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Apology| [Short stories]

Diana Spechler

The University of Montana

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Apology

by

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Close To Lebanon

I’m driving home from work. To my left, the Charles River sparkles in the late September sun. It’s Friday and the news is on: some kind of trouble in the Middle East.

In Haifa, a bomb exploded three hours ago, so loud they heard it in R’shon L’tzion. I turn up the volume. No further details. I race to my apartment and call my mother.

She says, “Bits, don’t do this. Don’t do this to me.”

I try Ash’s cell. I can never reach him on it. His voice message is in Hebrew. In it, he calls himself Asher. That’s what he goes by now. Like Jacob’s seventh son.

At the tone I say, “Maybe it’s time to come home, Ash. Enough with all this.” I hang up and search the kitchen drawers for the last letter he sent. I can’t remember what it says, only the package that came with it: dried prunes, dried apricots, bright orange sticks of dried papaya.

Ash has been studying at yeshiva in Haifa for two years. I picture it on a farm, dark barefoot men kneeling in soil, Ash inside an airtight building, twisting his tzit-tzit around his finger, wearing a kipah too big for his head. I picture how he used to be, a nine-year-old hockey player, lined up with his teammates, his helmet lower than everyone else’s. Or on a breakaway, tiny and fast. I picture him at the Purim carnival at our synagogue in New York, the year he went dressed as a cleaning lady, and wore an Orphan Annie wig. He was four then.

I find the letter.

It says, Bits, I went to Rosh Hanikra, where the grottoes are. The waves blow up against them at night. It’s so neat. I was really close to Lebanon. You could look through
a fence at it, but you couldn’t cross over. Back to Haifa tomorrow. I just learned this: when we die, God will ask, Why didn’t you taste all my fruits?

I go to the cupboard for the dried fruit, but it’s not there. I bite my nails to the quick and wonder if I should call my father in California. But what I don’t want to hear is, “Ash is where? Israel? What’s he doing in Israel?”

Instead I call the gym teacher from school. I teach second grade. The gym teacher’s an on-and-off flame. I say something potentially very bad has happened. He wants to know what. “Just come over,” I say. “Hurry.”

The phone rings as soon as I hang up. “Did you get in touch?” My mother is crying.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I say. “Don’t cry.”

She sniffles. “Why are my children so far from me? What with Ash in Israel, you in Boston.”

“Boston’s not so far,” I say. I almost say I’ll come visit soon, but I don’t.

“You want to meet a nice Yiddishkeit,” she says, “and I’ll tell you where they all are. Manhattan. I wish at the very least you still worked at that Jewish Day School.”

I talk about work, about a book I’m reading, a play I saw, things that are true and things that aren’t, but she’s not listening. “Mom?”

A pause. Something in the background.

“What is that?” I ask.

“Oh.” She laughs self-consciously. “One of my soaps.” She laughs again. “It’s nothing. See, this woman, who supposedly had amnesia....Never mind.”
The doorbell rings.

“I have to go,” I say. “Good Shabbos,” I say.

The gym teacher wears a whistle around his neck. I pull it over his head, grab his sweatshirted waist, and kiss him right on the mouth.

He gets soft in my arms and kisses back. “What’s wrong?” he asks.

Nothing, I tell him. It was a trick, to get him to come. He’s unshaven and the back of his neck is sweaty. He smells faintly of that sweat. We sink to the hallway floor. I straddle him. He looks like he’s bench-pressing. I close my eyes, but feel like a barbell. I focus on the black inside my eyelids. Try to imagine we’re in love. When we’re finished, I think I should offer him Gatorade. I wish I could pay him. I want him to go.

He’s half-smiling as he pulls his jogging pants back on. “Why do I feel used?” He doesn’t see I have his whistle. I keep my fist clenched tight around it. “See you tonight?” he asks. “At Maggie’s?” He holds my face with one hand, thumb hooked in front of my ear, fingertips against my scalp. He kisses me.

“Sure,” I say, looking at the tile floor.

He ties his sneakers and leaves.

I relax. Wind the whistle’s cord around my fingers. Unwind. Wind. Unwind.

There is no phone call, all afternoon. Eventually, I search for the fruit again. I want so much to tell Ash I’ve lost it.

It’s someone’s birthday. Maggie, the fifth-grade teacher, who lives by Faneuil Hall, throws a party. Her apartment is twenty-two floors up. The gym teacher doesn’t
show after all, but I don’t care. I’m on the porch, talking to a man with silky blond hair. I
tell him about the bomb in Haifa. “My brother’s just terrified,” I say. “He wants to come
home. We had a real scare for a second, my mom and I, when we heard the news, but he
called right away. He’s good about that. And he’s fine. Getting on the next plane back to
New York.”

The blond man has dimples. “Are you Italian?” he asks. “Such curly brown hair.
And your skin. You look like my relatives from Sicily.”

I smile and say nothing. Think of my mother saying, Always smile, Bits. You
never know when you’ll meet your husband.

The man pulls a bottle of pills out of his pocket and pops a few. I notice without
much interest that he’s missing a finger. A thumb, in fact. There’s just a stump, smooth

“I don’t know,” I say, but I reach for the bottle.

He gives it to me. “I’ve got tons at home,” he says. “Keep it.” He catches me
looking at his hand and does the trick my uncle does, tucking one thumb inside his fist,
then pretending his other thumb separates at the knuckle. Only it’s real.

I tuck the bottle into my coat pocket and look away, see the Boston skyline in
bright lights, bright lights casting glitter on the water below. Down would be a long trip.
Down would be bad. I squeeze my eyes shut and giggle, a nervous giggle.

“What?” he asks. “Never seen a guy without a thumb?”
“I’m afraid of heights,” I say. “I don’t care about your thumb.” I imagine Ash’s thumb, alone in a pile of rubble on a cobblestone street, the rest of his hand several yards away.

“You okay?” asks the man. “Want to get out of here?”

I notice for the first time how prominent his Adam’s apple is. It moves up and down. I want to touch it with my fingers, to press my lips against it. I look back at the water, deep breath, close my eyes: I cannonball into him, hear the splash in my mind.

Later, on his mattress with no sheets, I see the moon through the window, silver and cheap like a nickel. And then he’s on top of me, his gold cross swinging on its chain, knocking on my forehead. I think of Chinese water torture. I think of the sixth-grade girl at school who got caught in the bathroom last week, carving into her thigh with a pocket knife. I don’t know what it is about some people and pain. I try to focus, as if I’m meditating. I white out my thoughts. There is only this man, above me.

He shudders and collapses all his weight onto my body. I can hardly breathe. I feel the cross between us, boring into my sternum. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze. The skin on his back is soft and warm. I run my fingernails up and down the little hills of his spine.

“Am I crushing you?” he asks.

“Don’t get up,” I say. “I’m all right.” If he gets up, I’ll be cold. I’ll look very naked. It would be like a bright light in my eyes.

“You ever think about death?” the man asks. His voice is muffled by the pillow and by near-sleep.
"No," I say. His body feels as heavy as a house. I want that weight there for as long as possible.

"Unnatural death," he says. He yawns. "There are so many kinds."

I wonder if he's going to kill me. I catch sight of a framed picture on his night stand. I squint at it. "Is that a hamster?"

"A lemming," he says. He yawns again. "They commit suicide en masse. They jump off cliffs. No one knows why." Seconds later, he snores. Snores and snores. A ratty-towel-covered birdcage hangs directly above our heads. It could fall, I think. I slither out from under the man, quietly untangle clothes from sheets, locate socks. His socks too, green and white wool ones, which I stuff into my purse. I look back at him. He's on his belly now, face turned toward me, eyes closed, hands on either side of his head like parentheses. His flawed hand, and his good one. He drools on his pillow. I can see the dark stain, the spread of it, from the light that's coming in from the hallway.

I drive home, but can't sleep. I go for a walk. Cars zip by. The Citgo sign flashes against the black sky. Slowly the sun comes up. In Israel, the Sabbath is winding down. I walk and walk. I pass a woman sitting against a cyclone fence, wrapped in an army blanket, drinking from a brown paper bag. "Open your eyes!" she snarls.

Now the sun hurts. Now it's Saturday. I pass a synagogue. Couples with children walk toward it. Inside it, men bow up and down over prayer books in dusty stained-glass light.

Back to my apartment. By noon, I've grown fidgety. I eye the phone, but don't touch it. If I try Ash, he won't be there. If he's not there, I'll do something stupid like call
the gym teacher, or my ex-boyfriend in Brookline Village. I dial into the internet and search for headlines. There were sixteen deaths from the bomb in Haifa. No names released. “Ash,” I whisper, “why haven’t you called? You’re selfish,” I say. But he isn’t.

After my father left, when I was fourteen and Ash was nine, Ash was the one who picked up the slack. Was the one who, for the next nine years, stayed home on Saturday nights to play Scrabble with my mother. Who’d tell her she looked nice when she dressed up just to attend a PTA meeting, or a Hadassah meeting, or to shop for groceries.

I look up cutting behavior on the internet. I look up Orthodox Judaism. I think of my mother watching soap operas day in and out, her manicured fingernails, her olive-green satin bathrobe. I look up the word addiction. A confirmed habit, it says.

I go into a chat room called Addiction Net. I write, “What’s everyone addicted to?”

Someone writes, “Colonopin.”

Someone writes, “Ovaltine.”

Someone writes, “And you?”


Someone writes, “Addictions are born of fear.”

“I’m afraid of heights,” I write. “I’m afraid to travel too far from home. My brother’s not, but he’s the one who’s addicted to stuff. God, for instance.”

No one replies. “Just kidding,” I write, and sign off.

I fall asleep in my swivel chair and dream of the basement from the house I grew up in, full of my father’s unfinished projects. A crib for me that he never built bars for. A
hockey stick he said would be light as air. A rocking chair that looked on the verge of
collapse, that had no back.

When Ash left for Israel, it was with that basement in mind: “I’m sick of
everyone half-assing things,” he said. He wanted to be Jewish or not. “I’ll try Jewish first
and see what I think.”

I watched him pack a suitcase. “When did you get so earnest?” I asked.

“Earnest? Don’t you feel some responsibility, Bits? Aren’t you afraid you’ll wind
up like Dad?”

“I just want to live my life,” I said. “I don’t worry.”

He looked up. Smiled with eyes like our father’s. “I don’t mean to be preachy.”

It made me nervous, watching him fold one thing after another into that suitcase.

So many things disappearing. I thought, you can pray so hard your teeth fall out, grow a
beard down to your shins, but you’ll have to stop some time. I thought, go ahead and
pray. But this will always stay with you: Dad sneaking out the front door before Mom
woke up, dragging a black duffel bag, while we watched in our pajamas from the top of
the stairs. And this: the bruised light of that early morning, the way it ached behind our
eyes. I thought, Ash, this is not the answer. I said, “You’re so young, Ash. You’ll see.”

He was eighteen. Now he’s twenty.

Around then, I examined my own habits, echoing habits from the halls of my
childhood—no pork, no shellfish, no sex, and the most unassailable of all: the Jewish
boyfriend from college, whom I kept dating after college, who also ate no pork or
shellfish, and who said, “Sleep with me or we’ll never know if we’re right for each
other.” We had existential dilemmas together. We didn’t believe in God. We didn’t know how to break habits.

We weren’t. Right for each other.

I think of him now as I wake up, see the sky going pink through the window. And all the men who came after him, who marched into and out of me like soldiers. Their faces fold over onto each other. They are a pile of bodies. I dial back into the internet and rub the cramp in the back of my neck.

In a chat room called Boston Night Forum, I meet a man. He says he’s a man. I ask, “Are you Jewish?”

“I can be,” he writes.

“One more question. Are you afraid of anything?”

“Are you?”

“Yes,” I write. “I’m afraid I won’t taste all of God’s fruits.”

“So what if you don’t.”

“You become obsessive and neurotic,” I write. “You hate your stagnant life. Or you move thousands of miles away and try to taste all the fruits. Only you can’t. No matter where you are, it’s an impossible task.”

Within two hours, he’s knocking on my door. He has a goatee, two hoop earrings. In the livingroom, we watch a movie about a mobster, who takes a bullet for a woman and dies. She runs, dodging gunfire. It goes on like that.

“My father left my mother,” I say.

“Today?”
“No. I was fourteen. He got bored. She slept through it, but my brother and I saw him go. We didn’t try to stop him.”

“You’re interesting,” says the man. In the dark, the television reflects on his shaved head. Shaved or bald? I can’t tell. Maybe a little of both.

I tell him, “Interesting is dull.”

“No,” he says. “It’s the opposite.” He closes the gap between us on the couch, climbs on top of me, peels off his T-shirt, and all I can think is I can’t marry a guy from a chat room.

“Maybe we should call it a night,” I say. He smells like cigarettes. “Movies get so depressing. Watching other people’s lives—” His hands are in my hair; my hair is being wound around his finger, tighter, tighter. “I should concentrate on my own life instead. Stop it,” I say.

He pulls, winds.

“What are you doing? Stop it.” I push at his pierced nipples with my fists. My eyes tear. My scalp seems to separate from my skull. On the carpet below lies the construction paper I was cutting into circles. My half-finished project. Clocks with no numbers. On Monday, I’ll teach my class to tell time. But in this moment, there are scissors with blue handles, with shiny blades.

He pulls tighter.

“Stop!” I say again, and then I can’t help it: I giggle. It’s nerves, but I do it.

He smiles, eyes closed, tightens his grip.
I reach to the carpet, walk my fingers toward the scissors. Feel the plastic handles. The pain is sickening. The handles are in my fist. With one quick motion, I lift the scissors and stab him, hard, in the upper arm, through his tattoo, a red heart that says LUCKY in black.

“Fuck!” He smacks my ear so hard it rings. He rolls off me to the floor. “What the fuck are you doing?” He’s panting, holding his arm with his hand. “You some kind of psycho or something?”

I am literally speechless. I see a small blood stain on the beige carpet. My impulse is to sit on it, to hide it so he can’t take it home with him, but of course I know that’s ridiculous. I rub my ear, then the sore spot on my head, and stare at him.

He dresses, calls me a bitch, calls me a bitch again, and leaves.

The movie’s still going. There is gunfire, then the phone rings. At first I think it’s a phone in the movie, so it rings three times before I stumble into the kitchen and grab the cordless. It’s my mother.

“Anything?” she asks.


“Come on, Mom. I’m sure he’s okay.” I remember other Saturday nights, my mother and Ash lying on their bellies on the family-room rug, playing Scrabble. I would step around them on my way out to parties, roll my eyes, tell them to get a life. The memory makes me cringe.

“I’ll die if something’s happened to him,” she says. “I will.”
“Nothing’s happened,” I say. “Okay? Mom?” And through the silence I hear her try to smile. But I know that smile. It’s the one where her eyes look flat and tarnished, where her lips turn up too much at the corners like a parody of happiness.
Apology

Dear Miss Winston,

My name is Walt and I beg your forgiveness for the disappearance of your suitcase, which you probably thought was in Fiji, Zimbabwe, or Bangladesh. This happens. Your luggage winds up on the wrong plane, and within twenty hours, there’s some guy in Peru using your cologne. Or a woman in Cairo wearing your underwear. It’s a spooky thing, on the order of an organ transplant.

