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I knew it would be hard to go back. It always was. My older brother's griping and my younger sister's deadly stares, and the sister-in-law who sided silently and with a smirk with the husband she grew to tolerate over the years. It was only a matter of time before I would be accused of having done something wrong. Not an ordinary wrong that could be shrugged off by more level headed members of a family, but a grave injustice. Raising dust heaps of memories and murky recollections of who did what to whom, why and when. The anticipation and dread grew worse over the years, knowing there would always be that one land mine that triggered a word spoken in the wrong tone and shattered all hope of improving upon the past and forever altering its crimes.

This time I had the sense to bring my cat. The previous visit had begun with a heinous crime. Still in my winter coat and breathing heavily from the weight of my bag, the taxi cab in the midst of a U-turn in the driveway, change from the fare falling out of my hand and stuffing bills into my wallet which I couldn't snap shut, I looked up from the walk to find my mother standing in the back entrance of our three story home, a dish

towel slung over her left shoulder and her arms wide open for an embrace. She took an inventory of the bags hanging off my bony shoulders and her arms collapsed at her sides.

"Where is your cat?! I thought you were going to bring home your cat!" She was injured to the core.

"Yes, I tried to get her into her carrier case. But she stretched herself into shapes that could not possibly fit through the openings."

"Oh, I am so disappointed. You said you were going to bring her."

"I can't force her to go where she doesn't want to. She's an animal." I remembered that as a child I never had such rights.

"You have to learn to be more aggressive, Anna."

"You can't let your animals run your life," added my father from behind the Week in Review section of the Times. He lowered the paper and glanced at me.

"Hmm," he said and resumed reading.

"I am being upstaged by my cat," I thought. Small and furry as she was, Meridian served as a vital buffer between myself and my family. Everyone behaved better in the presence of a beating heart that was unconnected to the family's personal history. But I'd left my sheltering armful of fur at home in my

West Village rooftop apartment, with an excess of wet and dry food and bowls filled with water strategically placed in every location Meridian liked to frequent.

I brought her with me the following Thanksgiving.

"Giving thanks to what?" I thought. To my father's withdrawal from the world; caving into the peach torn and overstuffed arm chair in my parent's family room looking like he wished it would close up all around him and shelter him from the overflow of relatives. I knew exactly how he felt. Those moments of tuning out came upon me as a rule about twenty minutes into intense greetings and excitement and chatter with cousins and aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews and siblings; an overflow of people demanding social interaction that, particularly of late, became an increasing strain. By the time all assembled had reached dessert I had completely shut down. I knew that my mind was an unruly instrument. Ever since I had stopped apologizing for its nature I had no peace in my family's company.

I lifted my fork and ran a tong through the chocolate mousse on my plate. My mind drifted to the pool where I swam in the French West Indies during my last vacation.

"Over three years ago now."

"What, Anna? Did you speak?" said my mother.

"No, Mom," I said. "I was just thinking."

"Hmmm," said my father.

It was the colors of the island I remembered most. The light. The hues of blue and green and the line that cut across the horizon where the ocean met the sky. Both kept altering depending upon the hour of the day or evening. The sound of the waves during the intense heat of the afternoon, peeling my face into a shorn coconut, and the cool evenings, crashing and lapping against the beach and boardwalks. At times the heat grew so intense I felt suffocated by the wrap of skin around my bones and had to be in water. Lap after lap, the gentle caress of water on my flesh. No sound but the sound of my own breathing. Laying on my back to give myself a rest the big dipper cradled me inside its jeweled arc. I stretched my arms and legs as far away from me as they would reach and I was infinite. Expanding into this forgiving ocean, permitting every curve and repetition of flesh, every fold.