Joan says it’s inappropriate to pretend I am deaf.

Joan is caring and understanding, which makes her well-qualified to be my therapist. We meet biweekly in her office that smells like Christmas and mothballs. I pretend that we’re friends because it makes me feel less alone. Someday it will come up, perhaps during one of our final sessions when I invite her out to coffee or to go see the newest Wes Anderson movie that I imagine we will both love.

I don’t want to be rude and correct Joan. It’s not that I pretend I am deaf. I do hear other things, and maybe that’s me being crazy. In our last session, two weeks ago, it was *Claire de Lune*, the delicate sounds coming from the space between her front teeth. Today, I hear the crack of a hatchet against pine, the sound of winter at my grandparents’ house. From all the time I spend chopping wood because Grandpa snapped his ankle falling from a ladder into the azalea bushes. It is the sound of all things since my brother Zachary killed himself. With each whistle of the metal ax through the air, I watch Joan’s lips dance in their own silence.

“Meredith, are you listening?” Joan says. The hatchet stops and is replaced by the clicking of Joan’s pen. I grip the suede pillow, rubbing the spot that used to be beige, but has now become oily and grey.


“What was I just saying?” she asks, and in this moment I am a child being lectured by my mother. Joan is nearly my mother’s age, or I assume she is because she wears J. Jill and Coldwater Creek like my mother. I can’t respond to Joan because I don’t have an answer. “I’m here for you,” Joan says. “I hope you know that. I think what’s important is to have a dialogue going. I want to make sure your time here is well spent, that we help you recover from this
immense loss."

When Joan refers to immense loss, she is referring to the recent suicide of my brother. She is referring to my parents selling our childhood home and moving across the country to Connecticut. She is referring to the fact that I’m 32 years old, have quit my apartment lease to live in my grandparents’ Apache trailer and am currently taking a leave of absence from my receptionist job because sometimes I start crying in front of the clients and it worries my boss. I’m not intentionally wasting our time together, but I believe deep down that there is something causing this behavior that is out of my control. I want to tell her that it is like the fungus that seeps into ants’ brains in the Brazilian rainforest, the one that kills the ant and uses its body to breed. And maybe what is wrong with me, what was wrong with Zachary, is like this fungus thing. But I think telling Joan about my zombie ants theory will put strain on our future friendship.

“I’m sorry Joan. It was happening again,” I say.

“More Debussy?” Joan asks.

“Hatchets. Chopping wood.”

“Ah, I see.” She clicks her pen again and makes notes in her yellow legal pad that she keeps tucked between her thigh and the arm of the chair. I am able to request to view her notes, but I’m afraid they might reveal things about myself that I’m not ready for. That this thing I am experiencing isn’t some coping mechanism or neurosis, but that I am in fact, genuinely insane and that in the filing cabinet among the other notes, she has a straightjacket in my size.

“I’ve got a lot on my mind,” I say.

“That’s a start.”

“I’m just having doubts.”
“I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

“I think Zach would’ve wanted me to figure out why,” I say.

“Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn’t. I can understand why you have questions. It’s part of the process.”

The process. Some meaningless packaged phrase I’ve heard before from so many. It’s not a process, I don’t go from A to B to C. It is just me. And Zachary. And the space he’s left behind.

“Meredith, let’s focus on you,” Joan says.

It has been a year since Zachary died. If my grief were human, it would be walking by now. Using small words and clipped phrases. We would look upon my grief in wonder. Perhaps that is how people move on. Their grief eventually gets too old for them, and they stop seeing it as grief and start seeing it as something else. Maybe that’s the process everyone keeps talking about. I hope that this grief evolves and outgrows its role, that it will no longer need me the way I need it now.

