1999

Blindspots| [Short stories]

Elizabeth Blake Burnett

*The University of Montana*

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BLINDSPOTS

by

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Approved by:

[Signatures]

Dean, Graduate School

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Since the move, since the miscarriage, Annie has to wear twice as much lipstick to feel like a woman. The modest bathroom counter in the new apartment is littered with shiny black tubes: Blondie, Bisque, Blitz, Bohème.

Evan, Annie’s husband of five years, suspects the cosmetics. Why do they all begin with B? Why do they sound like the names of reindeer, rock stars, hearty stews? Annie unveils Coquette. She points to Obscurité, a bold mauve she’s saving for winter.

Annie is “looking for work.” The baby was supposed to be her project in the bleak mountain town, but it bailed, jumped ship, plopped into the toilet like a bloody little walnut several weeks ago. Now unemployed, fired by a curlicue of unplanned cells, Annie is “keeping a schedule.” This is what all the job-search books recommend. Get up early! Get dressed! Avoid the onset of antidepressants! Get out of the house! Go, go, go!

Annie tinkers with her resume as she imagines herself a woman on the move.

Annie Oliver, misplaced urbanite. Ex-saltine enthusiast. Cosmetics collector, B-list. Also: Coquette.

Two months, and Annie is beginning to hate this town full of hairy legs and hand-me-down hippie skirts. She is growing impatient with the environmental slogans on
Subaru bumpers, the herbal tea-drinkers, the unavoidable stench of patchouli. She can no longer tolerate the cyclists infesting the roads, the dreadlocked woman at the check-out counter who shoots her scolding looks—*I see you’ve forgotten your earth-friendly canvas tote today*—clears her throat in that nicey-nice ecological way, and says, loud enough for organic vegetable and bulk cereal shoppers to hear, “Will you be needing a sack?”

Sacs are for insects and embryos, and Annie wants to laugh out loud. “A bag,” she says. “Please.”

After unloading her groceries, she crunches the recycled paper bags—sacs!—in the garbage. She gets a tiny thrill from stuffing empty soda cans in the trash.

Get up early! Get dressed! Annie makes herself up, carefully concealing negligible creases around her eyes as if she has a lunch date with a cosmetic surgeon. She breakfasts with Evan before he trundles off to the university to lecture on the Politics of Global Migration. She reapplys her lipstick—today it’s Brink—and peruses the paper on the voluptuous couch she bought in her former life of cashmere and scallops.

Annie misses the sleek black shoes of corporate witchery, the soothing hues of concrete. She misses riding the elevator up, up to a door that wore her name. Gone are the mysterious restaurant menus—*conchiglie, porcini, ribollita*—and cocktails served in elegant V-shaped glasses. (Annie once tried to order a Cosmopolitan in the mountains, and the bartender gaped like she’d requested the Pacific in a dish. She asked for an Old-fashioned but got whiskey. The bartender tossed his hands in the air: “This here’s as old-fashioned as it gets!”)

Annie reads the classifieds, the personals (“Bastard of the Millenium,” a perfect match for her friend, Corissa, in Los Angeles), and the woman in the upstairs apartment
starts banging around. Annie has spied her neighbor’s name on the pair of unbelievably slim mailboxes. (Stop the mail! Save the trees!) D. Hubbard does not stir before ten. D. Hubbard has a whistling teapot. D. Hubbard yanks chairs across the floor, pounds across her apartment like a ferocious elephant, drops things—heavy things—often. Annie is beginning to wonder whether D. Hubbard is the victim of some muscular dysfunction that prevents a sturdy grip. She tries to muster some small sympathy for D. Hubbard, who may, after all, be engaged in that dismal, ten-cloud project of “looking for work.” Sister in this struggle. Frequent bather. Ally against the water conservationists.

Annie might forgive D. Hubbard the countless cups of tea and daily furniture rearrangement—is all her furniture on wheels?—if it weren’t for the tapes. When Annie first heard the feminine voice accompanied by D.’s weighty prancing, she thought it belonged to an exuberant exercise video. No. There was the rhythmic tone to consider. The crescendo. Clearly it was the voice of pornography, an unwelcome reminder of the wretched evening Annie and Evan rented what he called a “spicy little video.” In the end, the well-endowed, remarkably sculpted bodies made them depressed. They had to turn off the VCR and pretend to sleep, carefully separating like people who accidentally brushed each other on a bus.