My conscience is dark as a pocket, Miss Winston.

But there is this: I am capable of an apology and entirely willing to offer you one, on condition that it be pristine. No excuses. No sympathy-fishing. You’d catch me dead before you’d catch me fishing for sympathy, though there is a situation surrounding this absent suitcase, which you probably want to know about, so I am now obliged to mention Kate, my wife and accomplice.

*Accomplice* is farfetched. An accomplice wears pantyhose on her head. Or a g-string and nipple tassels to distract the sheriff. Suffice it to say that if it weren’t for Kate, none of this would have happened. And if it weren’t for her, I’d give you my return address. If it weren’t for her, I’d *have* a return address. But don’t go thinking I’m some vagabond. I’m no stranger to suburbia. I just happen to be in transition. Incidentally, prior to this mishap, I lived only ten or so miles from you, and worked down the street at Quill and Ink Bookstore. But you’ll no longer find me near Denver.
Understand: I love children. Reading hour was the most exhilarating part of my job. My co-workers had no interest in it. They had their own children, they said. Or were prone to migraines. All kinds of excuses. But I liked it. I’d sit in this big cushioned armchair, the kids on the floor in front of me, and stop the story now and then to show the pictures, moving the book from right to left, nice and slow, like a search light.

I’m not just saying this to win you over.

Three Mondays ago—the day I got mixed up with your suitcase—began like any other Monday. Morning reading hour at Quill and Ink ended and the children filed out like little soldiers, with their swords and sippy cups and what have you. One mother in a olive-green coat that came to her calves held the back of her son’s neck like she was steering him. As I watched her, a twenty-dollar bill slipped out of her coat pocket and fluttered to the floor.

I picked it up and held it in the air and opened my mouth, but no sound came out. Then I realized, no one was looking at me. This is unlike me, Miss Winston, but here’s what I did: I shut my mouth and slipped the twenty into my own pocket. Then I watched through the glass as the woman continued to steer her son away, probably toward home. He was looking just miserable. Imagine. Someone squeezing your neck like that. But believe me, I’m no thief and that’s the truth. I’m just trying to be honest with you here.

My boss, Anya, was vacuuming the children’s reading corner so I stood beside her and started telling her about things: my personal life was in shambles. *The Princess and the Pea* had made me pensive.
"You know what you remind me of, Walt? A really sharp pair of tweezers for one of those impossible stray eyebrow hairs."

That's how she talks.

I was trying to tell her about the phone conversation I'd had the night before with Kate, how Kate said that Boston felt like someone else's family reunion.

"She said that? What'd you say?"

"That Chad's not her family."

Chad is someone with whom Kate was supposedly doing business in Boston—she's in sales—but I don't know. Every Chad I've ever met is an asshole.

Anya was looking all disgusted, vacuuming like a warrior. She was sick of this problem of mine; it was nothing new. She said, "And?"

"I asked her to come home."

"You want her to come home, Walt?"

"Her ticket's for Wednesday anyway. But she's through with her work, so I said, why not come back early? I'm picking her up at the airport this evening." I dropped my eyes a little and sipped my coffee, sort of hiding my face in the curve of the mug; I wasn't even telling Anya the half of it.

I wasn't telling her about Kate saying, "Don't just sit around waiting for me to come home, Walt. Do something, will you?" Or about the list of suggestions she then rattled off: I could bake a pimento loaf maybe, play Solitaire, borrow her Thigh Master if I promised to put it back. All the while, Chad was probably right beside her sucking her
collar bone. Maybe with an ice cube between his teeth that was actually a sex-life-enhancing synthetic ice cube that never melts, which I saw once on an infomercial.

Gratuitous details. Nothing Anya needed to hear about. Nor did she need to hear how I said to Kate, “I can’t wait to see you.” Truth is, I’d immediately regretted saying that. I could have waited, for one thing. I’d just said it out of habit, and Kate has this thing about me wishing days away. She thinks it’s wasteful, unproductive. I don’t know.

So then I touched Anya’s thin shoulder and tugged on a chunk of her hair. She was all huffy, which was sort of cute, in the way a sad clown is cute: also a little scary. I asked, “What do you want me to do?” at which point she switched off the vacuum cleaner and glared at me, panting through her nose like a bull, lips thin as a hyphen.

Before Quill and Ink belonged to Anya, it belonged to Anya’s father. Before that, her grandfather. Anya’s tiny, hundred pounds tops, with this pale red hair that hangs down to her waist in unhealthy-looking bunches, and thick black glasses that curl around her eyes like cornucopias. You know what cornucopias are, right? Horns of plenty, they’re also called, but we don’t need to get into that. She was shaking her head, one hand on her hip, the other resting on the handle of the vacuum, and she said, all icy-like, sort of through her teeth, “Read Portrait of A Lady.” Then she turned the vacuum cleaner back on.

I laughed. Couldn’t help it. Anya’s only five years younger than I am—she’s 31—but sometimes she doesn’t understand things. I said, “I mean right now, Anya. What do you want me to do right now?”

“Love’s pleasure drives his love away,” is how she answered.
“What does that mean?”

Anya raised her eyebrows, all haughty—she can be absolutely obnoxious when she feels like it—but then she said, “Never mind. Come on, you’ve got a good head on your shoulders. It’s not even balding yet. Read The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Read Medea. You can’t always box women up like TV dinners.”

“She’s my wife, Anya.”

“Read The Scarlet Letter, Walt. What do you think this is?” Anya switched off the vacuum cleaner again. It hadn’t gotten all the graham-cracker crumbs. She bent to pick them from the carpet and said, “Let Chad have her,” then started talking about the days way back when I had just begun working at Quill and Ink and Kate would come in to hear me read during reading hour. “When was the last time she did that?” Anya asked. “Eighteen sixty-two or something? People just take from you, Walt. You’re like an open grapefruit; you let everyone spoon your sections out.” She lowered her voice, on account of customers. “You know when you have fajitas for dinner and you fill a glass of water for your nightstand before bed?”

I was sitting on the floor with a huge cardboard box of paperbacks, slicing it open with scissors. I was accustomed to this sort of reflection from Anya.

“And then you wake up at three in the morning with dry-mouth? And there’s the glass of water, and you love yourself for remembering to leave it there?” She pressed a graham-cracker-crumb-filled fist to her hip and said, “Kate should feel that way about you.”
"Oh," I said, "yes, well." I mean, that wasn’t exactly a topic I wanted to harp on; there I was, holding the scissors wide-open like a pair of legs—very awkward; I wasn’t looking to send out the wrong message—so I said, "Kate and I will be fine, Anya. After all, she is coming home."

A pathetic point to make. Kate’s homecoming certainly had less to do with me than with things in Boston being, for whatever reason, not too sensational. In all honesty, I wasn’t a factor. There had been issues between Kate and me for years: the issue of her biological clock, for example, which annoyed me primarily for linguistic reasons. I mean, people talk like it’s really a clock! Tick tick tick. Kate would always say, "My biological clock is ticking, Walt." As if I could remove her battery. And then, of course, this Chad character. Business associate my ass. Kate and I had been trying for five years to have a baby. There was this one time, on a trip we took to Florida, when we saw a thrown-back codfish floating belly-up in the ocean, and she said, "Like your semen, Walt." So you can imagine how crazy it drove me, picturing Chad’s semen like a school of fish, all turning at once in a synchronized flash.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, remembered the twenty-dollar bill in my pocket, and felt...soothed. Like I’d eaten one of those Pac Man pellets. I was rejuvenated.

"Forget about the harvest and its sheaves of wheat," said Anya, quoting some poet again. "You are the harvest and not the reaper."

I opened my eyes. "I’m neither," I told her, looking up from my box.

"Your choice."

"Excuse me?"
“It Is Your Choice.”

And I just kind of mumbled, “Not my choice, Anya. Please.”


I finished my shift, went home, showered, drove to the airport, and stood in the baggage claim terminal, holding my pocket watch. Kate’s plane was scheduled to land in ten minutes. I heard a voice through a speaker: “Do not leave bags unattended. Unattended luggage will be confiscated and destroyed.” A black plastic suitcase with a sign stuck to it that read, THIS IS NOT YOUR BAG, circled the conveyor belt, and behind that, a shiny pink and purple suitcase, smaller than all the others: yours.

I looked again at my watch, which Kate gave me six years ago for my thirtieth birthday, after finding it on the beach, glistening forgotten in the sand. The hands had been frozen so I’d opened up the gold back and fixed it. It hasn’t broken since. But gift-giving changed for us. Take, for example, our wedding anniversary two years ago. I gave Kate a television and she gave me a barbecue. Both had been on sale at the same appliance store. It’s impossible to remember who started that: buying selfish things to disguise as gifts. I didn’t even know how to barbecue—I can imagine how that must sound, but it’s true—and I still hate to do it, but some summer evenings, Kate all but dresses me in an apron and oven mitt, arms me with a spatula, and marches me out to the backyard, then lies in a lawn chair, reading something, or painting her toenails. I let her do it sometimes, not every time, but sometimes, because I feel so sorry about how things are. I mean, I know what she’s doing: pretending we’re an all-American family. And that just makes me feel sorry. Not that there’s anything wrong with all-American families.
I’m sure yours is lovely. But hot summer evenings used to mean ordering pizza and eating, naked, on the cool linoleum kitchen floor.

Anyway, I was watching the conveyor belt. If I let my eyes lose focus, it almost felt like I was moving and the belt was motionless. Then I would refocus my eyes and these were the things I saw: navy blue canvas duffels, brown leather shoulder bags, enormous hunter-green frame packs, and behind the black suitcase that was NOT (my) BAG, there was the little pink and purple suitcase again, like the North Star, surrounded by all that dark luggage. It came close enough for me to read the identification tag:

Jessica Winston. Your address was printed there, too.

I wondered, what would one carry in such a suitcase? Little T-shirts. Day-of-the-week underpants, perhaps. Nothing I could use. I envisioned Kate packing her things into that suitcase before a business trip. Inconceivable. Kate, who carries her lap-top in a sleek black bag with special cushioning. Kate with her stylish short haircut and the bright lipstick that Anya calls “war paint.” And that walk of hers: one foot in front of the other like a fashion model. I imagined her walking now toward the baggage claim, looking to her right, then her left, the way people do in crowds, when they don’t know that what they’re looking for is right in front of them. Just for sport, I tried to add a pregnant belly to my image, but felt that impossibility like a weather-ruined vacation, which got me to worrying about next summer, being made to barbecue things, like chicken parts that require different cooking times and are very difficult to gauge correctly. Well, you know how airports are. There was this old lady beside me, reuniting with her crated, sedated
dog, screaming, "Oh, Poochkin!" and then your suitcase approached again and I found myself thinking of you.

Here's what I pictured: blond pigtails, a punk dress, those sneakers with flashing light bulbs in the soles. (All the kids at reading hour wear them.) You would arrive at the baggage claim with your parents, then stand between them, each of them holding one of your hands.

As the suitcase came closer, I thought, I wonder how heavy it is, and then it was like I was in a trance or something: I reached out, grabbed the purple handle, and lifted it.

It was surprisingly light, the handle grooved perfectly inside my fingers. So there I was in dress slacks and a down coat, holding a little girl's suitcase. The empty spot on the conveyor belt circled away, out of my reach. I glanced around quickly, but your family wasn't anywhere I could see. I thought of the twenty-dollar bill I'd stolen that morning and told myself, "Put the suitcase back, Walt. You can buy your own if you really want one," but I felt stuck. There is no other way to say this: I just wanted it, Miss Winston. I felt my grip tighten on the handle, then I turned, and walked quickly, head down, through the revolving door and into the cold, clear night.

I was too scared to take the shuttle bus back to the parking lot, so I ran, your suitcase thumping my thigh, until I reached my Cadillac, which I inherited from my grandmother. It's a trip. This champagne-colored boat of a thing with a presidential roof. My breathing, by now, was all wheezy and visible: Colorado at night remember, and winter besides. I unlocked the door, pushed the suitcase over the console onto the passenger seat, gunned the ignition, and maneuvered out of the parking lot, onto the
highway. I tried the radio, found nothing but chamber music, which made me too nervous, so I switched it off, tried it again, again switched it off, all the while clenching my leg muscles, trying not to speed. Outside, there was moonlight like icing.

I imagined you again at the baggage claim. I pictured the conveyor belt emptying, coming to a stop, and how you’d cry, and how your mom would squat down to wipe your tears with her thumb, while your dad filled out a missing-luggage form. I felt terrible. I considered throwing your suitcase out the window, heading back to the airport, and reporting something: I’d say I saw a man in a black ski mask and a spandex unitard, standing at the baggage claim and speaking into a little microphone in Russian. “He’s your man,” I’d say. “Very suspicious.” But then I snapped out of that foolish daydream and worried again about being followed, so I got off three exits early and found myself at a red light in a neighborhood that unnerved me. You know Denver. Bundled-up men on street corners, drinking from brown paper bags. A mangy dog jogged by with an ear of corn in its mouth. The corn was still in its husk. I felt stared-at. I had one hand in my pocket, squeezing and releasing my pocket watch—a nervous habit—feeling positive that someone would close in on my car and slash my tires. I thought of the children from reading hour, and of their parents. What would they think of me now? I knew what Anya would have said: “A borrower nor a lender be.”

I finally reached a familiar neighborhood; then my own neighborhood; the elementary-school playground; the darkened Dairy Queen; the brown barn; fenced-in chickens, carelessly dropping eggs; then my own street. My own block. And home.
I cut the engine. The quiet felt fragile, like the quiet before a surprise party. I glanced back and forth between your suitcase and my house. Checked my watch. Kate had landed twenty minutes ago. If I’d turned around then, I’d have been forty minutes late, at least. The best thing I could think to do was go inside and wait for her call.

I ran to the house and straight upstairs. When I walked past the bathroom, I noticed left-over steam from the shower I’d taken before leaving for the airport. Just a tiny bit, on the mirror above the sink. But it seemed so strange. Like I’d been gone such a short time. And what that got me thinking of was Kate and Chad showering together. Now, I had no proof, of course, that they’d showered together, but I imagined Chad’s shower had excellent water pressure, and I felt my sterility like a wind tunnel. I said right out loud, “Forget about the harvest and its sheaves of wheat.”

Then I ran into the bedroom, grabbed Kate’s sewing scissors off the dresser, dropped the suitcase on the bed, and knelt on the carpet. I cut off the identification tag and tucked it into my shirt pocket. A flash of clairvoyance, I guess. Maybe you don’t know what clairvoyance is. Not important. Then I suddenly recalled a woman I’d seen at the baggage claim, who’d screamed and jumped into the arms of a black-haired man, her ankles hooked together at the small of his back; they’d kissed again and again on the lips like woodpeckers. The memory made me homesick, like an old photo album.