The clock on the wall marks that our time is done. It also marks the things neither of us have said in the hour we’ve been together. Joan’s expressions are not easily read, but her pen, this extension of her, is what gives her away. When she writes on the notepad, I know I’ve said something that is worth noting. It is the unreadable blank expression that leaves me worried. I imagine that if Joan has a husband or lover that this is the expression she uses when he’s told her the pork roast is too dry. It is the one that makes me feel studied. The one that makes me suspect that I am no longer a patient, but an experiment. It’s what makes me go quiet, and then wonder if my silence is more fodder for this imagined research. It becomes a game, one which Joan does not fully realize that she is a participant in.
When I get home from the appointment, I Google brain fungus because that seems like the only logical explanation for Zachary and me. Several hits on a death metal band with Kiss-esque face paint, not what I’m looking for, though maybe they also suffer from a brain fungus. I get closer to answers with a cattle brain fungus until I find an article from Doctor Doug Moore on tainted cereal that caused a community to suffer from mania and psychosis. The article wasn’t quite the answer, Zachary certainly didn’t have mania, but it could have been a different strain of fungus. I take down Doctor Moore’s email. Perhaps he would like a subject for his research. Though nobody believes me that Zachary couldn’t kill himself, I think Doctor Moore could tear this thing wide open.

~

Before I found my brother in the closet, and his blood on my mother’s old Gunnysack dresses, he used to write me letters. Long letters in his boyish handwriting about his roommates, about the unending grey of winter up north, and about the moments where he couldn’t imagine his future like he used to. His letters kept me company when I was living alone. He was teaching writing at the university and drinking too much. I should have gone up there to see him, but I didn’t. He would stay in his old room with my parents to save money on summer and winter breaks. And it was last summer that we found him in the closet, a writer who didn’t leave a letter explaining why he had to go like this. And in the weeks after, I scoured the letters he had sent me over the years, looking for some code, some clues as to why. I listened through all the old voicemails I never deleted on my phone, and my chest collapsed every time I heard his voice, the thin resonance of “Hey Mer-Bear, it’s me”. And while I felt the sadness of losing a brother, I also felt the sadness of knowing that no one could ever call me “Mer-Bear” again, that there was only one person who could ever call me that. I tucked his letters away in an old Converse
box, along with the pictures I had of him, and stowed it in my grandparent’s pantry, next to the Tupperware and the five-pound bag of flour.

~

After exchanging a few emails, I am invited to Doctor Moore’s house. He lives in an area outside of town, in range land where cows are abundant and research on them sparse. He explained in our emails that he wanted to study herds that hadn’t already been used for mad cow disease research, which he claimed is subtly different from the fungus he is studying.

I am standing in his living room with magazines stacked throughout. Not just a few small stacks on the coffee table or around the television, but stacks five feet high, three feet high on the floor, on the top of books on shelves. He has stacks that lean against walls and a stack that reaches the antlers of a mounted bull elk, as if the antler were the only thing keeping the stack from coming down and crushing us both. There are Popular Mechanics, and National Geographics from before the second World War. Some would look at these stacks and think hoarder, but Doctor Moore is a man of intelligence, he is a man of science, and therefore I believe that this is all part of his research. At least, that is the impression that I get from his Wikipedia page. On the mantle, there are jars filled with green-grey liquid, one with a horse fetus, with little hooves and curved nostrils, floating in formaldehyde. It looked like the toy horses I had as a child with the strings of hair made of oils and plastic. A wallet-sized glamour shot of a woman with big brown hair and high cheekbones rests unframed between two jars. Doctor Moore brings a tray with two glasses of milk.

“So you’re interested in my research?” he says.

“I want to know about your theory on brain fungus, Doctor Moore. I think it might explain how my brother died,” I say.
“Just Doug is fine. And how did your brother pass?”

“He shot himself in a closet in my parents’ house.”

“I’m not entirely sure how that relates to my research.”

“I don’t think it was suicide. I think my brother was infected with this brain fungus. I...he wasn’t capable of doing what he did.”

Doug nods. He’s handsome in the sciencey, older man kind of way. The sweeps of grey in his hair, the gentle wrinkles around his mouth and eyes say kind things about him, they say that he’s a man who will understand me.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “the picture, on the mantle. Who is she?”

