The Imposter Mother’s head never stops nodding.

She stands before the stove in our kitchen minding her boiling pots and sizzling pans, nodding inanely. She sits on the couch in our living room with a book splayed open in her lap, bobbing her head to the same dull beat. I wonder if she twitches like that in her sleep. I wonder if she’ll twitch like that when she’s dead.

Father assured us that this was the best move. He said that the only thing that drove him to breath life into his solemn vows was the dream that his children would eat well once more and rest easy in the home we’ve always known, the home he could no longer afford. He told me that for all he could have in the world, the one true thing he wanted for his boys to grow strong and successful and that I, his lone daughter, would never worry for her fate.

It appeared that Imposter Mother was well aware of this fact. Certainly he had not been enthralled by her looks, the old woman being all stick and sag and long wiry hair. Certainly it wasn’t for anything she had said, for she hardly whispered more through her pursed lips than a disapproving “tsk” while her head dipped back and forth in contradiction.

Though she knew as well as we did that this wasn’t a marriage of love, nor even one of lust, she was starved for my father’s attention. Any wink or smile that Father would offer my brothers and I was accompanied by an irritated glare from Imposter Mother. Every time Father so much as looked our way she was sure to acknowledge us, with cold stares and switch hits.

Father spoke to us less and less. He would visit with us for a short time every night to ask how our day had passed, to see that we were doing well, and end every visit with unspoken apologies. He would sit at the end of the bed with his eyes trained on the floor for minutes and his elbows resting on his knees. He ran his hand through his graying hair before patting the mattress and heaving himself to his feet without saying goodnight.

My brothers never bought it. They resented him, saying we had never been in his thoughts. They said that money had burned a hole through his heart so fast that any good intentions he may have had just fell through the gaps. And I was beginning to think the same.

At first I tried to console the boys. Naturally, I have always cared for them, being the oldest of our flock and as the only woman available to provide a modest substitution of motherly love. I soothed them with words and stories, tried fixing them simple treats when
the Imposter Mother wasn’t in the kitchen. We kept out of sight, out of mind, and for a time this worked. But when she did find us, she left her marks.

My brothers grew tired of this game and could no longer be placated. I tried the old ways, with stories and distractions, but they dismissed me and chose instead to lash out at me. Even the youngest of the six, my sweetest little brother, began to hate me.

“You can’t just say that everything will be all right and not do anything,” they snarled. “You only ever play house with us. You make us food and tell us stories to keep us quiet but you’ll never find a way for us to leave. And you won’t. Because you must like her, you must be turning into her.”

What could I have possibly said to them? When all I had known was to care for them, dote on them, and they had so viciously turned against me?

So, rather than speak, I left home. And I worked.

I know all the ways Father could have made the money to save us.

My body has become the table my brothers eat at, my body for the bills. There are so many things that can be sold, at what cost I’m still unsure. But my brothers will still be fed, they still wear sweaters on their backs in the cold.

I have come back to lead them away, to pick the locks of their iron cages. Yet, when I return they cast me out.

“Can’t I stay? Won’t you please just let me stay a night?” I plead with them. “I have been gone for so long. You are as old as I was when I left, and I have not seen you in so many years.”

They shake their heads, their faces meek and sallow. “She still lives here, and she’ll kill you if she sees you.”

“Can’t you protect me?”

“No.”

I have cast them crumbs all their lives, and now they peck mournful at the hand that breaks their bread. They keep their eyes trained on the floor and I realize that they have been held here far too long. Their arms hang limply by their sides, no more than clipped wings.

And here I stand, far too late, and unsure of where to fly.