I began to unzip your suitcase, slowly, inch by inch, until all I had to do was lift the top half like the lid of a treasure chest. I remembered this can of peanuts I’d gotten for my eighth birthday, how when I’d opened it, plastic snakes had popped out on springs.
I opened the suitcase.

Four large rag dolls lay in a neat row, each with yarn hair of a different color: yellow, black, orange, and brown. Their clothes looked hand-made. Your grandmother must have sewn them. Overalls on one doll, elastic-waisted dresses on the others. They were barefoot and had no toes, but they smiled with black-thread mouths, and stared blankly through white felt circles, like the paper circles that get stuck in a three-hole punch.

I unhooked the lining straps and lifted two dolls, one with each hand, and really, they weighed nothing. Incredible. Carrying them, you wouldn’t think a thing. No more than you’d feel burdened by your own arm. I thought, *How light to travel with four dolls in a shiny suitcase.*

I put the dolls back and looked at the row of them and it dawned on me all at once that Kate was probably on her way home in a cab. I could just hear her telling the cab driver, “My husband must have forgotten me. He’s a little flaky.” She’d say that to a cab driver. I knew if she found me at home with the suitcase, she’d turn me in, call me a pedophile maybe; I wouldn’t put it past her. But if I were to get rid of the suitcase, she’d come home and find me without it, which would leave me without an excuse for having left her stranded at the airport. Neither was a situation I cared to face.

Getting caught with a stolen suitcase would be disgraceful. Of that I was certain. And what I couldn’t stop thinking of, I won’t lie, was barbecuing. All the nights of it. The heat on my face, the smoke twisting up into the sky, the black burgers, and what I told Kate every time: “I’m not cut out for this,” I always said.
And she'd say, "Keep trying."

And I'd say, "I have tried."

And she'd say, "Try harder."

Now, let me jump ahead for a minute: where your suitcase wound up, Miss Winston, is in the dumpster down the street from my house. I can lead you there—I'm enclosing a detailed map, coordinates and everything; ask your dad to lend you a compass—but I can't promise that your suitcase will still be there. I don't know. How often do dumpsters get emptied?

I'm enclosing my gold pocket watch, too; I'm through concerning myself with it, and I want to compensate you, since I lost your dolls. One more confession: that story about Kate finding the watch on the beach? It's a lie, sort of. I was the one who found it, and it wasn't exactly a find. Kate and I were on that vacation in Florida. The dead codfish incident had transpired not twenty-four hours earlier, and to say the least, I just wasn't feeling so great. The watch was on a nearby red beach towel that belonged to a couple, who had for hours been all over each other, rubbing sun screen on each other's backs and the whole bit. Kate was off taking a walk by herself, so I'd had nothing to do all morning but watch them. Then they got up to go for a swim. They literally ran toward the ocean, holding hands and laughing, like a commercial for condoms. And I just walked over to their towel and took the guy's watch. I almost couldn't help it.

I know how wrong it was, Miss Winston.
Anyway, if you find your dolls in the dumpster, maybe you’ll track me down, the way adopted children track down their birth parents after wondering for so many years: which parent has attached earlobes? Musical talent? Weak ankles?

Poor analogy. It’s different, yes, of course, but I venture to say that puzzles, all puzzles, beg to be solved. You’ll wonder about me. You’ll wonder, why is Walt telling me his story? I wonder, too. I love children. I was once responsible for their reading material. I have a sense of such things. Of what’s appropriate, and not. I’m sorry, Miss Winston. I see it now. I see I’ll never send this.

In my bedroom, I was still thinking of barbecuing, realizing that all this, the moment, the suitcase, would haunt me for the rest of my life, and I thought of people, the people I’ve known, the things they say.

Like how Anya once said, “There’s more to life, Walt. Read Emerson. Kahlil Gibran. Jack Kerouac.” I thought of Anya’s back, bent over a vacuum cleaner like a wilted flower, and I felt so lonely, I could hardly take it.

Kate once said, “Go away, Walt. Just go away.” She was sitting on the floor of the bathroom, her jeans unbuttoned; she was crying into a home-pregnancy test.

A small boy I knew from reading hour once asked, “Who’s the strongest man in the world, you or my dad?”

I zipped your dolls back into the suitcase, lifted the suitcase by the purple handle and leaned my other palm on the windowpane. The moon, looking cold and ready to burst, made me think of Anya, who wore a black dress to celebrate the last full moon and
carried a wand, and told the children she was a sorceress. I wondered if full moons really make people crazy, or just provide an excuse.
Wedding Day

In the kitchen of the house where Shayna grew up, Mother waves a lipstick tube at Shayna’s mouth. “Make an O.”

Shayna shuts her eyes and puckers. In that dark hangs a negative of Mother’s face, closing over Shayna like a lid: vertical wrinkle between the brows, faint beginning of a second chin.

“Tighten your lips up like that and there’ll be cracks. You want cracks on your wedding day?”

Shayna takes a deep breath, relaxes her lips, folds her hands in the lap of her white dress.

“That’s a girl,” Mother says, and applies pressure.

Shayna slips away to the public garden alone. She is early for photographs. She senses Vic will find her there. Tells herself she wishes he wouldn’t. He is not the groom. But here he is on the bench, waiting for her. “It isn’t bad luck for me to see you,” he says.

He is also not a guest. “You shouldn’t have come,” says Shayna. “My bridesmaids. They’ll be here any minute.”

“One last look. All right?” Vic stands. Smiles. “That kosher?”

“Ha ha,” says Shayna.

He touches her arm.
She doesn’t smile. She wants to lean her cheek on his collarbone. There are little holes in his T-shirt. She stares down at her shoes, shiny white straps crisscrossing, binding her toes. “In a year, you won’t remember me,” she says.

“That’s not fair.”

“Six months, I’ll bet.” She wants to touch his T-shirt. She loves the holes.

“There’s still time,” he whispers. “We could still...”

She shakes her head, grabs his hand, and can’t tell which of their hands is the cold one, which is the warm one.

Now Shayna sits on that bench in the garden. Nearby, three bridesmaids wear yellow. Heat bears down on the bushes and grass. Shayna hikes her skirts to her thighs and wishes for a breeze. “It hasn’t rained in weeks,” she says.

“’Cause you aren’t a nosher, baruch hashem.”

“Lucky Shayna.”

“What do you want with rain?”

Shayna sees the men coming, filing over the footbridge like soldiers in black and white uniforms, Isaac in the front; she can see his scar, the neat pink curve from chin to cheek, a souvenir from some childhood accident, from back before he could make safe decisions. She used to trace that scar with her finger. It used to feel like a roadmap home. Shayna pushes her skirts back down. Taffeta drops over her legs like a stage curtain.
Eighteen months ago, one month after Isaac proposed and Shayna said yes, she met Vic at the aquarium. She sold tickets from a booth. A right-after-college job. An I-don’t-know-what-I’m-doing-yet job. Nothing that ever felt permanent. Vic was the new shark-feeder.

One evening at closing time, he stood on the other side of her glass window. Pressed his fingertips to it. Asked, “Can you come out?”

“Maybe,” Shayna said into her microphone.

He came around the side to her little door and opened it, grabbed her wrist and pulled her right into the lobby. He said, “It’s worth your while.” He took her upstairs to the top of a huge tank. There was blue water and no fish. They looked down on it.

He wove his fingers through hers. “Hop in,” he said, and they jumped.

“A little to the left...that’s it. Now just the groom’s family....Just the bride’s family. That’s perfect. Perfect.”

The flashbulb explodes and recovers, explodes and recovers. Isaac smiles. The scar smiles too. Like a back-up smile. A just-in-case. He’s smiling for both of us, thinks Shayna.

At the doorway of her apartment, weeks after that first swim with Vic, Shayna said, “Like this. Then kiss your fingers.”
“Kiss my fingers?” Vic squinted his blue eyes at the mezuzah. “I’ll just kiss you,” he said. “All right?” He gathered her hair in his fist.

She rested her forehead on his shoulder. He smelled like peppermint.

“All right, Shayna?”

Shayna says now, “Something isn’t right.” She is on that bench again, her face in her hands.

“Cold feet,” says Mother. “But they’ll warm right up. Think. You’ll make a nice Jewish home. So beautiful. And Isaac from such a nice family. Think of it.” She fastens a pearl choker at Shayna’s nape. It pinches the fine hairs there.

“Ow!”

“Oy. Stay still.” Mother unfastens. Re-fastens. Squeezes Shayna’s shoulders, then goes to stand in front of her.

Shayna squints up.

“I’m sorry, Baby.” Mother touches Shayna’s cheek with the back of her hand.

Shayna wishes she were sick in bed and seven years old. Wishes her cheeks were burning up. She shakes her head and smiles. “It was my fault,” she says. “I shouldn’t have moved.”
One day, the aquarium closed because of a blizzard and Shayna didn’t call Isaac to tell him.

“I love hiking,” she told Vic, strapping herself into snowshoes. She thought, *Maybe I will love hiking.* She remembers now that endless stretch of snow, the way her calves ached. Remembers watching Vic’s backpack move ahead of her, his green wool hat, his face, pink, now and then glancing over his shoulder.

“You’re not fading on me, are you?”

*You love this, you love this, because he loves this,* Shayna told herself. She followed the green wool. “I’m one hundred percent right with you,” she said. She held her breath so she wouldn’t pant.

“Cold?”

“Nope.”

“Bored?”

She shook her head. She wanted so much to impress him.

When he stopped suddenly, cutting off the steady crunch of boots to snow, and held up a gloved finger, Shayna stopped, too.

Behind a skeletal tree, a deer paused, its muscles strong beneath its brown coat, its eyes dark and wary. And watching. For no clear reason, Shayna thought of her parents. She took a step forward. The deer flipped its white tail up and ran.

“Did I do that?” Shayna asked.
“It’s okay.”

“She must have had something against one of us.”

Vic shrugged his shoulders. “Probably thought you were a bear,” he said. He yanked Shayna’s hat down over her eyes.

Shayna readjusted the hat. “I didn’t mean to...”

“She was just being cautious. She might have babies nearby. Didn’t want us getting too close.” Vic touched her cheek. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “Why are you crying?”

Rabbi lifts Shayna’s veil. “Is this your bride?”

“Who else’s would it be?”

The veil lowers.

Shayna liked watching Vic swim with sharks. He wore an air tank strapped to his back and breathed bubbles. Shayna watched for the bubbles. Breathed when he breathed. And when he was finished, when he climbed out of the tank and the sharks were alone, Shayna every time had to remind herself to exhale.

It was silly, really. She’d breathed on her own for so many years.

Father hooks Shayna to his arm. “Ready?” He squeezes her hand.
Shayna doesn't answer. She is sweating, but everything is white. She is bathed in white. The white gardenias smell so strong, they make her dizzy.

The chupa is white satin, draped over bamboo poles. The white grows clearer and larger as Shayna approaches. Father lets go. The garden is hushed, pulsing with heat. But the satin looks like snow, looks white enough to melt a fever.

After Shayna told Vic, “It’s because of religion, Vic. My parents. My family. I’m engaged. We just can’t,” she still liked to watch him feed sharks.

He said, “You’ve never taken a risk in your whole life.”

“You’re not hearing me,” she said. “This isn’t about risk.”

“You don’t always get hurt,” he told her, “taking risks.”

When she watched him then, from the dry side of the glass, as he swam weightlessly, his body draped in chain mail like something off-limits, she silently begged the sharks, attack him, bite him, make him see.

“I might be sick,” Shayna whispers.

“Four more.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Of course you can.” Isaac and his scar smile uneasily. “Since when are there things you can’t do?”

34
The sensation of spiraling. Gaining speed. One bridesmaid holds Shayna’s train.


Isaac’s shoulder against hers feels like something from a dream. She feels like a mummy. Pictures herself unwinding, away from Isaac, away from Rabbi, spinning and spinning down the grass aisle and out of the garden, like an ace bandage, unraveling.

Rabbi wraps a wine glass in linen. Shayna accidentally thinks of a guillotine, a hovering blade. The thought and the heat make her stomach lurch. Rabbi says, “Even in our joy, we remember destruction.”

Shayna hears the shattering, the uproar: Mazel Tov!

She is racing down the aisle, Isaac at her side, leaving behind a napkin full of shards.

Shayna knows this: if she still spent her days in that little booth at the aquarium, if she hadn’t quit three months ago because of jealousy—she’d grown jealous of the sharks who circled Vic, who depended on Vic, who accepted Vic as though he, too, were a shark—she would still, after all this time, look for Vic’s fingerprints from that day he tried to touch her through the glass.

“Your parents have made a good match,” a face tells Shayna.

Another face says, “May you both live to a hundred and twenty.”
There is dancing: concentric circles cluster and widen, widen and cluster. From her chair above the crowd, Shayna hears her mother: “I’m so happy. I’m so happy.”

Shayna, bouncing, smiles despite things. Smiles because of things. Isaac tries to reach her with a handkerchief. She leans toward him and takes it.

Later, Shayna wanders over the footbridge. She feels like she just came through something. Like a warrior, she thinks. She feels very, very brave. Below her, the creek runs and doesn’t look back. She thinks of jumping in, of letting it pull her away in her wedding dress, but even from above, she can see the sharp rocks.
After Logan

It’s March, it’s morning, and my fiancé Logan has been driving away from me, away from Cle Elum, Washington, for twenty-four hours. He’s heading east toward Florida. I’m at work, at Sweet Briar Daycare, watching the clock by the window. My boss, Mister Paul, with his perfectly center-parted hair, is spouting one of his theories: the more attention you pay a client (by client, he means baby), the less it cries. My co-worker Beverly and I can tell you something about that: total horseshit. There’s Fay, for example, who’s always colicky. There’s Edward, with his swelling head, with his unmarried mother who vanishes each morning like a mirage in a cloud of perfume and clicking high heels. She assures us, don’t worry, the doctors say his head’s just fine.

I hold Edward. Beverly holds a new baby with a hot-pink ribbon velcroed to its bald head. The ribbon happens to match Beverly’s nails and lips. Also her leg-warmers. Beverly is my best friend. The babies are wrapped in blankets like sacks. Beverly and I pace back and forth in our slippers—shoes are flypaper for germs—under the fluorescent lights of what we call our classroom. Only it’s not a classroom. A patchwork quilt hangs where the chalkboard should be, and above it, instead of an alphabet banner, pastel lambs on a strip of wallpaper. On the floor, a row of cradles.

If you want my opinion, Mister Paul should unplug his hands from his pockets and go do his boss-like duties, whatever it is he does around the daycare center. He’s
been hanging out in our classroom all morning, needling me. "Tessa," he says, "please get some sleep." He says, "you look like hell warmed over."

I tell him it’s my super-model-slash-junky look. I tell him I’d be a real junky if I could afford it.

The client with the velcro ribbon stops crying. Beverly tucks it into a cradle. "If I were you," she tells me, "I’d sell my ring. Rock like that?"