Another moment passes and he swirls his glass of milk as if it were a magic 8-ball toy deciding his next move.

“I have some video footage I’d like you to watch,” he says. Doug finishes his milk and takes me to the living room. He feeds a tape in the machine and turns out the lights.

The screen flashes, and a pasture flickers in silence. Cows are grazing and the camera wavers in and out of focus.

“Just watch,” he says.

In the distance, not too far behind the cattle is a steel shed. It’s rusted with neglect. I hear the whip of wind on the microphone of the camera and the crunch of dry grass underfoot. A cow breaks from the herd, running in the direction of the shed. I keep hoping it will slow down or change direction, but it’s going straight at it. The moment between cow and contact is filled with the sound of my grandmother singing hymns, her warbling, tender voice. It softens the violence of what I know is coming, the sound of suffering. And then it happens, the cow slams head first into the shed. We both shudder, and the cow goes at it again. The camera zooms in
closer as the cow slams into the shed like this several times, each time more blood, more skin tears. With every blow a metallic thud, hollow and painful. A dent grows in the side of the shed, but the cow doesn’t stop. When I feel like I can’t stand any more, that there has to be some kind of ending, a man, a younger version of Doug, appears in the pasture, maneuvering through the cattle with a pistol in hand. The rustling of the camera and hard breath. Doug takes aim and shoots the cow.

“It was one of the saddest moments of my life,” he says. He stops the film.

“Me too,” I say.

“I performed an autopsy. Blackness had spread all over her brain, in the folds, discoloring the tissue. It was as if it’d been soaked in tar.” He rubs his hands together, comforting one after the other. I try and put the pieces together for myself, try to understand what I’ve just seen because it doesn’t seem real.

We sit for a moment. Doug turns on the lights and shuts off the television. I want to follow him around the house, share his space, but I put on my jacket.

“The woman in the picture is my wife,” he says.

I sit back down. “She’s beautiful,” I say.

“She was,” he says, tracing the creases of his palms.

“Oh.”

“Horse-riding accident.”

“I’m sorry. I know it doesn’t really help to say things like that.”

“It was a while back. Time heals most wounds,” he says.

“I wouldn’t know.”

“It does,” he says. His eyes resonate a wisdom beyond my own. Wisdom of a man who
has struggled in ways I’m just beginning to understand. His mouth forms a half-smile, one that
is weighted with pity, the same half-smile Joan gives me.

“My friend Joan says it’s good to resume a routine, to get back into life,” I say. I am
embarrassed to admit to Doug that I’m one of those people who has to see a therapist. In my
family we bear our grief with stoicism, with few words.

“When Sarah died, I just wanted to start over. I had spent so much time living a half a
life, you know?” he says. “Like I was sleeping with my eyes open.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Did it ever get easier?”

“Sometimes I wake up and am convinced she’s still alive, those days are the hardest. But
those days become more rare with time.”

“I’m afraid I’ll forget,” I say. I grab my things because I’m no good at saying goodbye.

“I should go.”

“Right,” he says. I stand, knowing I don’t really want to leave.

“I’ll be in touch,” I say.

“Door’s always open.” As I leave, he gives me an affectionate squeeze on my shoulder.

I drive home in the dark, winding up the highway to my grandparents’ house in Idaho
City. The mountain-sides hug the road as I pass random sets of headlights. I roll up the gravel
drive to my trailer. My grandmother has been inside, I smell her musky perfume. A sandwich
wrapped in plastic rests on the counter. A thin envelope from my mother, probably another
check.

I go to bed thinking of Doug. I read in a magazine, that humans need physical contact six
times a day in order to survive. A graze on the train to work, that brief moment when fingertips
exchange money at McDonalds. I try to make it to six, and if I’m feeling like I’m slipping in the
world, I make it more. With Doug, I could make it, and he could make it. Our hands collide as we both reach for the same elevator button, the crescents of our knuckles hover close on the bus. He and I, we could watch out for each other. In him I could fold my grief into a tiny square, and tuck it away in a pocket somewhere. We could be parts of the process.

