DRAFT.
Emerald Forcier, 20226. Not for circulation.

Rooftops- Mexico, January, 2025

Tantalizing Oaxacan coffee stared back at me as my impatient mind and sleepy eyes inspected the French press. Despite catching up with my dear friend, Madeiline, until 2:00am, I was jetlagged and couldn't sleep past 7:30am. Out of habit I scrolled on Instagram, but nothing captured my attention. Nothing had captured my attention in months. All I wanted was that gorgeous coffee which had finally shifted from caramel to chestnut. Ready or not, I plunged and poured, followed by a dash of milk. Careful not to wake Madeiline, I tiptoed up the floating staircase leading from our Airbnb's living room to its rooftop terrace.

I was greeted by a morning sky sprinkled with dreamy cumulus clouds, the sun's rising pink and yellow illuminating each one from the east. I placed my coffee on the deck next to a hammock and found my precarious balance. Without shifting my center of weight, I fished beneath me for my cup and carefully brought it to my lips. The coffee brought a warm stream into my stomach as the cool Mexican morning took its time waking up into a hot day. I was so pleased with myself for not flipping over like a burrito on a spit, I nearly stayed put. But the blinding dagger of sunlight rising over Cozumel's glittering water was too unpleasant to ignore. Mustering all of my balance, I set my coffee back down, then made a graceless, but successful dismount. Gathering my things, I relocated to a shaded patio couch. Slightly less whimsical, I was far more comfortable.

I savored another sip and the warm morning breeze kissed my face. A sea of empty rooftop terraces stretched out in front of me. Staring off into the vista beyond, I saw myself from an

alternate vantage point. Playing out like a movie, in a flash, I watched myself set my mug on the coffee table and stand. I walked toward the clear balcony wall. Stepping over a mosaic of pebbles on the floor, I arrived at the edge. A quiet, narrow street sat five stories below. Without thought or hesitation, I put two hands on the balcony and hopped over it like I was jumping a short fence. The empty concrete sidewalk came at me faster than expected, with only a moment before my body hit the ground in a swift, fatal splat. Darkness.

I shook back into presence within my body. Safely seated on the couch, I clenched the cushion beneath me to anchor. "Fuck" I thought. "It happened again."

"Good morning" I heard from a soft, cheery voice. Madeiline, was approaching from the doorway, coffee in hand. I smiled and patted the seat next to me.

"Hey babe! Come take a seat. It's a beautiful morning."

Chicken Nuggets- Maine, 1989

Wind from the airplane's propeller blew my long, dirty-blonde hair across my face. As I struggled to peer through the strands, tears and snot plastered it over my eyes and onto my reddened cheeks. The loud noise of the plane drowned out my mother's voice. Our heartbroken group was gathered on the tarmac. Like a shirt ripping in two, I was the only strand unwilling to allow our family to sever.

"Emmy Lou, you need to let go."

My scream must have been sucked into the propeller because nobody heard it. Or maybe nobody cared.

“Moooommmmyyyy!!!!”

Suspended in the air, I clawed at my mother’s legs, holding on for dear life as my Aunt Debby pulled my legs and my distressed mother pried each finger from her pants.

“Emmy Lou. You need to go back with Aunt Debby.”

I locked eyes with my sullen older brother, seated in the back of Aunt Debby’s car. I knew why they wanted me to let go. Our older sister, Abby, was in Boston, dying. Our parents had been home for a brief visit, and we needed to get out of the way again.

My mother had felt like an extension of me. Our bond was built over years of breastfeeding and snuggles. As my four-year-old grip gave out and my fingers left contact with her, our bond vanished. Why did I think she was going to stay this time? I should have known better.

Aunt Debby’s efforts to calm my hysterics came in the form of a 1989 flavored bribe, “I’ll let you sit in the front seat and we’ll go get MacDonalds.” My small, flailing body was wrestled into the passenger seat. Unfamiliar cigarette smoke pummeled my tiny nostrils. My stomach ached from swallowing tears and snot.

The free Angel Flight for families in crisis lifted off from our small, regional airport in Maine, en route to Boston.

I didn’t recognize my parents while they were visiting. Their empty eyes turned them into zombies. They feigned a joyful reunion, but I could tell they weren’t feeling anything. Maybe I needed to be like them. Feeling didn’t prevent me from being left behind. I looked back at my big brother. He was a zombie now, too.

A happy meal was shoved into my lap. “Eat something. You’ll feel better.” I fished a chicken nugget from the box and took a nibble. It tasted like snot and tears. I fought my way through the four-pack.

Aunt Debby drove us home. I sat in the car while Adam was returned to the neighbors. He had moved in with the Browns a month prior after Abby had fallen into a coma from a brain tumor. Nothing was certain, and Adam and I needed to live with whoever would take us.

Adam was in school and our parents thought it was best to keep him enrolled. The Browns’ daughters shared his schedule and they welcomed him into their home. Legend has it that Mr. Brown heroically marched over to our house, picked up Adam’s entire dresser, and walked it across the street to their house. No suitcases necessary.

Unfortunately, nobody in our town had the time or willingness to take a four-year-old, so Aunt Debby and Uncle Rick, who lived two and a half hours away, took me in. We exited the Browns’ driveway, turning left up the road. I looked longingly at my house, my previous life, as it faded in the side mirror.

Holding a meaningless happy meal toy in my hand, I allowed myself to conjure a recent memory, from a time when I wasn’t a needy little problem that nobody else wanted.

Two months prior, my family was vacationing on Prince Edward Island. The red sand beaches were fiery hot in the summer sun. My tender feet were no match for the sand, so my dad walked with me on his shoulders from the car to our beach towels and back. I was the littlest, so of course I got a ride. I felt carefree and cared for.

Abby was eight and she was in charge. She micro-managed everything I did; how I applied sunscreen, how I built sandcastles, and how I put marshmallows on a stick around the motel

campfire. Adam, age six, bounded around the island like a little madman. His mullet swayed in the wind as he chased other vacationing children with a stick. My parents were young and energetic. They loved each other and they loved the three of us, never missing an opportunity to remind us.

Exhausted by the morning's turmoil, I slept through the drive with Aunt Debby. When we arrived at her house I sulked inside. I thought seeing my parents signified an answered prayer; an end to this nightmare. And yet, they left in the same swift, unexpected blur as they had the first time. My screams and pleads made no difference. It was time to acquiesce. It was time to be a zombie, just like the rest of my family. Anything I felt needed to be swallowed, just like a snotty chicken nugget, even if it made me nauseous.

My aunt and uncle were very sweet people and they did their best to make me feel at home. Their three teenage daughters each had their own room, so a bed had been made up for me at the top of a staircase, just outside Debby & Rick's door.

Downstairs, a stained-glass chandelier hung over their kitchen table. I couldn't see its details, but it glowed through the haze of cigarette smoke. Every night, new people trickled through the door, each gifted a red, plastic Coca-Cola cup filled to the brim with rum and coke. Adults talked and laughed, sharing an ash tray in the middle of the circular dining table. The girls spent their evenings with friends, and I poked in and out of the dining room like a shadow, tugging on Debby to come change the channel in the living room.

Weeks bled into months, and I was enrolled in the Calais preschool. Aunt Debby didn't have as many rules as my mom. She let me eat Lucky Charms every morning, as she sat in her nighty,

enjoying her morning cigarette, informing me of the weather forecast, or assuring me Abby would be okay.