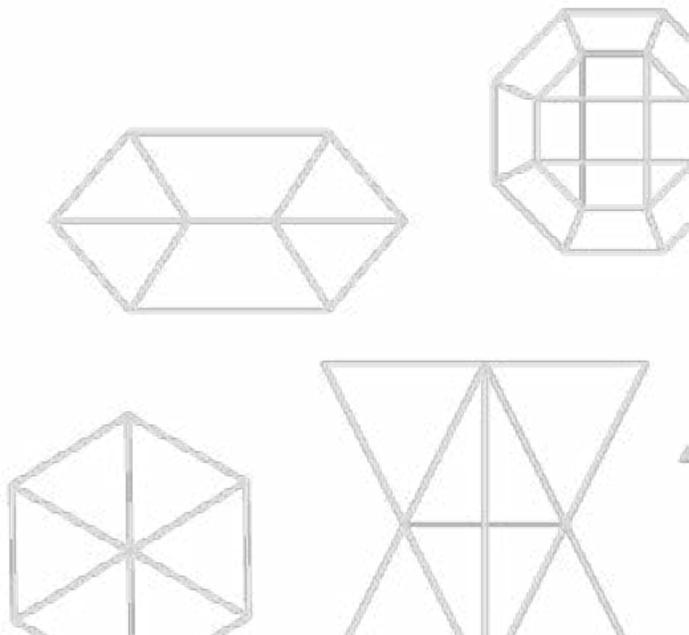




At one point, “City of Roses” was about a scientist trying to save her mother’s vision using mad science. At another point, it was a psychological examination of Meredith. Over time, it grew to become an analysis of what ‘home’ means to the members in a struggling family. The consistent thread through all of the drafts is the family bonds tying the story together. The story, as it is now, is my attempt to zoom in on family bonds between three very different characters and show how family bonds simultaneously bring them closer and pull them further apart.



## CITY OF ROSES

Alex Dankers

Lucille Sable stagnated after Meredith Sable escaped. No explicit forces made leaving difficult—not their mother, the city, the people—but the Sable sisters chose to isolate themselves, and so only they could free themselves. But, with Meredith gone, Lucille grew into the woodwork of their ancient house, like a bicycle propped against a growing tree that decades later encapsulates the bike with only a wheel popping from the bark to indicate something lay within, something screaming for help while sinking away over the years.

But Meredith left Lucille with their reclusive mother, Margaret Sable. Margaret was not negligent and certainly not uncaring, but her health kept her from leaving her room in the attic. Through a wide window, Margaret stared at the sky from when the sun cast the house’s shadow to when it set. She wishes it hadn’t come to this. She wishes that she could have held the family together all on her own, but the process was exhausting.

Maybe Meredith was a coward, maybe a visionary. She left to pursue her dreams away from the family, but she left behind her inspiration: Lucille. She lost her inspiration before she left, in fact. Her self-propelled motivation only went so far without Lucille. Uninspired motives are unloved children, growing up filled with holes and idiosyncrasies. As motivated as Meredith was, only Lucille could inspire her.

So Meredith’s escape can hardly be called an escape at all. Not

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without her twin.

If anything good came from Margaret Sable's illness, it lies in the possible reconciliation of the sisters. It offered a reunion and one final chance for the sisters to leave their isolation behind.



What a disappointing sight. Disappointing, but unsurprising. With Mother bedridden, Lucille cares for the house and the garden, but she hardly cares for herself. Ivy-vines creep up Mother's Craftsman house. They crawl across the sides of the building, into shingles, poking through broken glass and curling along dusty windowsills. Mom's rosebush—once blooming with fragile red flora, now a bundle of greying thorns and crunchy brown petals—cries for death or a new chance at life, some end to neglect. The hydrangea bushes do not even bother blooming. Blackberry vines invade a patch where daffodils once grew, they creep across our crabgrass and thistle lawn, they dig under our chicken-wire fence where Mother grew her vegetables. I left home for New York and returned to a weed-pillaged mess.

Lucille failed to tend to our house. I cannot decide whether it should be restored or razed now. Can the foundation even support it anymore? I once loved this house: one room on the edge carved from windows, each taller than I ever grew, facing a nearby field to get a perfect view of every sunset; wooden pillars, carved with the likenesses of goddesses or dancers—Mother was never clear which—hold an overhanging roof with thin, sturdy arms; a stained oak porch where I sat in a rocking chair while watching Lucille garden with Mother, and Mother's attic gable, supported by arched buttresses, pokes outward like an observatory with two smaller gables below. This house seemed noble, like a lumber castle tucked between the forest and plains, now diminished into a rotten porch with nails bared, windows broken with bent frames, a dirt-spattered home friendlier to carpenter ants than people. I left for seven years and my childhood home became a ghost.

With the house in disrepair, it was no surprise that Lucille could not care for Mother. She called me one week ago, her voice stammering in that nervous Lucille way—she pauses, she apologizes, she becomes distracted, and she seems like she could break in between each word uttered.