She clucks her tongue and fluffs her frosted bangs, and I report the latest bad news: the band I booked is non-refundable. If the wedding’s off—not that it’s officially off—my whole deposit’s down the drain.

I bounce Edward in my arms, but he’s inconsolable. "I know, Edward," I say. "Life is totally unfair." I look at the clock again, then at Beverly. "Logan’s supposed to call later this afternoon. He might even be there by then, the way he drives—"

"Like someone on a jail break," Beverly says. She says, "Let’s go to Murray’s after work for a drink."

"Your sweater’s on backwards, Tessa," says Mister Paul. "How can you put a V-neck sweater on backwards?"

I ignore them both. Edward’s head feels puffy. The clock keeps holding its breath. I say, "I’d like to know why Edward’s mother doesn’t mind her son’s head blowing up like a balloon." I sit in a furry cow-print chair by the window, prop Edward against my body, and hold his skull between my palms, like I’m a magician who can fix things.

All day, I keep hoping to fix things.
After work, in my silent apartment, I bargain with God: *I promise I’ll relinquish all my earthly pleasures tomorrow, if you just make Logan call me. Right...now!*  
Okay...now! I finally crash with the cordless beneath my pillow.

It rings at an appalling hour. I ask in my sort-of-sleep, “What do you suggest I do with my ring?” and splay my fingers out under my nose. Even in the dark, the square diamond glints and seems to blind me.


“Why does everyone keep saying that? It’s not funny.”

“Where’s your sense of humor, Tessa? Wear it. Enjoy it. Paint your nails with zebra stripes so people notice it. What’s the matter?”

I tell him I’m unhappy.

“Of course you are,” he says, “because you’re wasting yourself. You can’t be a babysitter for the rest of your life.”

I turn my ring around so the diamond lies against the inside of my hand. I make a fist around it. “You’re so inflated,” I say. “Like being a restaurant manager is some distinguished position. Please. And stop calling me a babysitter.”

Logan starts philosophizing; I should apply to teaching jobs like I said I would. I should find the thing that makes me happy, he says, as if that’s good advice, and I tell him I did. I did find the thing, but it moved to Florida and didn’t invite me. Plus, I tell him, I had a miserable evening at home, waiting for it to call, when I could have been at Murray’s, drinking whiskey until my brain turned to seaweed.
“Invite you, Tessa? Drag you across the country for a job I probably won’t even keep?”

I tell him about how I spread a road map over my kitchen table today and drew a line between Tallahassee and Cle Elum. How it looked like I’d crossed the map out: A big red-marker fuck-you to America. Practically treason. It looked like those poison labels that warn you against eating strychnine.

Logan’s quiet a second and then changes the subject, says he’s at a truck stop somewhere, and all at once I hate him so much, I have to grind my teeth to keep from telling him so. Instead I ask, and I really don’t mean to ask, but out it comes, “Are you breathing more easily? Am I still smothering you, from three thousand miles away?”

“I’m not three thousand miles away yet,” he says.

“You’ll have to keep me posted,” I say. He says he just called to say hi, but he can’t talk. He just got a cup of coffee and watched the sun come up behind the cornfields. I tell him Florida’s overpopulated. I tell him, “you’ll suffocate, Logan.”

The operator asks for money and the line goes dead.

The next evening I do go to Murray’s, which is right next door to Sweet Briar. It’s a bar I otherwise wouldn’t step foot in. But we all come here, the whole staff, every Friday for happy hour. It’s dark now and everyone’s gone, except Beverly and me. To my credit, I did get here a little late, on account of going home first to change.

I’m wearing a dress that would make my mother faint. My cracked red vinyl stool oozes stuffing, and hisses whenever I sit or stand. Beverly’s on my right,
embarrassed. I lean forward so my cleavage pushes up against the bar, like the top of a heart, severed horizontally. “The usual,” I tell the bartender.

“And what would that be?”

I laugh, bite a cherry off its stem, and say, “I’ve just always wanted to say that.” Then I wink, but I think I accidentally squeeze both eyes shut.

Beverly lifts her white purse from her chair back and lays it in her lap. She teases her bangs with her fingers, whispers, “What are you, the whore of Babylon?”

“You gotta shake what your mama gave you,” I say. I shimmy my shoulders a little, then grab the bar to steady myself. I tell her I’m practicing being single again, just in case. I’m practicing being back on the scene. I do a shot of whiskey with the toothless man on my left. He shows me his dentures, floating in a pint glass of water on a cocktail napkin. I tell him, “My babies...well, not my babies.” I look at Beverly and laugh. “But the babies we take care of, they have no teeth either.”

“It’s from the war,” he says, running his tongue over his gums. “But it don’t matter. No one’s got teeth.”

“I’ve got ‘em,” I say. “But what good are they? I don’t bite.” I laugh like a crazy person jumping off a roof:

“Tessa,” says Beverly, and I turn to her, hold her shoulders. “Look at you,” she says.

My hand slips from her arm and I nearly fall off the stool. “I’m unwinding,” I say. “I was so tightly wound.”

Beverly checks her watch. “You’re acting like a frat boy.”

“Well, cheers,” she says, standing. “May you always spread your sunshine.”

When she’s gone, I turn back to the man. “My babies don’t bite either,” I say. “They’re all gums.” I think of Edward’s head, warm and squishy in my hand. I close my eyes against the thought. Maybe I fall asleep like that.

“Tessa?”

I open my eyes and there’s Mister Paul, in his pleated khaki pants and brown suede bucks. “I thought you’d still be here,” he says. “You looked like you were setting up camp. Figured I’d better check on you.” He clears his throat and pushes his fingers through his stiff black hair. “Are you all right?”

I touch my knuckles to my face, feel wet mascara slipping. The toothless man is gone. “I could die,” I say. “I could just die.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know. I could probably cry myself to death.”

Mister Paul looks around the bar, as if in search of the emergency exit.

I say, “I’m not crying because I have problems, I hope you know.” My voice rings in my ears. “I’m crying,” I say, “because I won’t be twenty-six forever.” I point to my dress with both thumbs. “I won’t always be able to squeeze my keister into this hot little number. I won’t always be able to paint the town red. So feverishly, at least. Also,” I say, “I’m crying for humanity.”

“Why don’t I get you out of here,” says Mister Paul. He cups my elbow and helps me off my stool.
“Being single is so much fun,” I say. I trip over my foot. “I’m a swinging single. I’m living it up.”

In the car, I lean my forehead against Mister Paul’s stiff gear-shifting arm. He smells like a cologne sample, something measured and condensed on a cardboard strip. I fall asleep to the steady rhythm of the turn signal.

The next day after work, Logan calls from Tallahassee. He says, “I’m here.”

“Actually,” I say, “you’re there.”

“Whatever. How are things?”

“I’m perfect.” I collapse on my bed. “Except for this hang-over. How’s the sunshine?”

“Tessa.” He sighs. “Where were you last night?”

I watch out the window above the desk, see the tops of trees, bald branches, like cracks in the sky. “I was having fun,” I say. “Do you mind? Get your ass to the beach and have a daiquiri for me, would you?” I say it like a spunky grandfather with a dying request. But then I close my eyes and see a negative of things. The light in opposite.

“You don’t take a job in Florida,” I say, “when you want to marry someone in Washington.”

“Come on,” says Logan. “Let’s not start.”

The next morning, Beverly and I fold our arms over our chests when Edward’s mother tries to hand him over. We are baby cops. Baby security guards.

“His head,” says Beverly. “Maybe you think it’s not our business, but...”
"It's gargantuan," I say. "The other babies don't have heads like Edward's."

"We're worried," Beverly says.

Edward's mother looks back and forth between us like she's watching ping-pong. "It's common," she says, "in infants. It'll go away. It's not that bad. People usually don't even notice, and in fact, I think it's getting smaller." She presses Edward toward me again and I melt. Open my arms and take him. She smiles, tugs on the hem of her short blazer. "Girls," she says, "I can't thank you enough. I'll have him looked at again this weekend." She checks her watch. Widens her smile. "What gems you are," she says, laying a hand on each of our cheeks. "Perfect gems," and she's gone.

Spring heats up. Weeks braid together. Beverly and I keep pacing in our slippers. Today, I hold Edward. She holds a baby named Norm.

"People named Edward and Norm smoke cigars," I say.

"They're perverts," says Beverly. "Edward and Norm are dirty-old-men names."

I thrust Edward's head under her chin. "Look at this watermelon," I say. "What is wrong with that woman?"

Fay starts to cry from her cradle.

"Three criers," says Beverly. "Call in the troops."

I go to the cradles, squat expertly, scoop Fay into my left arm, and stand, one baby on each shoulder.

"God," says Beverly. "What will I do without you?"
"We might never find out. Ever gone job-hunting?" I fall into step beside her again. "It's like running through wet concrete." We stop at the window and stare out. A parking lot dotted with cars. A cyclone fence. Beyond that, a field. Two little girls fly anchor-shaped kites. I see the wisp of my reflection in the glass. It makes me feel very sorry for myself, like I'm fading away, a baby in each of my arms. "Summer's coming," I say. "If I were a real teacher, I'd have vacation soon."

"If this, if that. You're self-destructing," says Beverly. "What about the good ol' right now?"

"I hate the right now."

Beverly pats Norm's back with her palm. "What's the wedding date again? August..."

"Twenty-fourth," I say.

"Keep the band," she says. "We'll have an end-of-summer party in my backyard."

"Oh, God," I say. "That's like having a girls' night out on Valentine's Day. It's like going to the prom with your cousin."

"I won't lie, Tessa," Beverly says. "You're getting on my nerves. The world is not crumbling down around you." One kite catches on a tree, and the girls stop running. The other kite sinks to the grass beside them. They make visors with their hands and look up at the branches. Beverly says, "And he's not coming back so stop wishing for things."
At night, I drink sherry straight from the bottle through a straw. The phone rings and I pounce. But it’s not Logan. It’s hardly ever Logan anymore.

“I’m worried,” says Mister Paul, “that we’re losing you. We all are.” His voice over the phone sounds different. Smaller. He sounds like a guilty telemarketer. Or a pervert hoping for phone sex.

“My life is in cookie crumbs,” I say.

“That’s your business,” says Mister Paul, “but it’s not easy finding new employees. People are so incompetent. You and Beverly are just right for our three-to-eight-month-old clients. Most people don’t work well with that age demographic. Just...don’t leave,” he says.

“Yeah.” I snort. “I told Logan, ‘Don’t leave,’ and he went anyway and took a job in Florida.” I’m lying on my back in the dark, wrapped in a bathrobe, my head at the foot of the bed. “What I’d like to know is, how can we be together if we’re not together? It’s like the goddamn land of make-believe.” I lay an arm across my forehead. “He was perfect for me, Mister Paul. He told me I should be an interior decorator, since I’d done such a good job hanging the moon. He asked me to marry him while we were riding on a bus. We were going to Seattle to see a play, and he said, ‘come sit on my lap, Tessa,’ and patted his thigh, and then proposed to me, just like that. Everyone-applauded.”

“That’s against the law in Seattle,” says Mister Paul, “on buses, for a woman to sit on a man’s lap. Unless there’s a pillow in between them.”

“What are you, a narc?”

“It’s just something I know.”
I lift my head up to drink. At the bottom of the bottle, the sherry bubbles and then is gone. “We had a pillow,” I say, “for your information. And we weren’t in Seattle yet anyway.” I scoot down so my head hangs off the edge of the bed. My hair dangles to the carpet. Blood rushes like lead to my brain. “He was perfect,” I say again, but I wonder why I keep saying it. It doesn’t quite feel true anymore. “Still is,” I say. I giggle. “I guess I can’t act like he’s dead just because he’s in Florida.”

“You’re better than this!” says Mister Paul. His voice gets louder. “If you keep wallowing, you’ll miss things. Don’t you know that? Windows will close all around you. Just watch.” He takes a deep breath and lets it out. Goes back to his phone-sex voice. He says, “We need people like you, Tessa, who care about the clients.”

“No. You need people like Edward’s mother. People who can smile their faces off, despite things.”

Then it’s June and Logan’s really gone. He comes right out and says it.

“Washington just isn’t me,” he says. “I love you, Tessa, but I’m finally breathing. I couldn’t breathe with you.” He’s proud of himself. He’s talking like he’s recovered from a disease. He says, “I’m happy here in Tallahassee.”

“Yippee-aye-fuckin’-ay,” I say and hang up on him. It’s morning and I’m late for work already.

In the car, I keep all four windows down and remember how Logan always said, “If it weren’t for Tessa hitting on me like a prostitute, we’d never have gotten off the ground.” Very funny. He even said it to my dad. True: we met one night, three years
ago, at Murray’s. True: I was getting over another boyfriend. Was vulnerable. Was...effusive. But please.

And that wasn’t even his worst infraction.

He wouldn’t let me move in with him because he needed his own bathroom. This from a man who combed his eyebrows with my toothbrush. Not to mention the potato thing: he kept a bag of potatoes in my fridge, so he could, at his will, walk out in front of my apartment building, and throw potatoes at squirrels, screaming, “Take that! And that! Howd’ya like them apples?” The squirrels were closing in, he used to say. They were suffocating him. He was rescuing us.

My diamond against the steering wheel glints like a blade. It’s getting harder and harder to justify this.

In our light-swollen classroom, Beverly, in turquoise-blue stretch pants and a palm-tree sweatshirt, is pacing, bouncing colicky Fay in her arms.

I push my shoes off, step into my slippers, go to the cradles and Edward’s not crying. “There’s something,” I say. “Edward’s asleep.” I pick him up and feel his little baby breath on my neck.

“Seems better today,” Beverly says. “Who knows?”

I loosen my arms around him just a little, to feel his weight. Weight that would crash if I ever let go. “Doubt it,” I say. I rest my cheek on the blond down of his scalp. “Babies are fragile.” I sit on the cow-print chair by the window and feel like I might cry. Edward’s lips make little sucking motions. Amazing really, those instincts: babies are born knowing how much they need people. “You only get strong from having lots of
injuries,” I say. “Then you learn to fight things off. Edward hasn’t had time to learn anything yet.”

“Oh, cut it out, would you?” says Beverly. “I’m officially sick of your doom and gloom. Honestly. You bitch and moan and bitch and moan, you hate your job, your fiancé moves to Florida, you’re hung-over, you’re this, you’re that. But there are worse things, Tessa, than to be you.”

“Oh, okay. I’m not in the mood for your spiel right now, Bev.”

“You and your moods. Why should I gauge your mood every time I open my mouth?”

“Because I’m heartsick!” I say. “And you’re not. That’s why” I think of the job interview I’m supposed to have after work and feel like stuffing myself into Edward’s cradle and falling asleep. But then: something is wrong. I peel Edward’s body away from my shoulder. “Oh God,” I say Beverly hurries over in her slippers. “His face is purple!”

After the ambulance, after the afternoon that wouldn’t end, I skip my interview and drive to a pawn shop to sell my ring.

The man there says, “I can give you seven hundred. You won’t do better than that.”

