

red, and in my head, I could hear it all over again: *You will always be she to me.*

After she yelled “BRIAN!” for the third time, and still no answer, my mother turned to me. “Get your shoes!” she hissed. “We’re getting up there before it rains.”

At the base of the shed, I pressed the ladder into the earth. Wiggled its feet around until it made soft impressions and gave the illusion of purchase.

“When I get up there,” my mother said, “you pass me the tarp, and I’ll lay it over.”

I tried to argue about how I should be the one to go up. My mother had bad knees, rheumatoid arthritis. I worried she would fall, come crashing through the ceiling, and I wouldn’t be able to save her.

“I won’t fall,” my mother said, sternly. “Not if you hold that ladder steady. And with your back — no fucking way you’re getting up here.”

This, too, had crossed my mind. When I was thirteen, I had a six-hour surgery to fuse my spine near full-length, and in moments like this, I often imagined what it’d be like for my body to crumple — the rods in my back cracking into pieces, piercing out through muscle and nerve.

My mother was on the third rung when, in the driveway, my father appeared. “Oh, no,” he said. “You’re not going up there.”

“Well, you’re sure as hell not,” said my mother.

My father was, at fifty-eight, recovering from the same surgery I’d had when I was a teenager. Where I had ten vertebrae fused, he had four. But any amount of spinal fusion was a months-long recovery process, and he hadn’t been following his care instructions. Less than a week after the operation, he was out in the yard picking up sticks with a mechanical grabber, tossing them into a plastic bucket. Now, two months post-op, his incision was swollen and blue, bulging with thick ropes of scar tissue in ways mine never did.

I could see the lumps sticking out from his shirt as he took my mother’s place on the ladder. We’d begged him not to, told him to get my brother for help, but it was no use. He was up there gripping the scabs of asphalt faster than we could stop him.