“Mom is—well, she's getting sicker now, Meredith, and I don't know what to do. I know you're busy in New York, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I can't do this alone anymore.” She admitted to me once that she thought of herself as deadweight. She admitted this only once when we were younger and never brought it up again. Maybe she thinks I forgot. Her voice rose a bit. “I'm surprised this rotary phone still works though, so that's pretty neat.” She has always made trite observations to distract herself from her nerves.

I wanted to leave because of her, really. Mother rested in her attic every day while Lucille vibrated with tension. Her fingers are chewed stubs, but she doesn't chew her fingernails; instead, Lucille chews the skin around them. She pulls down with her teeth and rips off skin with pieces of cuticle. Blood seeps under her fingertips. Mother never reprimanded Lucille, but would always bring her cold water to alleviate the pain of these self-inflicted bites. Mother never tried to address issues in any proper way. I personally think it ruined Lucille.

I walk to the porch and drop two duffel bags. A nail catches and tears a small pocket on the side of one bag, so my toothbrush pokes through the hole. People in the bag manufacturing business scatter pockets around their bags: a row of wallet-sized pockets in front and on the back of the bag; tall, pencil-thin pockets on each end piece; five or six impractical interior pockets for good measure. I can barely fit a toothbrush in any of them, let alone actual luggage. When I sew pockets for dresses and skirts, I need to take into account viability on a convenience and fashion scale, but I still make better choices than these bag-makers. If I left any innovations in the field before I left, it was a trend of adding pockets to traditionally (and tragically) pocket-less articles.

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Lucille's face peeks through a crack by the heavy oaken front door. She nudges the door, and, attached to only one hinge, it tips forward. The rusted bottom hinge creaks, bends in half, snaps. Lucille stumbles backwards, frightened, inside while the door plummets through the porch, scattering a cloud of dirt and sawdust, snapping through porch boards like a cinderblock through a windshield. The door sits in a woody crater. Lucille peeks back out—she has always been lanky and gaunt, a few heads taller than me, this towering, emaciated woman. I bet four Lucille's shoulder-to-shoulder could fit in the empty door gap. She sees me, excited enough to momentarily forget about the door, and flashes a quick grin. She wears a sweater, far too large for her long torso. While it is too large for her, it looks like a child's sweater, such an abrasive shade of magenta with glittery smiley faces plastered about, one grinning into her armpit. The sleeves obscure her hands. She waves and a sleeve flaps, but she sees the broken door, puts her hands over her mouth, moves them back to her chest, and wraps her arms around each other like two tangled vines. I swear I can hear her heart still pulsing from the crash. I think I can see it pushing against the sweater, trying to burst from her ribcage to find a donor body that isn't incompetent.

She spills her words. They practically dribble onto her sweater. "I'm sorry, so sorry, the door broke but I'll fix it later, hi Meredith, I missed you, you can come in now, let me make you some tea." She breathes deeply and spills words again, "Mom will be happy to see you, are you going to stay, I fixed up the guest room, I'm sorry the house is a bit messy, but I tried to fix it, do you want chamomile or green tea, we're out of Earl grey, I know you love Earl grey, I'm sorr—"

I cannot stand Lucille. I cannot stand how she ruined our childhood home, how she shuts herself inside, how she keeps away from non-familial human interaction, and I can absolutely not stand how she apologizes so much.

And I missed her more than anybody. No matter how much I

cannot stand her. I hug my sister. She stops rambling. "Do not panic. I am here. Do not worry. I will stay with you and Mother now. It will be like old times."



Mother adores Lucille's birth-story. When I was young, I wandered home with friends, and, every time a new friend arrived, Mother made a point of telling the story. She makes my birth sound like a dentist's appointment by comparison—in the hospital, out with a baby; see you again in two months because the other twin likes your womb too much. The story used to embarrass me but, like a scar or a bad haircut, I grew to like the story as much as Mother.

In January twenty-five years ago, Mother went into labor with Lucille. I was two months old. An anomaly, a pair of twins months apart, my birth one month pre-mature, Lucille's one month late. This was also the first night in a while where our yard held onto a substantial amount of snow, two whole feet. Mother's car could not climb snow piles, so, clad in an open pink-with-white-stripes bathrobe (which she still owns and wears regularly) with me in one arm and Lucille on the way, Mother climbed down the ladder from her attic, waddled downstairs, set our phone receiver against her shoulder, and dialed 9-1-1. She struggled a bit to dial a '9' on a rotary phone while in labor and holding a baby in one arm.

But, of course, the phone lines were overburdened that late-night by city residents who rarely dealt with this much snow. Mother stifled her shouts, hoping I would fall asleep and make the night marginally easier on her. So, of course, I stayed awake and cried through the whole ordeal. She wrapped me in a blanket to protect me from the January chill leaking into our house. She dragged our phone closer to the couch—a disgusting chartreuse monster, one cushion with yellow fluff poking through, another missing entirely, leaving only two cushions on a three person couch—to the point that the cord was completely horizontal from wall to receiver. Mother slumped

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into a cushion. She listened to the music of the ‘Please Hold’ line for an hour before an operator answered her call. Apparently they played *Livin’ on a Prayer* and *I Died in Your Arms Tonight* on repeat. I understand they were popular songs at the time, but they seem a bit inappropriate.