“Seven hundred!” I scream. “This diamond’s almost flawless.”

He laughs, both hands on his giant belly. “Well now who in the hell told you that?” he asks.
Next I drive to Children’s Hospital, and find Edward’s mother in the E.R. waiting room, professional-looking as ever, hair yanked into a slick bun, body molded into a business suit that matches her sad blue shoes.

I sit beside her. Coffee steam bends toward her chin. I take her free hand in both of mine.

“Tessa?” She looks at me with nothing alive in her whole face, except her eyes, which glitter from crying. “I feel so...blind,” she says. “Thank you,” she says. She turns her wrist inside the knot of my hands, looks at her gold watch. “He’s been in surgery four hours. He could have encephalitis. I really don’t know what that means. But it’s not too serious.” She whispers, “Or there might be a tumor,” and looks all over my face, searching for the part of it that will laugh and say, A tumor? In your baby’s head? Don’t be ridiculous.

I squeeze her hand and say nothing.

“They won’t let me in the operating room.”

I nod. “Probably better,” I say. “Imagine how you’d be. Like an artist watching a crane move your sculpture.”


“I don’t think a thing,” I say.

“I’m a single mother,” she says. “My husband literally climbed out our bedroom window when I told him I was pregnant. I’m not kidding. He slid down the drain pipe. He was wearing nothing but boxer briefs.”

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“That’s terrible,” I say. I blink hard at the little white halo where my ring used to be. I almost tell her about Logan leaving, about how I flung myself on the floor and threw my arms around his ankles. How it was just a gesture really; I knew I wasn’t helping things. And how he acted like he didn’t notice, just kept right on walking, dragging me across the linoleum on my belly.

But I close my mouth and keep it closed. Sometimes, people don’t need your stories.

Edward’s mother says, “He had just shaved that afternoon because we were going to a party, and after he left, I wiped up all the little hairs that were stuck to the sink with a tissue and then saved the tissue in a medicine bottle.” She laughs. “I’ve thrown it out by now, of course. I’m just trying to say, it’s been difficult. Can you imagine? Saving someone’s facial stubble?”

I catch sight of the ponytail holder around my wrist. Three or four of my hairs are woven through it. I think of the baby with the velcro hair ribbon. I remember the time Logan plucked an ingrown hair out of my knee with tweezers. I think of the tiny bald spot on the back of Mister Paul’s head, then think, for some reason, of resting my cheek on it. The thought does not disgust me. I remember being fifteen and shaving my whole head to make a statement. I can’t remember what the statement was. People lose things all the time, I realize.

Edward’s mother shrugs her shoulders. Sighs. “Anyway,” she says, “they have to drain the fluid out.”
“Well, good.” I squeeze her hand again. “Last thing the world needs. Another
guy with a big head.”

I sit with her until the night’s gone completely black through the window. Then I
go outside to the visitor’s parking lot and sit on the hood of my car. I lean back on my
elbows. A few yards ahead of me, by the entrance to the hospital, there’s a white stone
fountain that looks like a big bowl. The water’s not on. A nurse pushes a bald man in a
black wheel chair. She stops so he can throw a coin into the fountain. I hear the nurse
say, “Keep it to yourself, Maurice, or it won’t come true,” then she kicks the wheelchair
brake with her foot, and they disappear through the automatic doors.
The Dive

The divers eat together at the breakfast buffet on the beach. Their requisite name tags, which read, *My name is ____ and I practice safe SCUBA*, lie neglected on the table. Victor wrote *Victor* on his last night. Beside Victor sits Pedro, the dive master who taught yesterday’s resort course, and across from Victor, a girl in a white bikini. There is also a family of four: forty-ish parents with twin boys who look about twelve. The mother, who introduces herself as Judy, wears a one-piece pink bathing suit with a ruffle ring around her hips. The father and the twins wear shiny little Speedos. Apart from Victor’s, all the name tags remain nameless. Victor wishes his were nameless, too. He casually pushes his napkin over it.

Pedro sets his fork down. “I’ve got a good one,” he says. “You have ten cows. Standing in a row. Which one’s closest to Iraq?”

The father looks up from his plate. “To Iraq? How do you mean?” He chews, open-mouthed.

Pedro drums the tabletop with his index fingers. “Cow eight,” he says.

The white-bikini girl laughs, which makes Victor wish he knew a joke.

The man grunts. “How do you mean?”

Judy touches his shoulder. “Kuwait, Gus.” She tosses Pedro a smile like a dog treat.

Pedro smiles back, a white smear of teeth against coffee skin.
Gus grunts again, then says, “What’s the difference between Hide and Go Seek and a man climaxing?”

“Honey!”

“Tell me,” says Pedro.

“One, two, threefourfivesixseveneightnineteen. Ready or not, here I come!” Gus roars and yellow flecks shoot from his mouth.

“Oh, Gus!” says Judy.

One twin says, “Gross.”

“Too much information,” says the bikini girl.

A seagull squawks. Victor, embarrassed in that watching-a-talent-show sort of way, is seized by an impulse to run to the ocean and drown himself.

Before uncertified divers staying at Hotel Seaspray on Martine can dive in open water, they have to take a full-day scuba course on the resort, which entails waking up at seven in the morning, and which is held in a five-feet-deep, not-heated swimming pool. Two days ago, when Victor, Norm, and Jimmy arrived on Martine, Victor tried explaining to them, sort of pleadingly, that the course is a means to an end, and Norm asked, “To what end, Pops?” (Some girls from the dorm nicknamed Victor “Pops,” on account of his being twenty-four.) “Waking up at seven again the next morning?”

“Fuck that,” was what Jimmy said.
All Norm and Jimmy seem to want, despite the indisputably slim-to-none chances of getting laid on Martine, is to knock back Cuervo shots at the beach bar with Elijah the Mayan bartender until dawn, then pass out (which Norm did last night in the bathtub for some reason, Hawaiian shirt and all, wearing one flip-flop, the other wedged behind his head like a pillow), sleep until two, then lie on the beach, sipping Tequila Tacklers from halved coconuts, and discussing which drugs are legal in Belize; how pleasant life is without a drinking age; and occasionally, deeper issues:

Norm (to Jimmy): I had a dream last night and you were in it.

Jimmy: What was I doing?

Norm: You were eating a phone.

And Victor finds himself trapped outside it all, like that street performer he used to see around Anchorage, a mime trying to break into an invisible box.

So here he is, about to dive without his friends. That’s fine. He’s independent. It’s not like he isn’t. He will transform, become a man of admirable exploits. Afterwards, Norm and Jimmy will ask, “What was it like?” And Victor will tell them about going two hundred feet under water, and about the barracuda that almost ate him, which he had to wrestle into submission with his bare hands. He’ll say it very serenely, while sipping a margarita and high-fiving the other divers in the bar, who will one-by-one approach Victor to say, “Nice save today. We’d have been lunch if it weren’t for you.” Etceteras. Victor loves water, relies on its inherent threat. Water, for whatever reason, doesn’t scare him.
Now Judy is telling a joke. The punch line is, “Whaddaya take me for, Mister? A showgirl?”

On the long buffet table, claw-footed metal tureens squat over purple flames. The outdoor breakfast buffet is part of the Martine spring-break super-saver package, which also includes airfare to and from Martine, a tiny island north of Belize City; a hotel room; a booze cruise; and a single-tank dive. Beside the tureens, food-caked serving spoons lie on saucers. The spoons are flecked with black flies. The only people Victor can see, besides his tablemates, are a pot-bellied man in a hot-pink beach cover-up and a naked child who picks his nose in earnest and eats a muffin. Since arriving on Martine, Victor has never found himself surrounded by more than a handful of tourists. The island’s as empty as a beggar’s hat.

Victor wonders if the black flies carry the plague. Or malaria. He remembers a story his older brother Byron once told him: a fighter pilot Byron trained with took malaria pills in Africa, went crazy, and wandered into the jungle alone, where he was captured by indigenous people who made him one of them. That was the whole description: indigenous. Which scared Victor the way girls with armpit hair scare him.

Victor’s never been to Africa. Until now, he’s never even been overseas. The farthest he ever got from Maryland was Anchorage, Alaska—far, yes, but still technically stateside—where he worked on F-15s for three years after high school on an air force base. He spent the following two years in Missouri. Now he’s a freshman at Sloane State College just outside of D.C.
Victor, Norm, and Jimmy wanted to go to Cancun for spring break—everyone goes to Cancun for spring break—but the Cancun package, which doesn’t include diving, cost two hundred dollars more than Martine. For Victor, who was determined to scuba dive, the decision was a no-brainer. For Norm and Jimmy, who aren’t funded by a G.I. bill, Cancun simply wasn’t affordable.

The white-bikini girl has long black hair. Victor tries to discern her nipples through her top. He stares at her while gnawing on a melon. Maybe they’ll dive alongside each other, she like a mermaid, he like a Navy Seal, gaze at each other under water through mask-magnified eyes, then swim behind a coral reef for a quickie, moaning into their regulators. He tries to decide which he would enjoy more: getting it on with the white-bikini girl, or reporting back to Norm and Jimmy that he’d gotten it on with the white-bikini girl. Victor wonders if they would even believe him. He worries about it. Maybe he’ll ask someone, Pedro perhaps, to take a picture of him kissing her, preferably while he pets her breast.

The girl’s head snaps up; she catches Victor gawking. “You know any good ones?” she asks.

He quickly lowers his eyes and returns his melon rind to his plate. “Nothing G-rated.”

“G-rated my ass,” says Gus. “Spit it out. My boys are used to it. Can’t shock them, that’s for goddamn sure.”

The girl keeps watching Victor. “New to diving?”

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“I’ve had plenty of experience with open water,” he says. He gulps. The realization grips him like a charley horse: he’s the only first-time diver in the group. “I’ve done underwater recon.” He sighs. “What a mess,” he says, shaking his head, willing her telepathically to forget about her question. “Not a pretty sight. Can’t save ’em all, if you know what I mean.”

“You’ve saved lives?” asks the girl.

“Yes.” No. One life, if that. And it was a dog. That was a few years ago in Anchorage. It was August. He had driven up to Beluga Point on the Turnagain Arm of Cook Inlet. At that time of year, beluga whales chase the salmon that are staging to begin the spawning runs. On the right day, you can watch the whales breach directly below you. The heart of summer, and there’s a glacier in the distance.

That particular day, Victor heard a scream and then a splash. The scream was coming from an old ratty-looking woman with a walking stick. Her dog, some medium-sized thing she’d been holding, had, after spotting a whale, jumped from her arms over the safety railing, and tumbled down the rocks into the water. Victor hurdled over the railing and ran (sort of side-stepped) down the rocks after the dog, who was thrashing around, trying to stick his head into the air to get a breath. Victor charged in. It was freezing-cold, but initially very shallow, which was not, he marveled, how it looked from above. There was a sharp drop-off, where the dog had fallen, but Victor was able to stay chest-deep and standing, and all he did, really, was scoop the dog up and walk out of the water, the thing shivering and dripping all over him. Victor was pretty sure
the dog would have found his way out. No one had ever really been in danger; it had just looked that way to people.

But no matter!

The crowd of tourists erupted in cheers. The dog’s owner waved her walking stick in the air and cried out in joy.

“So you’re the real deal,” the white bikini girl says.

Victor’s not sure what to make of her tone of voice. “I was in the service,” he says. “I mainly worked on the B2 program in Missouri.”

“What’s that?”

“You know, stealth bombers.” He chuckles. “You’ve never heard of B2s?” He shakes his head at her, as if she were a child who’d just asked where babies come from.

“What’d you do, fly a bomber?” Gus asks.

“Oh, this and that,” Victor says. He winks at the girl, who looks a little disgusted. “It’s top-secret.” Top-secret even to Victor, really, but he keeps that part to himself.

“Is that right?” asks Judy. “Well, you must be quite a guy! Flying stealth bombers. Goodness.”

Victor never flew a B2. He never even got the security clearance to see a fully assembled B2. Or to be in the same room with a part of a B2—a wing, for instance—without authorized personnel standing by, monitoring him. He worked in a sheet metal shop on the air force base, supposedly coating B2s with a substance that
made them radar-invisible, but in fact more frequently painting things like signs. Like fuel tanks. Like jeeps. Always the same color: gunmetal-gray. Gunmetal-gray became the backdrop of his dreams. It consumed him. It came to represent all that was unbearable.

"Everyone ready?" Pedro asks.

Victor says, "Born ready," and then spends the three-minute walk to the dive shop wishing he hadn’t said that.

The dive shop is a bamboo hut on the beach with a square carved out of the wall, like a teller’s window at a bank.

"Whatygowan Dred?" Elijah the bartender says, stepping out of the hut and walking toward Victor, holding out his hand to shake.

Victor wishes he could respond in Creole. Instead, he says, "How’s it hangin’, Bro?" and wonders how he sounds: cool? Affected? Cool, he decides. Away from his friends, in the company of Belizians and tourists, Victor feels a proud sense of authority, like he’s got a corner on social skills. A real college boy on spring break.

He begins to feel less proud when Pedro starts dressing him, holding a wetsuit open for Victor to step into, zipping it up Victor’s spine, clipping him into a buoyancy-compensator vest, then unclipping it and gesturing for Victor to shrug out of it. And less proud still when Pedro orders Elijah, who, it turns out, works by day for the dive shop, to carry Victor’s equipment to the little white motor boat. Now, as if things aren’t bad enough, the white-bikini girl, hauling her own air tank and a mesh bag full of dive
equipment, is following Elijah down the wooden dock. The family brings up the rear. Even the twins are carrying their own equipment.

"I can... I can get that," Victor tells Pedro pointlessly, gesturing toward the other divers, as Elijah, fifty yards away, loads Victor's things onto the boat.

From down the beach, which is about twenty percent sand, eighty percent gravel, *Cheeseburger In Paradise* drifts from a boom box beneath a red umbrella. Beside that boom box, a patient-looking woman sits—sits and sits—elbows on knees, chin on knuckles, asking every passerby, "Want your hair braided, Honey?" It seems to Victor that maybe she lives there. Past the red umbrella, a tall wooden frame stands in the gravel. Hanging in the frame, Victor sees a giant marlin, bound by rope, its white belly sloping in the sun. He thinks of a video he saw in a high school history class about the KKK: a graphic reenactment of a lynching. Victor tastes bile in his mouth. He gets an urge to throw a sheet over the fish. It's awkward. Large and displaced. So exposed. A fish out of water, Victor thinks. And while he looks, he simultaneously tries to ignore the voice in his head, the one whispering, "What the hell were you thinking calling Elijah 'Bro'? Asshole."

Victor feels hot in his wetsuit; it's only a shorty, but still: it must be a hundred ten degrees and rising. Pedro's bald head shines. Even the ocean sparkles, as if strewn with tiny flames. "Let's go," says Pedro, heading for the dock, and Victor, feeling very white and very fettered, has no choice but to follow.
Elijah drives the boat. He does it standing up. His bare feet are so callused, they look cushioned. He and Pedro speak rapidly and laugh loudly, now and then having some sort of muscular collapse from the laughter, their arms going limp and their heads shaking, high-pitched sighs escaping their lungs. Victor again wishes he spoke Creole. Maybe he’ll learn a little this week, so that when he returns to Martine in the future (next spring break? his honeymoon?), he can say to his travel companion(s), “Pity how quickly you lose Creole if you don’t use it.”

