

“People go away,” she says. “They leave things.”

The little one notices the teddy bear in the baby room and wonders why the baby left without taking it. I don’t explain that there isn’t a baby to call this room its own.

“Is the teddy lonely by himself?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“It’s okay,” she says, hugging the bear, “I’ll be your friend.”

The little one’s parents will return to pick her up on Sunday. The baby room is the color of plums when the sun sets, and in that moment I learn people are a lot like doorways in that they are always coming and going.

\*\*\*

Hoof prints have removed dew from the grass, and some of the blueberries are gone. I learned from the little one’s father that to keep deer away you just have to alter something. “Change how clothes are positioned on a line out to dry. Any slight difference scares them off,” he said. He has a rusted truck that he leaves out in his field. Every so often he will move it a couple of inches. We’ve grown accustomed to the deer taking what we have nurtured. Perhaps that’s why we keep our yard the same—to welcome life to it.

\*\*\*

When her parents arrive to pick her up, the little one leaves the teddy bear outside on the rocking chair, and the deer don’t come the next morning. With nothing to sustain us, my wife and I sit as the afternoon falls away.

**Commented [NK3]:** Do you want this to be a comma or a period? Imagine the sentence without the dialogue tag. “It’s okay, I’ll be your friend.” or “It’s okay. I’ll be your friend.” The first is technically a comma splice, but in this case I think that would be fine because it’s a child speaking.

**Commented [NK4]:** You used “in that” barely a few words ago—in a different way, but I don’t know whether or not you intended that.

**Commented [NK5]:** I’m not quite sure I understand this comparison. I get that doorways allow people to come and go, but the structures themselves don’t move.

## Final Houses

The sisters walked to their favorite spot, voices carrying on wind fragments. Syllables snapped on leaf steams. The lake on the monastery was down by the rocks where they swapped stories. They clung to warmer days that July promised, but did not keep. Leaves looked like hands the way they curled on the branches, the younger sister thought. She watched the breeze rustle them gently, mimicking them by opening and closing her hand. She tapped her older sister on the shoulder.

“I match,” she said, proudly.

“Match?” said the oldest.

“The leaves,” the youngest said.

The oldest nodded, pointing to the clouds. The valley clouds are honey-soaked. She explained to the youngest. She held the younger one’s hand, guiding her pointer finger to run along the bottoms of the clouds. Notice the sunlight highlighting the edges. They’ve been dipped in gold. Valley clouds are different than regular clouds. They have secrets that they keep and promises of harsh winters.

“The clouds move quickly,” said the oldest. “That’s how you can tell it is going to rain soon.”

To get to the lake, they cut through the runes. The younger one said that if she ran fast enough, it made it look like the gravestones blurred together into a mass of white light. The younger sister wanted to know more about the markers. Why were they here? Stones placed in a row. Cross-shaped.

“Do we become stones?” the youngest asked.

“No,” the oldest said. “Graves are our final houses.”

**Commented [NK6]:** I was confused for a moment about whether the breeze was mimicking the leaves or the girl was.

**Commented [NK7]:** Is there a reasoning behind why these pieces of dialogue are not in quotations while the former ones are?

**Commented [NK8]:** Ruins?

**Commented [NK9]:** Suggestion: The younger one said that if she ran fast enough, the gravestones seemed to blur together in a mass of white light.

“It is to hold many attentive eyes,” he would say. “It is to take something away. It is what I say when someone asks what happened to my heart. It is your name when I’m asked whom it belongs to now.—It is how the water would speak of the pail.”

-She would ask for him to consider if-whether this word is-was why people keep recordings to hold onto a voice they didn’t want to forget. To capture what they can’t-couldn’t bear to lose.

“Perhaps,” he would say.

She would wonder if-whether he confused *capture* with *captivating* or if-whether there was a likeness to-between the two words she hadn’t realized. He wouldn’t focus on *capture*’s negative meaning like she would be expecting. The one that reminded her of caged birds. They would keep a collection of “Words That Should Be Words” on a chalkboard hanging on the French door. She would think about adding *captivature* to the list. The list would be above the spice rack where he would mix up cinnamon and-with nutmeg; she would tell him that they’re they weren’t-not the same—cinnamon leaves-left you with a floral feeling.

“What do you think happens when we die?” she would ask.

The sun would go down. Darkness would reflect her face back to her in the glass when she attempted to look out.

“That,” he would say, pointing out the window.

“All I can see is my face,” she would say. “Will I recognize myself?”

“Not even then,” he would say. “You won’t know who you are. You won’t want to.”

Their conversations would never sting until then. The cake would rest on a decorative platter. The ceramic would crack into pieces when it left her hands. Their eyes would focus not on each other, but what lay between them—a widening gap she hadn’t noticed before.

**Commented [NK21]:** See above notes about the past subjunctive. However, now that I’m reading it, I understand why you might prefer the present tense. I don’t think it would be a huge faux pas to keep it in the present tense if you prefer it that way.

**Commented [NK22]:** Would have expected?

**Commented [NK23]:** Suggestion

**Commented [NK24]:** See above notes on past/present tense—whatever you decide is fine, as long as it’s consistent.