“9-1-1, what’s your emergency?” When Mother tells this story to Lucille, she claims she was perfectly calm reciting the circumstances and details of how to reach our hidden house, and to please hurry. When she tells this story to me, she claims, “I screeched at that phone operator like a banshee in the end of days. She was such a sweetheart, I feel so bad about it now. I am sure she gets a few calls like that daily though, the poor dear.”

Ditches and ice obstructed the ambulance on the way to our home. Tow trucks, at the time, were as tied up as the ambulances. Every emergency vehicle was either too busy or unprepared to reach Mother. By the time the towed ambulance made the drive, the sun rose from behind the house and Mother cradled baby Lucille in her arms. Graciously or spitefully (depending on who heard the story) she accepted a ride to the hospital. They drove into the city and cut the umbilical cord inside the hospital.



The Sables never owned a television, though their living room always begged. It practically dusted a spot off itself for a television—a patchy cream armchair, nearly a quilt from the holes mended by Meredith, stared along with the chartreuse couch, the dining room chairs and table, and an antique cat clock at an armoire leaning against a far wall, blocking a colossal window. Double doors on the front could open outward and slide into the armoire, the drawers were removable, and both Meredith and Lucille could fit inside. Without these drawers and doors it seemed more like a casket than a container. Despite ample space, no clothes or television blessed the armoire.

But the siblings did take the drawers, stack them on top of each

other, and build a fort from a childhood blanket, the side of the chair, and two couch cushions. The two slept in the makeshift home more often than their actual rooms for a month before Meredith tore the fort down to make a skirt from the stained baby blanket.

That fort really brought life to the empty living room for the one month though.



I guess we grew up. Maybe it happened over time, a slight slipping from childhood into obligations or maybe there was a precise Moment—When I moved to New York? When I graduated from high school?—but Lucille and I grew up.

Lucille stayed with Mother and now works as a digital artist, selling art on commission with whatever internet we could afford given our distant location. She begged Mother to find her supplies and turned her room into an art studio. First she had to gut the room, relocating her bed and dressers into the living room. I helped her dust the floors and throw out her trivial childhood toys. She spread ratty blue tarps across her floor, draped the walls with canvas, plopped a wobbly kitchen stool wherever she sat, and painted the walls. She started sleeping on the couch, but her tall body always left her ankles dangling off one end.

At about the same time, I left for New York to pursue a fashion design career, but barely left a mark on the industry after seven years, an amateur professional-cluttered city. One of my designs made it into the back of a fashion magazine, my name in a small caption, my current career peak. Every other day I feel like quitting and moving home permanently, but then the next day comes and I keep trying despite the evidence that I should stop.

“Meredith.” Since we were toddlers, Lucille always pronounced my name oddly. For ‘mere’, she said ‘mary’; for ‘-deth’, she said ‘death’. Marydeath. Mother tried to fix this quirk exactly one time, but she let it stick for Lucille’s comfort. “Meredith, come in, Mother will want to

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see you.”

Beyond the general lack of maintenance, the interior of the house changed little since I went to New York; Lucille never left a large footprint on the layout of the house after she made her room into an art studio. In fact, her old bed still rests in the living room with the old sheets still bundled in one corner of the mattress. Our rotary telephone sits on a corner table in a spider-web jacket, still connected to the phone lines, probably a fire hazard. Our kitchen appliances, once a matching cream shade yellowed into mustard tones with thick dust layers on their tops. Mother’s Kit-Cat clock, already vintage when she salvaged it years ago, stares straight ahead, unmoving. I pull it off the wall, turn the clock dial to the proper time, and wind the cat; it only gazes forward, fully dead. I hang it back up, wipe dusty palms on my skirt, and follow Lucille upstairs.

I hear Lucille at the top of the thick ladder to Mother’s attic. “Mom, Meredith’s home now!” Mother’s voice murmurs. “Yes, she’s coming up right now to see you, mom!” I climb up the ladder and can stand tall in a cramped attic space. Lucille

**“Yes, I will get you a rose. It was nice to see you, Mother...”**

hunches. She bounds down the ladder once I enter the room. Mother sits in a rocking chair facing our one unbroken window in the one pristine room of our house. The wood floors shine, not a bit of decay, a stained-glass vase with a slightly wrinkled rose radiates in the windowsill, Mother’s bed next to her chair is immaculate—pressed sheets spread across her bed, tucked around each corner with careful hands. Mother looks weary. She grew wrinkles, deep circles under her eyes, and a thinning head of gray hair. She sets a quilt aside, stops her chair’s rock with bony feet, and leans a hand against a thigh to lift herself. She slips her feet into a pair of fuzzy pink slippers and ties her bathrobe. She hobbles over to me, her back leaning forward. But her eyes still sparkle as always, a deep brown tinged with white along

the edges. In poor lighting, her irises look completely black, a shade passed down to Lucille and me. She grins with her lips, never one to show her teeth.

“Why, Meredith, you need to come home more often. Your mom gets to missing you pretty quick.” She puts her arms around me and squeezes. Like a vise. I grimace—there’s no reason I couldn’t have visited in seven years—and squeeze back, but not nearly as tight out of fear that I may break her.

“I can stay home as long as you need me to, Mother. Are you well?”