~

The last memory I have of my brother was the last summer he came home. I was still living in this cinder-block apartment by the river. He brought gin and a watermelon. I carved it on the grass and the juice ran between our fingers and down our chins as we ate it on the front lawn. The smell of the river in summertime, of cottonwood and cheatgrass, filled our lungs. We drank gin from plastic tumblers. Zachary laughed with his mouth so wide you could fill it with an ocean. It didn’t feel like the last moment I’d see my brother alive, but it does now. With sticky fingers and clouded heads we laid in the damp, soft grass.

“I think I’m going to move back here,” Zachary said.

“I thought you liked Pullman.”

“It’s alright, but I think I need something different.” He pulled at the grass and threw it at my crossed legs, like when we were kids.

“I miss you,” I said.

“Remember that video Mom made of us at the old house?”

“The one where she left the camera on and you could hear her scolding us?” I said.

“Yeah. I was happy,” he said.

“We lived in that hovel on Elden.”

“I was a boy. No responsibility.” Zachary looked wistful. I wanted to take him back to our past, back to knobby knees and untended cowlicks. He wanted what every man wants, what
every person wants, to live in moments that seem better.

“I wish it too sometimes,” I said. “Wouldn’t mind not paying rent for a while.”

“You can still do that. Not pay rent.” He smirked, a telling look.

“Sure. Wanna join?” I said. Zachary laid back on the lawn, took a swig of gin from the bottle. My head was dizzy. “It’ll be good to have you around more,” I said.

~

A knock on my trailer door. It’s my grandmother. I answer in sweats, my grandmother already dressed even though the sun’s not up yet. A plate with cinnamon rolls rests in her hands.

“Sorry to wake you. I know how much you like these,” she says. Her hair shines a purple hue from cheap boxed dye. At 87 she insists on dying her hair. Every morning she rolls the thin strands around bright pink sponge curlers and combs the curls into graceful waves.

“Come on in, Grandma,” I say. I clear off the small table, moving the mail into a new pile on the counter.

“We really need to fix up this trailer, don’t you think?” she adds.

“It’s alright.”

“I just worry about you out here all by yourself. You are always welcome in the house, though I know you like your privacy.”

“I know.” I start a kettle of water. My grandmother opens the curtains to let in the early morning glow.

“You staying warm enough out here?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, really.” I know she worries about more than just the heat. I know she comes here in the morning to make sure I don’t end up like Zachary.

“I love you. You know that right?”
“Of course,” I say.

I pour the hot water into two mugs, saving the chipped one for myself. The cinnamon rolls are still warm. She puts her thin hand on mine, the tips of her fingers cold. I smile, a response that lets her know that I’m okay for the moment, that we’re okay.

“Will you be around for lunch?” she asks.

“I meeting with my friend, Joan.”

“Well, we’ll keep some for you in the fridge. You can help yourself.”

“Thank you. For everything,” I say.

~

Joan’s office is filled with watercolor still-lifes. One of an old milk jug spilling over with wildflowers. She’s wearing a wine-colored cardigan. It lays over her bird-like frame, draping her delicate muscles. She’s even styled her hair differently, a bundle of bouncy waves against her shoulders. Beauty is awkward on her, but it makes her that much more endearing. When we are friends, maybe we can go shopping together.

“That’s a lovely sweater,” I say as she pulls her notes from the filing cabinet.

“It was a gift from my husband for my birthday. He’s got a knack for picking out presents.”

“Such a warm color,” I say.

“Anything new happen since we last saw each other?” she asks.

“I saw someone.”

“A date?”

“Not exactly. I found this scientist on the internet. He’s doing some research I’m interested in,” I say.
“Huh. I didn’t know you were interested in science, Meredith.”

“He’s into brain disease, stuff like that. He’s quite brilliant.”

“And how was it, with him?”

“I’m finding answers.” I find the same worn pillow, pulling it toward my chest.

“I see. Are you planning on seeing him again soon?”

