things to preserve my ideals from decomposing. I present an image of myself that is lifelike, but not entirely.

Lie: To embalm.

Sometimes, I don't even tell you things. What if I read some ridiculous paper-thought of mine years from now and say, like King Lear, "Oh, what a fool I've been!"

But to not write is sometimes just as foolish. Not writing leaves me no recourse but to stew and wilt in confusion and anger.

Lie: To de-compose.

I have to travel forward six years before I finally stop deceiving my journals about my marriage. I'm twenty-eight; Brandon has moved from porn and strip clubs to secret relationships with other women. I can see the shadowy possibility of divorce and I need to inform my journals. *For the past few years, Brandon has been struggling with a sex addiction. He first told me about it eighteen months after we were married. I was completely devastated. I hardly knew what to think. I felt — I feel — betrayed, and I can't trust him anymore.*

Slowly the words fill out again. From then on, I write all I can, I tell my journals everything, and watch the gradual change. *I used to think it was my fault that Brandon had a porn problem, that I wasn't pretty or good enough. But I realize now that's not true. I am unique, I am good.* I was afraid that if I wrote the truth, something would tear apart, but instead, it is the opposite. I watch the loops and curves of my penmanship and see signs of life, a bloom on an ashen cheek: an embalmer's touch on a corpse.

Wake

It's strange when you read your journals from twenty years ago. You laugh at yourself, the way you gave one of your toy horses a funeral after your dog chewed it up, the way you kicked a boy who was trying to impress you by showing you something gross, the way you couldn't stop talking about him for days after. But then you cry as you read how you had to stay with your sick father in his room for seven hours one day to care for him. He had leukemia, and your mother was working, and you cry for yourself because no 12-year-old should have to be burdened with

something so heavy; you cry for yourself because you didn't realize those seven hours would be some of the last you would ever spend with your father, and if you had only known it then, how much more you would have written than just: *It was a long day.*

You look at your journals where they lie on the kitchen table and regret what you wrote and what you didn't write. You read about the time you argued with a friend about religion, telling her that *she would be unhappy because she didn't have the truth.* You are mortified, and you see now that you were judgmental and arrogant, but of course, you can't go back. Your journals are finished. But you also remember the other pages, the ones where you redeem yourself. *Maybe I tended to discount other religions' experiences,* you say. *Maybe I haven't seen quite as clearly as I thought I did.* You look at your journals where they lie and think of all the times you asked them, *May I confide?* And the journals always sat ready, waiting, acquiescent, never complaining, never telling you what you should think or what you should do.

You feel you are two people at once. You're reading yourself, but a self who is both you and a total opposite of you. You are 12 years old in New York, catching frogs and playing in the creek in the backyard; and then you are 30, and you look up at your little home in West Virginia, 600 miles from where you just were. You are displaced; you don't know where you are, and nothing here, now, seems real. Where is your father? Where is Brandon? Two men who were each a part of your life now exist only inside the covers of a journal, and now they don't know you, and you no longer know them. But you see your journals lying there, and it is real.

You read the day you went to your father's viewing. You waited until everyone had left the room so that no one would invade your last moment together. You looked at him in the casket, lying there so still. You put your fingers on his embalmed hand, and felt cold. You said your last goodbye and uttered a final prayer.

May you who read this forgive me of my faults, and find some inspiration here, either from my mistakes or from my triumphs.

Eulogy

I write, at first, because I am told to. *I don't always feel like writing in here,* I say when I am eight. *But we are supposed to keep a journal, and I think it's better to write every day.* I miss days of course, sometimes months at a time, but I keep writing. Later, I write to gossip about my own life. I tell them about my dating problems, my ideals

about love. *I want my future husband to be kind, faithful, handsome, romantic.* Then I get married, and I write to talk about the life I am supposed to have, concealing the parts that don't conform. I'm afraid of what my journals will think, or afraid of what I must admit to myself. When I finally tell my journals about Brandon's addiction, I write to confess, to quiet my mind. My journals are friend, judge, priest. *I've stopped myself from writing this for a long time, and I shouldn't have. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before.*

I write to remember, but also to forget. I wrap the days in paper, store them somewhere dark. I am like a pallbearer, I contain the days and bear them away.

Yet sometimes none of this seems like enough: maybe there should be some bigger purpose. *Why write something if no one is going to read it? Isn't that the point of writing? But then, why have I kept a journal since I was eight years old? For me. No one but me.*

I am a eulogist. I write to remember these things. I write to lay them to rest.

Cremation

I'm considering burning my journals, swiping a stick across red bumps of a matchbox, holding the blue-gold flame to the black scrawl of words. I'll watch as the paper curls, as the black burn spreads an eclipse over the page. The words silently protest, darken, crumble into flakes. The hardbound covers will wither, blaze all to ash. Then my journals will be nothing but a pile of dust. I'll dip my fingers into carrion, pinching soot between my thumb and forefinger, grinding them together. I'll brush the darkened tips across my face, ashen blooms on rosy cheeks, and wear my past as war paint.

And yet...

Here I've been standing, cradling journals in my hands, racing through pages and years and the whole time I've been thinking about the next line, tonight's entry about how I read my journals today and isn't time a strange, strange beast? And someday in the future I'll read this new entry and, surprised by who I was then, I'll pull out the journals, seeking the past in the curves of my words, and I'll watch time decay then grow then bloom, and I'll write, the ink in the pen borne from the journal's ashes. Every time I read my journals, I burn them. Every time I read them, I rewrite myself. 