“Oh, I’ll be just fine now that my daughter is home. You can leave whenever you need to dear, don’t let me keep you. I never could hold you back, you were always my wild child.” She chuckles and releases me, still grinning. “You need to go back to New York! My daughter needs to get famous so she can fly me over to New York to wear her dresses on a runway. But right now your Mother needs only one other thing of you.” She shuffles back to her rocking chair, leans slowly into it, and nods back and forth. She points a finger at the shining vase on the windowsill. “My rose is wilting. Could you please head out and pick me up a new one?”

I nod, despite her being turned away. “Yes, I will get you a rose. It was nice to see you, Mother, I will be back in a bit.” I can hear her rocking chair creak as I climb down the ladder out of the attic, head to the living room, and step past our fallen door.



It’s hard to say that Meredith grew up in that house, if she grew at all. But when she went to New York, Meredith kept an intentional distance. Geography split her off from her family by a few thousand miles when she left to the other side of the United States, but, when she made it into the city, she left behind the West entirely. She kept her tone, words, and apparel formal, handling family and friends like an interview. Fortunately, this made job hunting in New York simple. Unfortunately, her peers imagined Meredith as an ice queen, leaving

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Meredith with few major connections on either side of the country. And, oh, her frustrations were intense. Even though she grins while she walks, it's easy to tell that Meredith never truly smiles anymore. Her grin is just another formality.

Lucille, in particular, drove Meredith away and into this nature. Meredith felt Lucille was coddled by Mother, held close to home and kept safe within fantasy while Meredith struggled in reality. She struggled to perform for friends, teachers, and for her own ambitious goals. But Lucille dealt with none of these, dealt with only Mother and their garden.

Meredith strove to become her opposite, the anti-Lucille because, to Meredith, it seemed like there was nothing to Lucille. Like she existed without a substance, a life wandering in a void. Purposeless.

And Lucille did feel that way.



“Lucille, I am going to go pick up a rose for Mother,” I shout into the hole in our house. “Is there anything we need from the store?” Lucille appears on the porch, a few torn sheets of notebook paper flat in her hands. Fresh cyan paint stains dig into her shirt, abrasive bright splotches in the sunlight. She nods.

“Yes, actually, we need a lot, because, with Mom in bed, I only have what Rose can get us once a week when I send her and—“

“Rose? Who is Rose? What does she have to do with shopping?”

Lucille’s hands crinkle the papers. “Oh, Rose is my personal shopper I met on the internet. I think it is pretty funny when Mom wants Rose to get roses so when I e-mail her that on the list I always give it a line by itself, ‘Rose would you please get roses?’ and then I add a little smiley face.”

I frown. I commit to this frown, I frown with my forehead, eyebrows, and cheeks to show my disdain. “How much are you paying her?”

Lucille balls up the paper. “Oh, it isn’t that much, not much at all.

You know, I like to make a smiling face with a colon and a three. It looks like a kitten face, it’s really cute, Meredith.”

I try to frown deeper, moving my eyebrow as low as I can. I want the edges of my mouth to touch my chin. “Lucille Marie Sable.” It hurts my throat to talk in this tone, a bit lower than I’m accustomed. I would describe as either an impression of a demonic ox or a frustrated foghorn. I speak a pitch higher for my vocal safety. Lucille squirms and looks away from me, her arms curl to hug herself, two magenta sleeves with cyan polka-dots crisscrossing her chest. “How much. Are you. Paying her?”

Lucille glances over at me. She moves a sleeve to her mouth, a hand peeks from it, and she chews at her cuticles. “It’s only ten percent. Ten percent of whatever our order totals are. We’ve only needed Rose for a year, and I used to go grocery shopping when Mom could come with me, but it hasn’t cost that much Meredith, really! My art has been selling lately.”

I rub my temples. “You will e-mail Rose later, you will thank her for her services, but you will say that you will not be using them anymore. Okay?” Lucille looks away and nods. “Okay. Good.” I walk over to Lucille and hug her, keeping distance between our torsos to protect my jacket from paint stains. “I know you do not operate too well in public, but I am home now and can help you again like when we were kids. Okay?” She rests her chin on my head, I can hear her snuffle. “It will be okay, Lucille, I am not mad at you. I am just upset that you spent on something so frivolous.”

“But it’s not your money to spend!” Lucille flails out of my hug. Her voice shatters. “It’s not your money to spend and it isn’t frivolous to me! What do you even know, Meredith? You left us for seven years and come home thinking you know everything about me, but you never even know what to say to me unless you’re criticizing me or trying to comfort me, like I’m this pitiable mess or have some disease you’re afraid of catching.” She wipes at her eyes with her sleeves. Cyan paint smears on her nose. “You don’t know anything and Rose

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is more supportive than you ever were because she sees me as more than a victim to help.” She runs inside, sobbing. The grocery list lies on the ground in a ball. I pick it up, flatten out the bent papers, and walk inside after Lucille.