“I’m not sure,” I say. The sound of Doug’s cow slamming into steel crowds my thoughts.

“Stop. Just stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Nothing, Joan.”

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“Joan, I have something I want to ask you,” I say.

“What is it?”

“Will you be my friend?” I ask.

“I’m already your friend, Meredith. I am your advocate.”

“No. I mean, will you like hang out with me sometime, outside of our sessions.”

“You are a wonderful person,” she says. “I just don’t think it’s appropriate given our clinical relationship.”

“Clinical? How?”

“Meredith, I care about you. But this can’t be what you want it to be. I know it’s hard to hear that.”

The slamming sound returns, loud and persistent. It floods with the sound of Zachary’s laughter and Tchaikovsky. The chaos rushes my ears, forcing me to shut my eyes. I cannot stay in this room, I cannot be with Joan.
“Meredith, please wait,” she says as I grab my purse.

“I have to go,” I say.

~

I drive to Doug’s house. Past fields and sparse houses. I arrive at his door.

“Hi. I’m sorry I didn’t call first,” I say when he opens the door. He seems puzzled, but invites me in. “I shouldn’t have come, I just, I needed to get away from where I was.”

“Can I grab you something to drink?” he asks. He’s in a plaid shirt tucked into khakis and fleece-lined house-shoes. He pats down the back of his hair. Watching him maneuver around his kitchen makes me feel I’ve made the right choice.

“I’d love some tea, or whatever you have is fine.”

“So what brings you to my humble home,” he says, laughter in his voice.

“I just needed to clear my head. I haven’t been myself lately.”

“Let me guess. Brain fungus?”

“Something like that,” I say, and it feels true and absurd. He hands me a cup. “I’ve just been thinking so much about my brother and it’s getting to me. And my friend, Joan, is not who I thought she was.”

He sips from his cup, leaning against the kitchen counter.

“We never really find answers that satisfy,” he says. I am here for answers, I want him to tell me that there is a reason my brother left like he did, that it wasn’t just emptiness. Maybe I wouldn’t feel like it was my fault, that I could have done something about that last night when nothing seemed wrong. But it was. And maybe Doug can help me figure out what’s wrong in my brain, that maybe it’s not just loneliness and grief like everyone thinks, but something more. Maybe he can give me truth.
"I’m disconnected," I say. Doug reaches across the counter, leaning in on his elbows. He strokes my arm. The intimacy feels false, but not unwelcome. It will do for now.

“I’m here,” Doug says. And it feels like enough. My hands grasp the mug tight.

“I think there is something wrong with me,” I say.

“How do you mean?” He draws his arms in, creating an immense distance between us.

“I think I have brain fungus.”

Doug laughs, and his eyebrows shift into the shape of concern for a small child. “Meredith, my research has not been linked to humans.”

“What about Zachary?”

“I think you know,” he says.

“No.”

“I can’t say for your brother, but what I have seen with you, scientifically speaking, is not brain fungus. That should be a relief.”

“The hatchets, the concertos. How can you explain the sounds?”

“It sounds like you miss your brother.”

“Or like I’m crazy,” I say.

“People do strange things when they’re grieving.”

“It’s more than that.”

“I don’t think it is, Meredith.” He comes over to me, places the empty mug from my hands to the counter. He squares my shoulders with his hands and looks at me, a mixture of pity and care and warmth. “You think you’re alone in this. And I bet it feels that way most of the time. People around you are living normal and happy lives, and here you are.”

“I miss him,” I say.
“That will never change, Meredith.” He runs his hands down the lengths of my arms.

His own hands hover, containing the tension and pain in a bubble. I reach for his hand, and with the other, I open his palm. The creases in his skin run long and deep. I touch the tip of each finger, counting off each one in my head. The thumb and the moment of finding Zachary among dresses. The index and the middle and the smell of watermelon. The ring, and the moving van packed with boxes before my parents moved to Connecticut. The pinky and the feeling of never being “Mer-bear” again. It’s only five. I lay my hand on top of his. Six.

For right now, that is all we need.