“You knew Creole?”

“Oh,” (dismissive wave of hand) “yeah. All those overseas missions back in my B2 days.” (Jaded little chuckle.) “Learned a lot of things I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.”

“How exhilarating!” Travel Companion will exclaim.

“Maybe it’ll come back to me,” Victor will say, “now that I’m on the island again.”

“Well, if you aren’t a thrill-seeker, I don’t think I’ve ever met one.”

“I’m nothing, really,” Victor will say.

The air tanks, one per diver, sit along the inside perimeter of the boat, secured in slots that look like large cup holders. Pedro pulls dangling buoys in from the boat’s exterior. Water drips from the buoys and collects in pools on the deck. The boat drifts. The engine idles. Victor looks at the other divers. He’s the only one in a wetsuit.
Pedro claps his hands. “I need everyone to listen to me,” he says. The group gathers around him. “We’re on our way to a dive site called Eagle Ray Cove.”

Judy shrieks and grabs Gus’ elbow. “Honey! You love eagle rays!”

“I can’t promise any rays,” says Pedro.

“Then I can’t promise any tip.” Gus punches Pedro’s shoulder.

Judy turns her palms up grandly.

“If I see one, I’ll do this,” says Pedro. He flaps his arms. “And for shark, I do this.” He presses his thumb to his forehead. “Okay?” Then he bunches the fingers on each hand in front of his nipples. “Grouper is this,” he says, repeatedly opening and closing his fingertips. He grins. “Like groper.”

“It’s a typo,” says Gus. He roars again. Judy giggles like the Pillsbury Dough Boy.

“Hello,” says the bikini girl, waving her arms over her head. “What is this, Testosterone Appreciation Day?”

Everyone laughs. Victor tries to laugh, too, but he chimes in a few seconds late, and it sounds forced. It ruins the harmony of the laughter.

“Bottom time will be forty-five minutes,” says Pedro. “Maximum depth, twenty feet.”

Twenty? Victor thinks. You could snorkel twenty feet! His muscles clench up so tightly, his toes curl. He tries to uncurl them. It doesn’t matter, he consoles himself. Twenty feet is better than zero.
But that just doesn’t feel true.

The engine rumbles to a start and the boat picks up speed. Everyone sits, backs against air tanks, on padded benches. The twins, who even have matching haircuts, like shaggy helmets, keep standing up, then losing balance and falling to their hands and knees on the deck. Gus yells at them. Victor stares. Much to his own disgust, he finds himself wishing to be their triplet. He worries briefly that he’s a pedophile, then assures himself that he’d much rather watch the bikini girl, but he’s too afraid of getting caught again. The wind cools Victor off a little, but not much; he continues to suffocate in the wetsuit, which upsets him so badly, he starts to long for Norm and Jimmy back at the hotel.

It’s getting sort of painful, missing things.

Take last night, for example. After one beer, with the sunset not even finished, Victor, knowing he’d have to wake up early this morning, slipped away from the bar and retreated to the hotel room, which, when he arrived, was so silent, it practically throbbed. He was struck with excruciating pity for anyone who had ever stayed in that room. But he also felt a deep relief, felt grateful for the quiet after an exhausting day; it takes energy to talk about things that don’t interest you, with people six years younger than you, and to laugh off the right things, like when on the beach earlier, Jimmy had thrown a washed-up jellyfish at the back of Victor’s neck: those sorts of things. Or like when Norm called Victor a Bati Mon (the local word, they’d learned, for fag) after Victor asked Jimmy to rub sun screen on his back. Victor lay face-down on one bed, on
top of the bedspread, which was embroidered with what looked like fishing line, and which was tucked tightly between mattress and box spring and smelled of salt.

The quiet had made him homesick. But maybe, he thought, it wasn’t home he was missing. Maybe it was something else. He couldn’t come up with what that something else could be though, so he tried to call home, but his international calling card was broken—well, not broken, but the instructions were in some other language that Victor didn’t know—and after a few minutes of trying, he thanked God he didn’t know that other language; no need to call his parents without any good news.

His getting the B2 job, for instance, was the kind of good news he could call home about; it had sounded particularly good the way Victor relayed it. He was living in Anchorage then, and as soon as he hung up with the officer who had said, “You’ve been chosen to move to the center of the world” (meaning Missouri), Victor had promptly called his parents.

Something about having just committed yourself to a worthless job, about having just been manipulated into thinking otherwise, and about wanting to believe that you’re not worthless, compels you to present your worthless future to others in grandiose ways.

“Missouri,” Victor told his parents, “is equidistant from all edges of our country.”

“The center of America!” his mother had exclaimed.

“The center of the world,” said his father, a former Navy Seal, “if you think about it. B2s have to stay in the center of the world.” Then he said, “My boys are two brave men.”
Other things also made Victor’s parents proud. He couldn’t recall just then what those things were. Definitely lots of things, though.

If he had gotten through on the phone last night, what would he have said? Hi Mom, I’m homesick? Spring break isn’t all it’s cracked up to be? Martine’s a drag if you aren’t an alcoholic? So he just lay on a bed, staring out the window, waiting for sleep, watching the gathering dark.

The engine quiets and sputters and the boat slows to a stop. Victor wonders what everyone in Cancun is doing. He imagines that Cancun is like Martine, only crowded. A tropical clusterfuck. The image is amply unappealing. Elijah tosses an anchor overboard. Victor touches his own hair, which is wind-flattened against his ears. All the divers, even the twins, as if on cue, turn around and begin fitting their BCs onto their tanks, attaching their regulators, checking their air gauges. Victor panics: the forgetting-to-study-for-a-test kind of panic. He can’t remember the order of things. Turn the black knob backwards? Or forwards? And what is that thing that you’re absolutely under no circumstances supposed to do? Something that could cause an explosion. He glances around desperately, but everyone else is hard at work.

Pedro elbows Victor aside and takes over. “Watch me,” he says.

Victor stands behind him lamely, pretending he and Pedro are actually a team, joining forces to set Victor’s gear up in a special, complicated way. Preparing him for a secret mission perhaps. “Christ,” Victor mutters under his breath. He swipes his sweaty forehead with his arm.
“Everything cool?” asks Pedro.

“It’s hot as balls,” Victor says, then he wishes he hadn’t said that.

Pedro lifts the tank from the slot and holds it against Victor’s back. Victor pushes awkwardly through the arm holes of the BC. Pedro secures the clips on the BC, tightens the straps, then fits a snorkel into a face mask and yanks the mask over Victor’s head, also yanking, Victor feels, quite a bit of hair from his scalp.

“Fins,” says Pedro, kneeling on the deck and tapping Victor’s left knee.

Victor, forced to lean on the curve of Pedro’s back for balance, lifts his left foot, which Pedro equips with fin and fin. Then Pedro does the right foot, stands, says, “Vamanos!” and guides Victor to the stern of the boat, where Elijah waits.

Elijah buckles Victor into a weight belt, then sticks the regulator into Victor’s mouth. Victor turns to see what’s going on behind him. Everyone’s fully suited-up, looking like robo-people, watching him, waiting for him to jump. He breathes squeakily through the regulator.

“Vamanos!” Pedro says again, clapping like a coach.

Elijah grabs Victor’s wrist. Victor turns back around and puts his regulator in his mouth. He feels as if he’s being made to walk the plank. He looks at the glittering engine, at the waves lapping the blades of the prop. Then Elijah inflates Victor’s vest and shoves him off the boat.

A cool shock of water and a lovely silence, and Victor bobs to the surface, where he finds that his soaked hair is plastered over the front of his mask, blinding him. He
pushes the hair back in time to watch the white-bikini girl—who still wears no wetsuit and, thanks to the BC straps, has outstanding cleavage—expertly cover her face with one hand and her weight belt with the other, and jump (or rather, effortlessly step) into the sea. She floats up beside Victor and removes her regulator.

Victor can’t help glancing at her, but he quickly tries to think of something else to do instead. He’s stumped.

“You on spring break?” she asks.

Victor lets his own regulator fall from his mouth. It bubbles menacingly between them. “Yeah.” He faces her squarely. “You?”

She removes her mask and spits in it. She is beautiful. He’s never seen a face like hers. So smooth, as if she somehow arranged for it look like that. She fills the mask with water, then empties it and tugs it back over her head. “I’m a traveler,” she says.

Victor laughs. “All the time?” He’s never heard of such a thing. But he instantly wishes he didn’t laugh. There’s something sort of volatile about this girl, something he doesn’t want to mess with.

“A year and a half now.”

He wonders if there’s snot in the nose part of his mask. It sure feels like it. His weight belt is uneven or something, so he has to kick frantically to keep from tipping to the left. “I’m here with some buddies,” he says. “Some college buddies of mine.” He likes the way those words roll off his tongue.

The girl snorts. “What are you, a frat boy or something?”
Another splash. It’s Judy.

And then, Splash! Splash! The twins jump in simultaneously, much to the chagrin of Gus, who is still on board, pitching a fit. “What do you think this is?” he hollers. “A goddamn circus?” Gus jumps. Splash!

Pedro tips in backwards from a sitting position off the side of the boat. Another splash.

“Are you?” the girl asks. “A frat boy?”

“No. I’m not.” Victor hesitates, tries to gauge her reaction. She looks disappointed. “I mean, yes, I am.”

The girl throws her head back and cackles.

“What?”

“You’re one of those,” says the girl.

“One of what?”

“Those typical frat boys who walk around like, I’m not your typical frat boy. Bla bla bla. Makes me puke.”

“Regulators in!” shouts Pedro. “Meet me at the bottom.”

“Let me guess,” the girl says. “You love the Grateful Dead. You have a story about how you saw them on their last tour.”

“I—”

“You dropped acid in the parking lot.”

“Did not.”
“You have the T-shirt.”

“The T-shirt?” Victor sputters. “I’m a bomber pilot, for your information.” Then he swims away.

“Sayanara!” says Judy, and she sinks.

Gus calls out a final warning to his sons: “No horse play! You’d better not let me catch you horsing around. You horse around under there and you can bet your behinds you’ll stay in the hotel all afternoon.” But when he realizes that the twins are nothing but two sets of air bubbles on the surface, he looks a bit lost for a second, then corks his own mouth with a regulator, deflates his vest and sinks down after his family.

The girl in the white bikini swims over to Victor and touches his shoulder. “I was only joking,” she says. She smiles. “You didn’t really get upset, did you?”

“No!” Victor laughs.

“I didn’t think so.” She smiles again. “See you at the bottom.” She pops her regulator into her mouth and sinks.

“Don’t forget to clear your ears all the way down,” Pedro tells Victor, then he sticks his own regulator into his own mouth and Victor’s into Victor’s mouth and deflates both their vests simultaneously. Together, they slip beneath the surface.


His ears clear easily, and he and Pedro meet the others on the ocean floor, where the twins charge head-first into each other’s guts, languidly, like football players in a dream. Gus has a silent conniption, Judy looks on passively, and the white-bikini girl
hovers just above the sand, arms crossed neatly, ankles hooked together, her buoyancy perfect, her loose hair floating Medusa-like around her face. Victor wishes that Pedro would let go of him. He feels like a dog on a leash. Pedro flashes everyone the okay sign, and everyone flashes it back to him, except for one of the twins, who flashes his middle finger instead, which only Victor and the other twin notice.

Victor tips his head back. On the water’s surface, sunlight rests like a halo. Beside that, the boat’s bottom sags beneath the waves. A blend of excitement and mild nausea stirs in Victor’s stomach, and then Pedro begins to swim, dragging him by the vest. The others follow.

Maybe the girl’s not that hot, Victor tells himself, still a bit stunned by their conversation. He’s not fooled for a minute by her “just joking” disclaimer. He tries to figure out how he irritated her. He doesn’t feel surprised by having irritated her, just curious about it. He’s used to girls biting his head off. They respond like that to him.

Pick-up lines Victor has learned don’t work include, “So... you like this bar?” “Having a fun night?” and “Hi, I’m Victor.”

Victor looks at the white-bikini girl. She’s bent as if over a microscope, inspecting a piece of soft coral with one finger, her long legs and finned feet scissoring gracefully, like two check marks. Gus watches her, drooling bubbles. She is that hot, Victor concedes. If only he knew where he’d gone wrong. Victor’s mother always used to say that jealousy breeds unkindness. But it’s impossible to imagine the white-bikini girl being jealous of him. Maybe it’s he who’s jealous of her. It’s true that for five years
in the service, he tried and tried and tried to get sent overseas. And now here’s this girl, this little wisp of a thing really—not counting her breasts—who’s probably traveled all over the world. How ashamed Victor feels. Failing to impress her. Pretending to be a frat boy. Pretending to be a fighter pilot. Like a 24-year-old baby!

Beside him, a school of yellow-finned fish swims past. All swimming in the same direction. All turning at the same time. Victor’s angry at them. But with his senses so uncomfortably heightened, he processes the analogy and feels like a pussy. He’s feeling uncharacteristically pensive. Must be some sort of nitrogen buzz. What do you think you’re doing? he berates himself. Having an epiphany?

Focus, he thinks. Focus on the task at hand. You’re scuba diving in Belize! A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Dad will be so proud. “Good for you!” Dad will say. Victor would give anything to hear Dad say, “Good for you.” He keeps accidentally kicking up clouds of sand with his fins, probably wrecking everyone’s visibility. He tries to stop doing it, but the damn weightbelt; it keeps tipping him over. He tries to relax and let Pedro do the work. Just breathe, he tells himself. All you have to do is breathe. He breathes. In and out, in and out. He sounds like Darth Vader. He drifts by a coral formation that resembles a brain, maze-like patterns etched into its surface. Rainbow-scaled fish that seem to wear make-up. A dark green serpent-looking thing that snakes through a little tunnel and scares the shit out of him. What in God’s name.

And then something bites him. His shin. It feels like someone is using his shin to strike a match. He looks down, but sees only water. Now it’s biting his calf, too. His
ankle. His knee. Now the other shin. Whatever it is burns so much, Victor feels like he might vomit. He wonders briefly what it would be like to vomit into his regulator. Where would it go? He tugs Pedro’s arm. Is he being eaten by a shark? He looks down again but doesn’t see any shark. Pedro turns around and flashes Victor the okay sign.

Victor shakes his head no.

Pedro checks Victor’s air gauge, then breathes into Victor’s spare regulator. He looks confused. He flashes the thumbs-up sign, and Victor shakes his head, but then remembers that thumbs-up means ascend to the surface. So he nods his head yes, then flashes the okay sign, the thumbs-up sign, then nods his head again, crazed with pain, signaling everything all at once, like a traffic light gone haywire.