Lucille Sable feels defined as a burden. This definition invades her every thought, her every breath. She thinks of herself as a physical, mental, emotional, and economic burden on her sickly Mother, on her twin sister, even on the professional shopper she hired so she could be home at all hours to paint. She tries to paint her way through it all, the emotional and economic stresses. When the paint seeps into her bitten fingertips, it soothes her, like an artificial medicine. And the act of painting itself relaxes her. She focuses on murals, on large canvas stretching wall to wall. Lucille likes to paint trees with black branches swarming outward like lightning. She likes to paint eyes in sunflower shades peeking from the bark, arms and legs in the shade of the sun before it sets sprouting in twisting lashes from inside the wood. Her suns are always cyan because she loves warm sunny colors accenting everything else. These murals end up looking like black spiderwebs in a Technicolor world, but they’re so large that she can hardly sell a piece.

When she finishes painting on good days, she smiles at herself in the mirror and thinks of herself as a “Love Tax” on her family, an obligation they handle at the proper Moments.

Lucille began accepting her eternal status as “The Burden” in grade school. Lucille grew with a lanky, skeletal stature. She towered as a child among children and now, as an adult, she continues to dwarf those around her. But years ago, on the elementary school playground—a concrete patch with one rusted swing set planted in a field of woodchips—height did not designate prestige. No, noteworthiness came with respect. Respect out of fear or generosity. Respect built on some foundation of passion. A bull of a girl, with wide eyes, a perma-

nently furrowed brow, and wide flaring nostrils, valued passion. A full four years younger than Lucille, the bull-child passionately rammed Lucille into the concrete and became notorious—the second grader who beat-up a sixth grader! And although Lucille bled, although she cried, and although she begged her Mother to homeschool her after sixth grade, Lucille felt relieved with her pain. To her, it seemed purposeful. Lucille helped the bull succeed. She was a tool for success—not her own, but success nonetheless.

Success seemed designated as Meredith’s calling—Meredith, the plucky, older sister, the New York fashion designer, the daughter that went to college, the daughter who left home, the motivated daughter who actually tried. Lucille had inspiration, yes. She wanted to open a bookstore, to open a café, to be an artist, to leave the house and breathe the air around her, but it simply never happened. At her core, she always wanted to be Meredith, to be the doer.

Of course, Meredith changed. Sitting in her room with Meredith lightly tapping on the door, her voice whispering through (“Lucille, would you please open this door for me so we may talk about this?”) Lucille doesn’t know who it was she admired or who she wants to be anymore. She never wanted to be Lucille Sable, but Meredith seemed perfect. Infallible.

But here Meredith was, more fallible than Lucille, less trustworthy than a near stranger who bought the groceries.

With an idol broken before her, Lucille embraces her own identity.



I think it took a few hours for Meredith to leave me alone, but I’m usually alone anyway so I like to think of it as a status quo. I like status quos, they make me feel like I’m building toward an important revelation, even if the revelation can’t be found for a few years or a few decades or in my own lifetime. I like to think that I’m patient, so no trouble arose when I waited for Meredith to leave. It hurt when she left seven years ago, but it can’t hurt anymore.

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I lift two lids of paint with a screwdriver, the cherry red of an old sports car and the indigo of a skyscraper seconds after the sun falls completely behind the hills. I pour the buckets across paint-thickened tarp and smear the colors into each other with my hands. The mix looks like a neglected purple, as if an amethyst crushed itself into dust and fermented for a month in a basement, swirling around with a band of living sludges.

What a lovely color.



Dearest Rose,

Rose, Rose, Rose! Rose. That 'r' sound is quite nice I think. It's the purr the kitten in your apartment makes. It's like your name contains a kitten, oh my! It's quite unfortunate, let me dial the fire department so they can rescue the cat from your namesake. It might get lost in the 'o' and the 's' and find itself at the edge of 'e'. If we aren't careful, you may have to start going by Osre! That's pretty tough to say I think, so let's not let it come to that. :3

Meredith didn't come back home last night, so I need you. I attached below a list of the groceries we need, but I'm also running low on paint! If you could get a can of each of the following BEHR brand colors, I should be okay for another month—#ECC-32-3U, #500A-2, #500B-5PP, #680B-7. Ummm... They're called Cherry Tree, Refreshing Pool, Mermaid Treasure, and Sugar Plum if you have trouble with the catalog numbers, I'm sorry. And if you could get another can of any random color as usual, that would be nice too. And yellow and black! That seems like a lot of paint, sorry if it's heavy... >n<

No rush on the paint, but Mom and I could use the other groceries in the next day or two. I don't know if Meredith will come home again.

Sorry for the trouble, thank you so much!

Lucille Marie Sable



Mom echoes late at night with her coughing and I can practically see mucus leaking from her throat simply from the sound, but I need to keep painting because I think I am onto something, so I keep Mom's old lantern on all night on my stool and paint. It's a bit hard to balance on my lopsided stool and my shadow gets in the way sometimes, but it's the best light source we have. Painting goes less smoothly with the shadows, so sometimes I have to repaint spots of the canvas leaving a bumpy map all over.

My black trees look too burnt and sad, so I started to mix the black with the mucky sludge purple I made that one time. I wasted all that paint before, but Rose bought me new cans so I'm trying to conserve it a bit better this time. Sometimes revelations waste a lot for me to see what I need. My trees look slightly less sad, but now they are a bit leakier and make my painting feel like a swamp so I splat yellow birds against the tree bark every now and then to try to make it brighter. Dead still, but brighter, sunlight hanging over a funeral.

