

Rent

by Christian Bell

We were in the bedroom upstairs when I told her the three people downstairs were not my family. The room felt like cotton, smelled like it had been enclosed for decades. Her hair was wet and she smelled like Bath and Body Works raspberries. At first she didn't understand, thought I was joking.

Were you adopted, she said, because, you know, that's okay, it can still be family.

No, they're not my family. Not in any sense. I don't actually have a sister. I've only known them for a few weeks. I'm renting them.

I was holding her hand as I told her. Thin, bones like delicate museum fossils in soft fleshy bag. She released herself and kept her hands tight under her arms, dropped her head and clenched her eyes shut. I hadn't seen her do this before.

That morning, we drove 200 miles to get there and she held my hand and slept. We moved through fields of horses and carefully groomed farms, all of it looking still, manufactured painting landscapes. Ate lunch at a Cracker Barrel. Browsed the collections of manufactured to look authentically worn knick knacks, bought glass bottles of Stewart's Root Beer.

Exiting the highway, we had to travel through the remnants of a small town Main Street to hit the sprawling development of box houses. It still had a general store. Window signs advertised handmade ice cream and prepaid cell phone cards.

My real parents lived about 200 miles in the other direction from where we came. They were probably sitting around in their dilapidated, too small house doing crosswords and reading

remaindered books and not pretending they are waiting for a phone call or a letter. Who knows when I last talked to them. But long ago I determined they were too real. Dad would say three words in two hours and Mom didn't know how to cook. I was the son who didn't care, didn't pay attention, couldn't be bothered.

So it's time for dinner and I start to head downstairs. The smell of poultry ripe with rosemary and thyme filled the air. At the top of the steps, I'm waiting for her to join me, reciting the list of conversation topics I'd compiled in my mind. I stand there, waiting for movement, the two of us to descend as one, the bedroom quiet.