Pedro taps a seashell against his own air tank to get everyone’s attention, draws a circle in the water in front of him to indicate the whole group, then gives the thumbs-up sign.

The burn creeps up Victor’s leg to his thigh. But maybe it’s not so bad. He’s terminating the whole dive after five minutes, so it had better be bad. Is it bad? Yes, yes, it’s bad. Pedro is motioning to everyone to swim up slowly, but all Victor wants is to shoot to the surface like a rocket. Now he can’t breathe. He can’t even breathe? Oh, wait, yes he can. He breathes hard once to make sure. Yup, all clear in the breathing department. And the burn’s diminishing. But it can’t! It can’t diminish yet. It should worsen, or else Victor’s going to look like a dipshit, ruining everyone’s dive over nothing.
He breaks through the water. The sun has slipped behind a cloud. He yanks out his regulator, gulping fresh air. Pedro inflates Victor's vest, shaking the regulator from his own mouth. “What is this?”

One by one, heads pop up around Victor and Pedro: the twins, the parents, the bikini girl. The girl asks, “What’s up?”

“Something bit me,” says Victor, and just the saying of it makes it sound untrue. But what then? He didn’t see anything attacking him, but he didn’t imagine the burn.

“Where?” asks Pedro.

The twins snicker.

“The whole lower half of my body.”

Pedro hooks an arm around Victor’s back. “Show me.”

Victor kicks a fin up and Pedro takes hold of his ankle. His thigh and shin are as pink and puffy as cotton candy. Hallelujah! Hard evidence.

“Fire coral,” says Pedro, releasing Victor’s leg.

The girl says, “I’ve got just the thing. I’ve got it with me! On the boat.”

“What is it?” asks Judy.

“It’s called AloeBreeze. I got it in Cozumel. You should have seen the fire-coral burn I had in Cozumel. You think his is bad?” She jerks a thumb in Victor’s direction.

Judy looks impressed just thinking about what the girl endured in Cozumel.

Victor wishes the girl would shut up. He doesn’t want AloeBreeze. He wants to go back under water and wrestle some barracudas.
“I’ve logged at least a hundred dives the past year and a half,” the girl says.

“Trust me. This is the stuff. It’s in the front pocket of my dive bag.” She pats Victor’s shoulder.

_Bitch!_ Victor thinks. _You bitch!_

“You get back on the boat,” Pedro tells Victor.

Victor looks at the girl. Is she _smirking_? A rage wells up in him, reminiscent of one excruciatingly hot afternoon on the air force base in Missouri when a bird shit on his eyebrow. The rage is followed by a surreal shift in his vision, like he’s zipping through a cartoon flip book.

Pedro is saying, “It’s time for you to rest,” but Victor hardly hears him; he only hears blood, pumping in his ears. And then Victor is raising both hands over his head. He never knew things could happen this way: that you could just find yourself doing something, having had no idea you were going to do it, feeling like maybe you’re not doing it: he brings his fists down hard on the water’s surface, the motion of splitting wood with an axe, right in front of the girl’s face. She whips her head aside instinctively, but it’s no use. She’s too late. Splash! Victor raises his arms again. Splash! He raises his arms again, but then freezes like that.

A thick silence ensues.

Victor’s hands are clasped in the air as if in triumph. He unclasps them, then lowers his arms calmly. There seems to be a pause in time, like the instant before a car falls over a cliff. Think, think, think. How bad was that? He didn’t hit her or anything. It
was just water. Just splashing. Children splash each other all the time. Maybe Victor’s splashes could be construed as playful. Flirtatious? It’s not like she was dry before he splashed her.

But that won’t console anyone, Victor bets. He realizes now that his hands, white and rippling below the surface, are balled into tight little knots. He relaxes them.

“What the--” Gus spits his regulator out and lunges toward Victor.

Pedro says, “Chill, chill, chill. Come on now,” and holds Gus back with one arm.

“He splashed a lady!” Gus shouts. “A lady!”


“Back on the boat right away,” says Pedro. The boat is floating beside them now.

“Right away!” Clutching Victor’s BC, Pedro swims to the ladder.

“No, no, I’m fine. Really. I can go back down. I’m--”

“Please. Stop now. You’re done.” Pedro pulls off Victor’s fins and passes them to Elijah, who is standing on deck at the stern.

“But I’m sorry!” Victor accidentally whines.

Elijah reaches for Victor’s hand and pulls him up onto the deck, then guides Victor to an air-tank slot and helps him sit. He unclips Victor’s BC and weightbelt.
Victor pulls his face mask off and stands, panting. Stripped to wetsuit and booties, he peers over the edge of the boat. He drips like an ice sculpture.

The girl is still laughing. “No, no, I’m fine,” she’s saying to Pedro. “Of course I’m fine. It’s that retarded army thing. He thinks he’s a samurai. What can you expect? He’s got no idea about people.”

The twins are spitting mouthfuls of water at each other. Judy is blowing her nose into her cupped palm. Gus shakes his head and chuckles unsmilingly at Victor, then returns his regulator to his mouth.

“All right, everyone,” says Pedro. “Meet me at the bottom.”

The group descends again. The water closes over their heads like sliding glass doors. Air bubbles. Then nothing.

Victor doesn’t want to turn to face Elijah; he has a lump in his throat. He tries to swallow it, which makes his eyes well up. He considers saying something about an allergy. He’s allergic to . . . to . . . salt water? Maybe he’ll say he’s allergic to his wetsuit. But that might sound fake. To fire coral? The burn has dulled to a hot throbbing in his legs. Victor takes a deep breath and his tears ebb.

“Damn fire coral,” he says finally.

In his peripheral vision, he sees Elijah standing at the helm, tinkering with the wheel, his rough black hair glistening like a moistened sponge. “New diver.” Elijah chuckles.

“No. It’s not that. It’s, you know, that damn fire coral.”
"Just takes practice."

"Diving?" Victor laughs.

Elijah shrugs. "Can't expect to shit a pearl." His accent gives the adage a tropical flavor.

Victor reaches down to unzip his booties. He spills the water out of them onto the deck. "The diving's no problem," he says. "I was--" He almost says, a Navy Seal, but he stops himself. He unzips his wetsuit and peels it down to his waist. A gentle breeze raises goose bumps on his white arms and stiffens his nipples. The ocean is huge, the horizon circular. A drab dome of sky, gunmetal-gray. It's hard to say from which direction they came. Victor can't tell where Martine is.

"Cerveza?" Elijah asks.

Victor turns finally to Elijah, who is crouched now by a cooler near the bow of the boat, holding a sweating can of Red Stripe up to Victor like an offering.

"Thanks, Bro," Victor says, then cringes.

He cracks the tab open and takes a sip; he cringes again. He wishes he liked beer. But what he wishes most is that people would believe he liked beer. He wishes he could say, "Just taking a load off," and kick his feet up and gulp a beer down, then crush the aluminum in his fist. What a relief it would be. Like the feeling of dumping the wet dog into that lady's arms; he thinks about that day on Beluga Point, about the tourists posing for pictures, backgrounded by a glacier; about the children woven through the
safety railing; and one child specifically, holding a woman’s hand, asking amidst all the commotion, “Mommy?” Pointing to Victor. “Is that man a hero?”
Two Stars

There are three things people might mean by “accident:” one is doing something you think is fine, until someone else thinks otherwise, like when my dad would get home late from work, on account of forgetting about dinner. “An accident, Sharon. It was an accident,” is what he’d tell my mom, and he’d hold his hands up in front of him, the way the mime on the beach in Santa Monica does when he’s trapped behind his invisible wall.

My mom would yell, “What do you think you are, Jeff, a Goddamn king?” She’d say it while washing dishes in the sink and wearing yellow rubber gloves. But then she’d forget all about it until his next accident.

Then there’s the kind of accident our miniature Doberman pinscher Kitana used to have when she would pee on the living room rug. Our housekeeper Rosa would clean it up, shaking her head while she did it, and clucking her tongue.

And the kind of accident that means someone died from something besides being too old or sick. My mom and dad, for example, had an accident on a sailboat.

The death kind of accident is the worst, because I lived in California for ten years and some months, and I’ll turn eleven in October, and now it’s June, and here I am all of a sudden living in New Jersey with my grandparents, who may or may not even want me.

Uncle Harold picked me up at the Newark airport this afternoon, looking like the saddest man alive, with even a wrinkled shirt on and puffy skin around his eyes, and
maybe he is the saddest man alive, judging by the funeral, which was in my old
synagogue in Santa Monica, where everybody sits wherever they want, boys, girls,
whatever, and Uncle Harold sat next to me and I felt the sleeve of his suit jacket bounce
up and down from crying.

Here in New Jersey, he and Aunt Linda and Robby and the twins live next door
in a bigger house than Gran and Grandpa’s. If I’d gone to live there, I’d have taken
Todd’s room I’ll bet, because he’s away at college, but instead I’m staying in Gran and
Grandpa’s guest room, which used to be Grandpa’s study. The guest room connects to
the living room, and has a bed that folds out from the couch. I don’t think I was invited
to live with Uncle Harold and Aunt Linda, which I didn’t know until I got here this
afternoon, when Uncle Harold let me into Gran and Grandpa’s house and went, “Look
who it is!” meaning me, and Aunt Linda was sitting there in the living room.

Gran and Grandpa came over to hug me, but Aunt Linda kept watching
television, and then she said, “Typical. Smack in the middle of my program,” and put
her hands right over her ears!

I have my suitcase open on the floor, as if I’m on a vacation somewhere, but I
don’t know where to put all my clothes, because there’s a big desk in here, and a
rocking chair too, but no dresser, and besides, I’m not on any vacation at all. Instead,
this is now the place where I live. I can hear Gran crying in the kitchen and Grandpa
whispering to her, and outside, the night’s all the way dark, so I can’t see anything
through the window but a reflection of myself, and then there’s a knock on the sliding
door and it’s Robby.

He pokes his head in and his hair is sticking up all over the place and looks
greasy. He’s taller than he used to be and looks more like Todd than he does like
himself. I haven’t seen him since a year ago, and now I’m a whole new person too,
much older, and different because I don’t have parents anymore.

He crosses his arms around his chest and smiles at me. He didn’t go to the
funeral, even though the rest of his family did, because he’s scared of public places,
which my dad told me is a phobia. The phobia made him almost have to quit school last
year in the tenth grade, but I don’t think I’m supposed to know that.

“Want help?” he asks.

“I don’t have any drawers,” I say.

“We have some extra ones we can give you. Todd’s old ones.” Robby steps into
the room. “Welcome to Pine Hill,” he says. He pulls my bed out of the couch for me and
sits on it.

I’m trying to remember if I like Robby or not. I hardly ever saw him before,
maybe once a year, so I never had to decide.

He lifts my big yellow flashlight from the carpet beneath him and shakes it a
little. “All you’ve unpacked is a flashlight?”

“I need it,” I say, “for earthquakes,” and I’m so sleepy all of a sudden, I sit down
hard on the bed next to Robby and then lie all the way back with my legs hanging over
the edge. There’s no air conditioning in Gran and Grandpa’s house like there was in Santa Monica, just a fan by the window in this room that twists on its neck from side to side and blows summer at me.

“There are no earthquakes in New Jersey, Becky” Robby lies down next to me, resting my flashlight on his chest.

“You never know,” I say and I yawn. “Especially when you’re sleeping, you can’t know. How would you know a thing about earthquakes?” I ask him. “You’ve never even been to California.”

“That’s the whole point,” Robby says, and he sits up again and reaches for the light switch on the wall, which he turns off.

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter and also wrap my arms around my body and I feel the warm air coming off Robby’s skin where his legs are bare like mine below his shorts.

He starts singing *The Star-Spangled Banner* in a voice much deeper than his normal voice.

I open my eyes and he’s holding my flashlight under his chin, turning it on for words like “see” and “light” and “gleaming,” and off for all the other words, and my head feels like it could explode, but I laugh a real laugh.

When he finishes the song, he stands up and flips the light back on and I sit up and he hands me my flashlight, which feels hot from his hand. “You and me can hang
around all the time now,” he says. “I’ll just wait in my house and you can come see me whenever you want.”

I will never tell him, I decide, that I know about his phobia. Robby is the nicest person in the world.

Five weeks have gone by and each one is more humid than the last and Gran and I are in the kitchen, where she’s crying like she does at least once a day. Probably about my parents being dead, or maybe she worries because she hasn’t raised children since my mom and Uncle Harold a billion years ago. She wedges the spatula under the egg in the frying pan and her arms jiggle past the short sleeves of her house dress when she flips it.

I ask, “Are you sad about my mom again?”

She doesn’t turn around. “Oh,” she says. “There are lots of things to be sad about, Precious.” She twists the dial that makes the purple flame disappear, then reaches for her pink lotion, which is on the windowsill above the sink, rubs some into her hands and stares out the window. There’s nothing to see, except part of the Jersey Turnpike past some trees. “Your Aunt Shay called again,” she says. “She’s still hoping you’ll go see her in Boston.” It looks like she’s talking to the window instead of to me. I wonder what Gran makes of Aunt Shay, who is my dad’s only sister and is Catholic.

I ask, “See her or live with her?”
“Put that on a plate and bring it to Grandpa,” says Gran, and it’s fine by me that she didn’t answer my question because maybe if we don’t talk about me leaving Pine Hill, nobody will remember that they want me to leave. Since I can’t live in Santa Monica anymore, I don’t want to live anywhere but here, because I know Gran and Grandpa, and I don’t have to think when I’m with them about what to do or what to say. You never have to think like that with old people who love you.

The hand lotion smells like a glass pitcher of lilacs, like the one in the kitchen of my California house. I go to the cupboard.


After five weeks, I still can’t keep the kitchen straight, even though Gran made signs on paper grocery bags, which she taped to the cupboards and the silverware drawers: Milchig. Fleishig.

Like milk, she said. And flesh.

Grandpa is watching wrestling on television in the living room. His belly is so round, his shirt looks tucked up under it, instead of down into his pants.

“Oh,” he says. “Motek shelee,” and he pets my head.

“Those aren’t real wrestlers, Grandpa.”

“Listen to you,” he says, pinching my chin. He takes the plate and fork and sour cream from me. “That accent of yours.”
“I don’t have any accent,” I say. I wait for him to agree, but he’s spreading sour cream on his fried egg, so I say, “I won’t talk in school if I’ve got one.” I hug my arms and hold my elbows in my hands.

“You don’t know a thing about that.” Grandpa keeps his eyes on the wrestlers, but he points his fork at me. “When I was small? I came home after my first day of school and my mother said, ‘How was it?’ and I said, ‘School was very nice, but none of the children know how to talk.’” He shrugs with all his fingers spread open. “Imagine,” he says, “if no one understood you. I should feel sorry for your accent?”

I look out the big picture window. I’m hot and sticky in my pajamas, and it looks hot outside too, because the green hose attached to the side of Uncle Harold’s house is shimmering. It’s all wrapped up in a spiral.