A splotch of blue makes it onto the bark. Rose brought me the cyan the first time I told her to pick a random color for me, so I've been using it a lot more often. On the tree though, it seems to be a good window color. I paint in the borders and make a window with a flower pot on the inside. I widen my tree's trunk and expand it across the canvas. I paint in red cracks within the bark of the tree. I transform the tree into a forest metropolis, a full city forged from one lonely tree. Or maybe a vein of ore filled with rubies?

One week passed since Meredith came home, but she's already been lost for seven years. I miss the old her and want her to come home.



Margaret Sable's illness truly struck that week. She felt it most in her temperature, her fingertips, face, and feet seemed to be subzero compared to the rest of her body. She wrapped herself not in her warm-

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est clothes, but the ones handmade by Meredith—the thin sweater, scarves, shawls, and caps sewn from leftover fabric. She wrapped her feet in socks made from linen curtains in their living room from years ago. She layered herself heavily, praying that the clothes would heat her core and then she added ever more layers. A sickly thin Margaret seemed ballooned by her clothing. One final layer fit snug around her, a black and red plaid dress sewn from quilts. But, still, her bones chilled.

Firmly tucked into clothing, Margaret Sable leaned back into her rocking chair and laid a blanket over herself to watch another day's sunset behind the gray stem of a shriveled flower.



I knew this city's strength when I came back. I knew the risks so I packed everything. Those two whole duffel bags in my name. What a pit I've dug for myself, so deep that it keeps sucking me toward the center while I slip down from the edges. You don't think to build stairs until you need a ladder and when you need a ladder hope dies.

I cannot head back to New York. I expected to stay here, to start fresh near my home and family, so I quit. It only took a few days for this hotel and this city to absorb a large portion of my savings, and I cannot bear to call on Lucille for help. I do not think Mother even taught her how to drive.

The phonebook listed a few friendly names, but, after seven years, those bonds broke. I always thought of friendly bonds to be like ribbons, thin and fragile, but not meant to shatter. But, given enough frigidity, anything can be frozen and any substance frozen enough can break, even the thinnest silk ribbon.

I pack my bags, one duffel for each forearm, and open my hotel door with an exasperated hand. I shove to make it through the door with both bags in tow and my arms ache with the weight of my whole world. From a window down the hotel hall, I see frost building up on the windows. Snowflakes. Compared to the criminal sea-foam and

black tea leaf color motif of this hotel, I think a small walk in the cold will be pleasant.

I suppose I need to go home and apologize.



The snow flurries lick at the edges of the Sable residence and find the cracks leading indoors, the broken windows, twisted panes, rotted woodwork, and hole in the front door. The heat drains from the house like blood from a stunned face and snow tumbles in thin powder swirls across the hardwood floors. Flakes creep into Lucille Sable's lamp-lit room and melt inside, congealing with paint layers on the floor. Lucille tossed aside her brushes and now paints with her fingertips and torso, with the edge of her sweater for texture improvements. The forest city coats itself in fingertip smudges and the thin sheen wiping of a sweater sleeve, but the colors blur with each new stroke, a bright spiral condensing into a cracked black whole center of paint layers. I cannot say for certain whether the chill penetrates the layers of paint on her body or not.

**"I always thought of friendly bonds to be like ribbons, thin and fragile, but not meant to shatter."**

But, if it does, Lucille likes the cold. She wants it. In this Moment, Lucille hopes to freeze with her fingers sprawling across the canvas, her dirty paint stained sweater and twisted scowl immortalized in winter's chill inside the decrepit house like performance art.

To Lucille, the painting absorbed the Sable home and now everything is part of the painting. A dying rosebush outside with frostbitten leaves, a heavy door trapped in a crater, goddess pillars dancing while struggling to hold up a house that is more natural than professionally made because the ivy digs so deep, and with one perfect room in an attic gable.

Maybe somebody stumbles across the house at noon and explores

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the house, witnesses the deep tunnels dug by carpenter ants, the Kit Cat clock frozen at 8 p.m., the living room with the chartreuse couch, the patchy chair, the husk of an armoire, a long abandoned bed. They enter Meredith's room and see it entirely gutted with seven years of dust mingling with a week's layer of snow, both layers in equal measure. And, maybe, they will be so fascinated that it will inspire them to write a poem on the spot. Or maybe they'll be disgusted and leave. Or curious enough to explore the rest of the house.

Maybe they skip Lucille's door completely. They walk upstairs and have their foot sink the wood floor to their knee. They spend ten minutes pulling their foot out, scratching it in the process. Maybe it leaves a scar, adds a splash of red to the woodwork and, just maybe, Lucille would have splashed that color on the ground herself if she could move.

Maybe after opening the door to Lucille Sable's room, they spot her icy statue frozen against a mad portrait. Maybe they write a poem on this spot instead, but with paint thinner, and they lead the poem out the door. The stranger sets the portrait of a house ablaze to free Lucille Sable. Maybe a tired, sick Margaret Sable, tucked in sentimental layers and a checkered dress, will finally feel warm.

Lucille leans her forehead into her painting and sobs. Tears dribble down the side of the painting. She begins to giggle like a child, like a criminal. She knows that the stranger, the arsonist in her hypothetical thought's center, is her sister.