“That woman! Watching porn at eleven in the morning!”


Vexed by his verb, Annie quickly hung up.

Now, hearing the lewd voice upstairs, Annie dials Evan. “We have to move! Do you hear me, Evan? Before it’s too late!”
“Why don’t you turn on the television. Get your mind off things.”

“Spectacular!” says Annie. “Add that to my resume. ‘Annie Oliver. Talk show junkie. Proficient in getting her mind off things.’” Annie is starting to feel like she’s drafting a resume for her mother.

Evan sighs. “Sweetie. Give this place a chance.”


In the paper, her horoscope says; “Clear your mind of built-up gunk. Become acquainted with your happy place. Go to a spot where two paths intersect and leave an offering. Look out of the corner of your eyes. Risk.”

Annie hurls the paper on the floor with a savage grunt. She collapses on the plush couch and shuts her eyes. She listens to the upstairs voice. Introspection, discovery, expulsion. This is what they call self-help.

*Let it go. Release it. All the broken records. Unworthy! Unsafe! Unlovable! Release it. All the anger All the rage. Throw it out! The fear. The sadness. Let it go, let it go.*

The steely voice grabs Annie by the shoulders and gives her a hardy shake.

*Pull it out! Pull out the rage. The grief. The loss. All the worn-out messages. All the lies. Unhappy! Unworthy! Unloved! Pull it out. Pull! Pull! Pull it out!*

Her body is tight as a rocket. Her head growls. Honey. Baby. Sweetie.

The voice softens: *Pull it out.*


*Let it go. Release it.*
Tears squirt from the corners of Annie’s eyes and cascade onto the couch. She read somewhere that crying expels toxins specific to the individual. She pictures her tears: transparent globes of tiny toxic women with fuzzy armpits and earth-friendly canvas totes.

*Let it go, let it go, let it go.*

It is, by now, afternoon. Autumn light yellows the hardwood floor. Annie’s toes clench. Get out of the house! Her eyes flash open. She rattles around the kitchen, finally locating the car keys. She tosses her purse on her shoulder, clambers into the monstrous Jeep—green, a color she now regrets— and drives.

At six, Evan returns to the vacant apartment. He straightens the disheveled newspaper on the floor. He empties Annie’s cold mug of coffee and places it in the dishwasher. He opens the refrigerator and studies the contents as if he expects to find his wife in the crisper. A dainty pink figure swathed in plastic wrap, mouth molded in a startled yawn.

A few hours ago, after the troubling phone call, Annie appeared in the Political Science wing. She craned her head around Evan’s door like a detective. Stepping inside his office, she lifted the framed photograph on the desk. She screwed up her face and stared at her image as if it were beyond recognition, eventually replacing the chrome rectangle among stacks of student papers with an exasperated sigh.

Evan mustered an explanation. “Paris last fall. You loved the Marais. The falafel.”

Annie thrust her hands on her knobby hips. “Does it concern you at all that
you're the sole wage-earner in this family?"

   "Honey, it's a temporary situation."

   "Well," Annie said, "it concerns me that I'm the primary casserole-baker." Her voice grew louder and crumbled. "It concerns me very much. Evan."

   He thumbed papers on his desk.

   "You realize," she continued, "this is an area I never intended to master. Noodles. Chicken. Mayonnaise. It's disheartening."

   "I tell you what," Evan stood to place his hands on her narrow shoulders. "I'll pick up dinner. Pizza, Thai, whatever you want."

   "Thai!" Annie screeched. "In this town?"

   "We can decide later," Evan said gently. He rubbed her cheek with a paper-sliced finger. "Chef's night off."

   Annie's eyes softened. She chewed her lip thoughtfully. A red flake landed on her front tooth and stayed there. "Oh," she grumbled, "just let it go." She pirouetted to the door and squeaked down the hall in her sneakers.

   Sitting at the kitchen table, Evan notices the pad by the phone is covered with scribbles. Of course. Annie always leaves a note. He puts on his glasses to decipher the loose script: Bastard of the millenium. Built-up gunk. Throw it out. Go to happy place. Someone has drawn a red ameba labeled "Sac." Who has done this? Who is responsible for this nonsense?