“This was Brooklyn,” says Grandpa, “1920 or somewhere in there. My parents spoke Yiddish, so what did I know? I thought everything and everyone was Yiddishkeit. Later, your mother, too,” he says, taking a bite of his egg. “She spoke. But she never used it because she was a mule.” He chews with his mouth open.

On the television, a wrestler in red and a wrestler in blue inside the cords that wrap around the ring are hugging with a lot of muscle and a lot of sweat. The red wrestler lifts his shoe up and sticks the heel of it hard into the back of the blue wrestler’s knee. The blue wrestler falls and the audience cheers and I see they weren’t really hugging at all. They were more like struggling against each other. I know it’s not real, but I feel bad for the man in blue, even though he has very long hair and is very
ugly. It's just not nice to be tricked.

I walk next door to Uncle Harold’s, barefoot. He’s at work and Aunt Linda’s somewhere, and the twins are at their summer camp. Robby is watching television in the air-conditioned family room. He’s wearing a T-shirt inside-out with the sleeves torn off. He says, “Look, it’s California.” There are girls dancing on a beach with their arms up over their heads like they’re waiting for someone to pull their shirts off. Only thing is, they’re not wearing shirts. Just bikinis that make them almost look naked.

“That,” I say, “is the stupid part of California. It’s not really like that, I hope you know.” I go and sit on the couch beside him. His shoulder is very white with brown freckles. “It’s not like how me and my friends were,” I say.

On the end table, there’s an old framed picture from Robby’s Bar Mitzvah. It’s Robby, Todd, Uncle Harold, Aunt Linda and the twins, Gran and Grandpa, and my parents and me. I look away.

Robby lies down and lays his head in my lap. “No bikinis?” he says. He pats my stomach. “No belly button rings?”

I squirm out from under him. Robby likes to hug and touch a lot, but when someone’s touching me, not counting Gran of course, all I can think about is that I’m being touched, and that takes away the whole point of touching. The other thing is, even though Robby’s house has air conditioning, it’s just not touching weather right now and that’s a fact. Robby sits up and shoots the television with the remote control, and he’s acting like his reason for quitting lying in my lap was that turning up the volume was a
real emergency. He’s acting like I wasn’t the one who moved away first.

“You’re always watching these things,” I say.

“This is nothing,” Robby says, because what he thinks is something is his collection of girl magazines, in which everyone’s got gigantic nipples, and they all squint their eyes and look mean and sometimes wear nothing at all except a pair of boots. He’s shown me. He keeps the magazines under his bed and there must be eighty of them or more. “And I wouldn’t go near those girls anyhow.”

Robby says the girls he goes near are sophisticated. They don’t go to his school. They’re real women, he says, who drink wine and have their own apartments in Philadelphia. I know practically for a fact that he’s full of it, because if his phobia makes him scared to go anywhere besides his own house and Gran’s, how in the world would he get all the way to Philadelphia?

Robby says, “If I got to live in California, I’d surf all the time. That’s basically the most fun thing to do in the whole world. All you ever did was boring stuff.”

“What do you know? How would you know a thing about surfing?”

“Everyone knows,” Robby says, and he drops a hand onto my knee, but acts like he doesn’t notice that his hand is on my knee. I know he’s just doing it to be nice.

Still though, I stand up quickly and say something about having to help Grandpa, but Robby ignores me and makes his face go empty, like a video put on pause, and I don’t move right away. I’m watching dust float in the sunlight by the window. I want to grab a handful, but I know it only looks like you can.
Before bed, I sit outside with Gran on the porch. There's a square of light next
door in Robby’s window. The lawn chairs have metal frames and the seats and backs are
made of canvas, like the bag my mom used to wear when we’d go to the beach. I scratch
beneath the seat with my fingernails. The sound makes me feel like I might cry. Then
Gran goes and tells me that Grandpa’s dying.

“Too much death stuff,” I say, and Gran’s eyes are shining. Her mouth looks sad.

“It’s better though, Dear, for you to know.”

I can’t decide which is better: knowing or not knowing. Either way, when they’re
dead, you know it, and I don’t think it feels better one way or the other. Dead is dead. I
tell Gran that. “Dead is dead,” I say. Beside me, there’s a fluorescent purple thing that
zaps mosquitoes.

Gran reaches for my knee and holds it, and I hold the back of her hand, where
the skin has brown spots and feels like a deflating balloon.

“Do you think he got sick because of my mom dying?” I ask.

“Bless your heart,” says Gran, which I think is her way of saying yes without
saying yes.

I wonder if when Grandpa’s dead, and then later when Gran’s dead, I’ll go live at
Uncle Harold’s house in Todd’s room, right next to Robby’s. I hope I’m grown up and
married before Gran dies, because Aunt Linda’s mean enough as it is, and she’d be way
worse if I had to be her daughter.
"I don’t want to start school," I say, and I feel like I’m speaking a different language, Yiddish maybe, because what I feel in my real language is something else. Something connected with my parents or with Grandpa dying, but all that stuff is too sad to keep talking about. I worry for a minute that I should have kept my mouth shut, because I don’t want Gran to think I should move to Boston and live with Aunt Shay, who’s never had kids and lives by herself and talks too loud.

“You’ll like school just fine," says Gran, and her voice is wobbly from tears. I hear her try to swallow them. “It will be like California.”

But I know that’s not true because none of my friends are here, and besides that, something else I know is it gets cold here and snows once the summer’s over.

Tonight, I lie awake on top of my sheets. Aside from it being hot, I can’t sleep because of Grandpa snoring. He sleeps on a cot in the living room and Gran sleeps upstairs, and even though they used to sleep together, which is how they wound up with my mom and Uncle Harold, Gran can’t sleep with Grandpa now because of the snoring and I can’t say I blame her a bit. Still though, I wonder if when he dies, she’ll wish she got to sleep in a bed with him while they were old.

When Grandpa dies, it won’t be what people call an accident, and it won’t be tragic, which is the other word people use all the time when they talk about my mom and dad. Kitana peeing on the floor isn’t tragic. Neither was my dad coming home late for dinner. But dying on a sailboat is tragic if you’re only forty and forty-two years old.
At the funeral, everyone kept talking about the tragic accident, which reminded me of a traffic accident, which also would be tragic, provided the people who died in it were young like my mom and dad.

I know what my mom would have said if she knew Uncle Harold let Robby skip her funeral: “Why do you think he’s turned out like he has, Harold? It’s because you never say no to him.” I don’t know how she used to figure stuff like that out, but those were the sorts of things that gave her trouble with Aunt Linda, who thought Uncle Harold listened too much to my mom.

My mom once told me Aunt Linda doesn’t like girls. Lucky for her, because she has four sons. At the funeral, her face looked like a plate with nothing on it, but Aunt Shay told me that people grieve in all different ways. I guess that’s true because Aunt Shay was smiling so hard, I thought she might crack. She walked around all afternoon serving food and laughing really loud about everything. That’s Aunt Shay’s way of grieving. Gran’s and Uncle Harold’s is they cry all the time. Aunt Linda’s is she gets blank, but that’s assuming she’s grieved at all. Grandpa goes and starts dying.

I’m not sure what I do.

Uncle Harold offered to adopt Kitana and he still might, come fall, but Rosa has her now, still in Santa Monica, and I can’t say I mind. Uncle Harold said to me, “But isn’t she like a sister? She’s the closest thing you’ve got. Don’t you want to keep her?” But Kitana’s nothing like a sister. She’s no bigger than my face, for starters. And then, during Shiva, after hanging our sheets up on the mirrors in my old house, and moving all
the furniture, Gran sat on the floor in the living room, crying and holding Kitana in her lap, kind of bouncing her the way Aunt Linda used to bounce the twins when they were colicky, and it scared me so bad, I don’t like the thought of Kitana being around Gran all the time. Also, Kitana used to sit on my dad’s back and bark while he did push-ups in the morning, and thinking about that makes me think about my dad drowning, which makes me feel like I can’t breathe, even though I’m the one who still can.

Fridays have always been my favorite at Gran and Grandpa’s house, even back when I was just a visitor from California, because it’s Shabbos, and the air smells like pot roast all day, and Gran wears an apron. This evening, I help her set the table because Uncle Harold, Aunt Linda, Robby, and the twins are over for dinner. Everyone’s in the living room. I hear them laughing, which makes me feel like when I used to wake up in the middle of the night in my old bed and realize it wasn’t time for school yet and that I didn’t even need to pee, and I could just snuggle into my quilt more, and fall back to sleep.

Gran lets me get the good plates from the dining room china cabinet, which are meat plates. Fleishig. She is bent over a drawer beside me, polishing the silverware with a white rag, and I can tell she’s concentrating hard on the polishing, because her eyebrows look serious, but I wonder if on top of all the concentrating, she’s thinking about Grandpa, the same way I can be doing any of a million things, but I’m still always thinking a little bit about my mom and dad.
When the table’s set and I go to the living room to call everyone in for dinner, someone’s pushed aside the coffee table and the twins are performing. Robby is sitting next to Aunt Linda on the couch and I watch the backs of their shoulders and see the little upside-down triangle Robby’s hair makes on his neck. It’s like an arrow that’s not pointing at me. I wish I could walk over and lean my chin on top of his head, even though I’m usually the one who hates things like that.

Mikey is lying on his back on the carpet, and Jonah’s sitting straddled on Mikey’s middle, facing everyone, with his own legs sort of folded up under him, acting like he’s got no control over his legs, which are really Mikey’s. Mikey’s kicking like that turtle my dad and I once found flipped on its shell near the duck pond. Everyone’s laughing because the twins are six years old and a real riot.

Jonah’s saying, “Help! Help!” and waving his arms all around and Mikey’s still kicking, and then Jonah says, “Help! I’m drowning,” which I wish I didn’t hear, or if I did have to hear it, I wish I could have heard it from the kitchen so no one would think to stare at me.

Aunt Linda’s laughing so hard, she’s shaking her head and holding her face in her hand. Then she sits up and wipes away tears and gets her mean look, which is her cheeks and lips sort of disappearing into her face, when she sees that Grandpa and Uncle Harold and Robby have stopped laughing and are looking at me.

I say, “Dinner.”

Gran comes through the doorway behind me and puts her hands on my shoulders
and says, "Hurry up, everyone. There are two stars in the sky."

I'm sitting in between Grandpa, who's wearing a linen napkin in his collar like a bib, and Robby, who keeps accidentally touching my thigh with his thigh under the table, and we've all just poured water on our hands from the orange cup in the kitchen sink and are being silent before saying the prayer for challah. Across the table, I catch Uncle Harold staring at me and notice for the first time ever that he has eyes like my mom's. They're dark brown and even wrinkled in the corners in just the same way. As soon as I look back at him, he looks down at his lap, but I'll bet he was just thinking about me what I think about him: that I look like my mom and he wishes I were her instead of me.

Grandpa holds up two loaves of challah and presses them together like cymbals, and he dips everyone's challah in salt and passes it around the table. Then Gran's up serving soup, and I help her, which makes Aunt Linda's lips get white around the edges.

It's starting to feel like Robby's touching my leg on purpose, and I'm worried that's the real reason Uncle Harold was staring. Maybe he noticed. But I hear my mom's voice in my head saying, "Becky, don't be ridiculous!"

When I give Aunt Linda her soup, she doesn't say thank you, but instead acts like I nearly spilled on her dress, which is the color of a brown envelope and isn't pretty. As I'm in and out between the kitchen and the dining room, I hear Grandpa telling another story about when he was small and spoke Yiddish in school.
"I read out loud in class one day and I lost my place, and I thought that was it for me. Then my teacher called my mother that night and said, 'How does your boy know how to read?'"

I sit back down in my chair. "How did you know how to read?" I ask.

Grandpa starts to cough, which is something he always does, but I didn't used to know it meant he was dying, and I look at Gran, who's staring at her soup like she doesn't want any more of it. Finally Grandpa says, "I'd just been studying my spelling lists, is all. I thought I was in trouble for losing my place." He coughs one more time. "In those days, it was a sin for parents to teach their children anything."

Now it's Robby and I who sit out on the lawn chairs. Aunt Linda and Gran are washing dishes inside, which Aunt Linda volunteered very loudly to do, almost pushing me out of the way like reporters do to each other on television, when it looked like I might start to help. Grandpa's dozing on the leather chair in the living room, where he would be watching wrestling if it weren't Shabbos. Uncle Harold has gone to his own house with the twins to put them to bed.

"Why does your mom hate me?" I ask Robby.

He shrugs. "I hate her."

"I hate her, too."

"You can't say that," says Robby. "She's my mom. Besides, she hates your mom."
“My mom’s dead,” I say, “so shut up.”

He reaches for my wrist and I pull my hand away and he looks at me like maybe I just hit him, which is a look I recognize from my own mother’s face, from when she and my dad used to fight over things they probably wouldn’t have fought over if they’d known how soon they’d both be dead.

“You’re such a baby, Becky,” Robby says, and he has a small smile on his face. He kind of rolls his eyes and does something to his hair with his hand, which looks like something he doesn’t need to do to his hair, but like something he’s doing so he doesn’t seem embarrassed.

I’ve never seen my mom try to look like she’s not embarrassed. She also never would have called me a baby, but none of that takes away the fact that I just saw Robby look like my mom. Nothing takes away that fact.

I can hear cars on the Turnpike that don’t sound any different from cars on Santa Monica Boulevard, and for a second I close my eyes and pretend they are cars on Santa Monica Boulevard, but then my eyes snap open fast because they’re starting to get full of tears.

“I’m not a baby,” I say.

Robby slides off his chair onto his knees and puts his head in my lap, like he’s the baby.

There are so many stars in the sky, it’s like someone threw a top hat full of confetti at a black sheet, and all the confetti just stuck there, and there’s no pattern. I
also see a blinking light that’s probably an airplane, but every time it goes dark, it seems to stay dark for such a long time, I start to think it’s not an airplane after all, that I’ve just imagined it, but then it goes and blinks on again.

I pat the back of Robby’s neck, but what I really wish is that Robby’s head wasn’t in my lap in the first place. Still, at the same time, Robby has been my friend for five weeks, and also, all my life he’s been my cousin, and he looks like my mom, so I keep patting his neck the way my mom used to pat mine when I was sick with the flu and crying in her lap. The window of Robby’s room is black instead of lit-up, so I can hardly even tell it’s there. I’ll only be able to see it if he stands up and goes home and turns his light on. Different from the airplane, which blinks on and off and has nothing to do with me at all.

Behind us, the screen door opens and shuts, loud as a slap, and it’s Aunt Linda. “Robert!” she says. “Are you sick?”

I keep scratching at the canvas under the seat of my chair and watching for the airplane, then when I finally turn a little, Aunt Linda looks so angry, her nostrils are puffing out, and her hand’s over her mouth because Robby’s head is on my legs.

He says, “Yes. I’m sick,” then he gets up to go to her, and I get that feeling like I’m standing at the shoreline and the waves are pulling sand from under my toes, when she takes him in her arms and puts a palm against his cheek, which I’ll bet anything isn’t hot.