Dear Lucille,

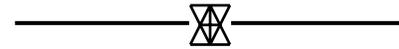
It's cold out and the front door of your home is still broken, so, if it's okay with you, I can come fix it later today! In fact, I'm definitely coming over whether the door is fixed or not. We can make cocoa and I'll watch you paint again. I'm not sure if I've made it clear enough with the dozens of times I said I like watching you paint, so I'll say it again: I really like watching you paint.

But I haven't heard from you in days so... To be honest, I'm a bit worried? You might be low on food. I don't usually worry about clients like this, but almost everybody I work with uses my services as a frivolity to help out just a tiny bit. But I know you genuinely need somebody for this. Because your mother and sister can't exactly help so much right now.

So ummm... If you read this I'll see you later and if not, I guess I'll surprise you?

~See you soon~ <3

Rose

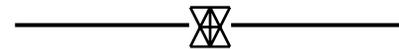


So I slept in a 24/7 fast food restaurant last night. The manager of the place was generous enough, though I must look like a beggar at this point. Our home takes a bit more energy to reach than I expected and, with the snow flurries, the taxi drivers in the area all scoffed at me.

At noon, I will begin another trudge through the city. I stocked up on soup and a can opener from a supermarket, a cheap hat and gloves, and disgusting fluffy boots that, at the very least, keep my feet from freezing. I have multiple layers of tights to keep me warm topped with my last clean skirt so I can pretend I am decent while I trek to our home. Oh goodness! Those broken windows and the downed door! I'm sure it is more an igloo than a home at this point.

First, I shall head to a coffeeshop and stock up on caffeine. A jittery version of me will move a bit faster than I generally do and I can be grateful for that. Hopefully I can be back before the sun goes down.

I'm sorry, Lucille. I'm sorry, Mom. I'll be back shortly.



One phonograph rests in a closet next to a column of records. Lucille Sable dusts the record player off and blows the dust from the record on the turntable, careful not to touch the disc and ruin it with

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paint. She sets down the needle and turns on the music player. Margaret Sable's favorite Cilla Black song resonates in the snow-powdered room.

You're my world/You're every breath I take/You're my world/You're every move I make

Lucille dances across her painted tarp. Sticky splotches squelch against her bare, painted feet. The snow's chill blasts against her cheeks, brings a veiny blush out in them. After a few days in this weather, her body shivers. Even in her sleep. She drapes a blanket over herself on her blue tarp floor and writhes about on the floor, her vibrations painting the ground with her hips, her shoulders, and with her hair as a paintbrush, stroking about in the obsidian spiral mess.

As the trees reach/For the sun above/So my arms reach out/To you for love

While awake, Lucille, tries to clean herself in the snow. It already moves freely around the home, conveniently available, and she simply wants to see a clean hand or fingertip again. She packs snow tightly and rubs it against her arms and fingers, bringing about chapped skin underneath with cracks like fault-lines about her hands. She worries that she'll shiver too hard and, like an earthquake, shatter the house around her.

You're my world/You are my night and day/You're my world/You're every prayer I pray

Despite the frigid environment, Lucille feels a heat growing from her chest. This energy gives more warmth than Meredith ever offered her. But Lucille knows her danger and staggers upstairs. She cannot feel under numbed feet with each step forward, but she needs to reach the attic, the closest room to being warm in the house with the only unbroken window, the only room that was taken care of. By her mother, no less. "I let this place become such a mess" Lucille thinks to herself, "I'm sorry Meredith, I'm so sorry, I know why you left now."

"I am such a mess too."

If our love ceases to be/Then it's the end of the world/End of my

world/End of my world for me



The sun is starting to set as I trod. So slow. But I certainly know where I am at least. One more turn off this gravel road and I will be on our private road, a mile long road when accounting for how much it winds, but I'll make it. I know a short-cut over the hills and I am as well-heated as if I were in-doors.

But what a tiring walk! It must be five miles between our home and the city. The snow certainly has not been a boon. The vine infested, glass shard ruins of my childhood home likely won't provide a very well-heated environment for Lucille, Mother, or me. Maybe I can convince Lucille to e-mail Rose and take us somewhere warmer, at least for Mother.

I think I will ask her in an hour or so when I make it back.



That wobbly stool sat in the center of Lucille's room with an oil lantern burning on top of it. It only took a gust. The fire smoldered for a while, a tame in-door campfire. The snow inside the house helped dwarf the flames. Water-based paint all over the walls also helped. The lamp oil lead a path to the edges of Lucille's portrait, and the flames reached up to kiss it, singeing the treetop city and painting the sludge color black again with smoky touches.

Fortunately, the house had plenty of ventilation without windows or doors. Much of the smoke skulked back outdoors. Enough smoke for Margaret Sable to see from her window. Her near hypothermic daughter lay on her bed, now dressed in all of the clothes sewn by Meredith. Margaret, in only a pink-and-white-stripes bathrobe, nudged her daughter awake.

"The house is burning, dear, I need to get you out now."

Lucille nods and smiles, struggles to her feet in her mountain of layers. Margaret grabs her hand. "Slow and steady now, dear." Mar-

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garet Sable hobbles over to her ladder, guiding her daughter. But, at the steps, Margaret stumbles down the ladder. Although she cannot move, she projects up to her daughter through gasps.

“Okay dear, I know you can’t feel much in your feet...” cough “...and you maybe aren’t fully awake or aware of what’s happening...” cough “but I need you to walk down to your mom now please.” cough.

Lucille takes a cautious step downward, nearly falling. She knocks an elbow against the wall, but cannot feel her nerves. “That’s it, you’re doing just fine, keep going.” cough. Another step. The fire engulfs and leaks through Lucille’s door downstairs. Lucille moves two steps down, quickly, climbing down in falls. She stabilizes herself against the ladder with one arm against the ladder. cough. She hops a few steps to the floor and lands on her knees, scraping them against the floor. cough.

“That’s it, Lucille. Stand up now.” Lucille stands. “Your mother is so proud of you. Get downstairs and away from the house now, it’s dangerous.” Lucille wobbles downstairs, slowly, like the ladder, but the fire heats her up. She can nearly feel again with each ember moving toward her. She moves closer to the door. It’s a tripping sort or run that gets her through the gap in the front door before the flames. She trips over an oak platform stuck in the ground and stumbles forward onto the porch. She crawls, pulls her body with her hands, moves each knee forward, and lets her legs slump down each step in the stairs after her body. A nail catches against her arm, tears through multiple thin layers of fabric, and cuts her arm open. Lucille is surprised how hot her blood feels.

She closes her eyes as she hears a car drive into the driveway, skidding against the gravel. She hears small pebbles scatter. She imagines the dancing goddesses holding up the Sable household behind her when she hears the crackling spread faster and the sound of what could only be a roof collapsing.

So very, very hot.



Frigid, chilled. Fingertips like icicles, a bit of frostbite in her toes. Thank god it was only her toes. The doctors amputated both pinky toes, but Lucille shouldn’t have trouble recovering. I hold her hand in the hospital. I feel like the only person she knows any more.

Her mother died. I could tell as soon as I drove up. There wasn’t a chance. Those heavy pillars held the house up with goddess arms, but the fire ate away their heels. They fell backward, straight through the wood, knocking the entire roof down with them. The buttresses holding the upper gable crumbled to the center. Watching a multi-tiered house fall like there was a black hole in the center was fascinating. If Margaret weren’t dead and if I didn’t see Lucille crawling in the snow, barely outside of the fire’s reach, I may have marveled longer.

I dragged Lucille into my car. I set the heater up to an intense degree. I felt like my eyebrows were scorching off and Lucille seemed positively loopy. She couldn’t even speak.

I truly appreciate her. I appreciate her and her visions and her art. If I had half of her courage, I would have gone through with art school, I would create worlds, I would be truly happy instead of a professional shopper.

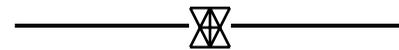
Maybe at least I can be happy with her.

I ask how she is doing.

“I’m still in shock, I think? I set our house on fire. I killed Mom.”

I try to reassure her. It wasn’t her, not at all. Her brown eyes sink into a shade of black. “Could you go pick up Meredith, please? Please? I need to see her. I need to say I’m sorry.” She smiles.

I pick up my keys and open the door to leave. “I will be back in a bit.” I blow her a kiss. Her eyes widen and shine, the brown revived. As if I gave her the first semblance of affection in years.



What a disappointing sight. A platform coated with ash and snow. I can’t differentiate the gray from the white powder. It all mingles.

Halfway across the field, I saw the silhouette, like the house was

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demolished entirely. Walking closer, I knew what had happened. There is only one thing that could have happened—the house caught on fire. Nobody’s fault, necessarily. Just an accident.

But it’s all gone. The goddess pillars, the buttresses, the oak armoire, chartreuse mattress, patchy chair, Mother’s Kit-Cat clock, and ancient phone. Gone. I abandoned my childhood house for a few weeks and it left me behind, alone. But, thankfully, our rose bush was untouched. It is a leafless, bushy gray bramble, yes. But it remains untouched.

The house curls inward, like it was sucked in the center. The crackle of embers stays alive in tiny cracks where the vines spread across the porch and the walls. The ceiling falls in completely, cracking into the wooden foundation. The gable of my room collapsed; Mother’s attic too. Lucille’s seems relatively safe, though it seems the fire started from her room, stretching outward and engulfing the rest of the house.

It is the only accessible room. I walk in through her window and stare. The wall I walk in from is unpainted and the opposing wall is burnt through, but to my left and right is a spiraling mural, blackened by the flames. A melted sludge seeps from the walls in a thick sheet, a rainbow melting into a gooey char.

And I know Mother died in this fire.

And I do not know where Lucille is.

And I know it was an accident, of course, and I cannot blame Lucille.

I feel like I could have stopped this. I am such a burden. I reach into my duffel bag. I happen to have a vase—I saw it in a thrift shop for \$5. Stained glass. Like Mom’s. I hoped she would like it.

I lay it in the center of Lucille’s room. Headlights from a car flash behind me. I guess I have a ride away from here.

I pull a fresh rose from my bag and set it in the vase before leaving.