   Who is the bastard of the millenium? It concerns me that I am the primary casserole-baker. It's very disheartening. Evan. He folds his glasses on the table, lays his head in his hands. He is the bastard. He is the built-up gunk. Annie—his wife!—
intends to throw him out. She wants to give him the sack. How could she have known
he devoted office hours to illicit thoughts of Jenny Wingate?

The sorority girl is responsible. Sorority girls are always responsible!

Evan quickly dials Annie’s friend, Corissa, in Los Angeles, who says, “Make it
snappy, buster. I’m gearing up for date two with the market analyst. It’s the one-night
stand after the one-night stand. We’re going out for Thai.”

Evan groans. He asks if she’s heard from Annie.

“She only calls on five-cent Sundays,” says Corissa, “except in cases of sincere
crisis.”

“She’s gone,” Evan says. “I think she wants to give me the sack.”

“What?” Corissa shrieks. She exhales deeply. “She’s probably gone exploring.
Roaming the new frontier. Give the woman some space!”

“Space,” Evan says. He pictures Annie behind a very tall fence of bricks.
Already he misses her.

“Look, Evan. It’s a transition. She told me all about the recyclers. And that
miscarriage didn’t help either.”

Evan winces. “Corissa, do you think I’m—” he trails off, then retrieves his
courage. “Has Annie ever referred to me as a bastard?”

“Bastard. Hmmmm. Let me think.” Evan drums his fingers on the table and
waits. He can hear the petulant wall clock, and strange thuds overhead. “No,” Corissa
says finally. “I don’t think she’s ever called you that.”

When Evan gets off the phone, he feels like pizza. He considers the margin of
error. Annie probably meant built-up hunk. She wants to get him in the sack. He kicks
off his shoes and dances around the kitchen in spunky argyle socks.

Seven o'clock. Eight o'clock. Nine, and Evan has consumed the pizza scattered with nondescript brown pellets. He has chewed a half-roll of Tums. He paces the living room. He sets out into the brisk dark. He gets into the svelte black Saab and drives.

The room is not what Annie hoped. Motel rooms, she decides, are designed to defy expectations. Like pregnancy. Like mountains. Like marriage.

The bedspread looks like a collage of coffee spills. There is an orange foam chair in the corner. There is a coffin-sized dresser decorated with cheap brass knobs. There is a sagging plastic plant in the corner, covered in fine gray talc. The wood-paneled walls are scattered with duck prints.

There is no Bible in the cabinet by the bed. Annie has exited God's country. Is this where two paths intersect? Is this her happy place?

Annie peers through heavy polyester curtains onto the second-floor walkway carpeted in Astroturf. A three-legged cat lopes by, and Annie realizes with a shiver of satisfaction that she's never done this before. She's never departed Evan without notice. She has not, in fact, spent a single night away from him since they started shacking up six years ago.

Standing at the gas pump this afternoon, Annie glanced up at the Holiday station sign, blazing patriotic colors. Look out of the corner of your eyes. Risk. A holiday! Of course! She bought a six-pack and several candy bars. She cruised the town's main strip, searching for a vacation destination. She chose a motel at a bustling intersection, encouraged by the gas-guzzling sport-utility vehicles in the parking lot, the extinguished
The spongy chair releases a pungent puff of smoke when Annie sits. Watching 
MTV with the sound off, she opens her fourth can of beer. Thank God for the 
miscarriage! Beer without fear! Annie raises the can in a silent wavering toast. Maybe 
she should take up smoking. She picks up the phone, hears her own chirpy voice on the 
answering machine, and promptly hangs up.

Annie didn’t know how much she wanted the baby until she lost it. She hadn’t 
intended to get pregnant. She was one of those savvy career women who said, “Why 
have kids when you can have white carpet?” But after she and Evan overcame the initial 
awkwardness, after he started brainstorming names and friends barked, “Congratulations! 
Oh Annie, CONGRATULATIONS!” her outlook changed. She imagined new carpet 
possibilities. Beige was, after all, not unflattering to a room. She wandered into the little 
people section of the department store. She eyed wee corduroy overalls and quietly told 
herself: Congratulations. She was thirty-four. The window of safety was lowering its 
dusty blinds. Oh Annie, congratulations.

She bled before the clot dove into the toilet of the new apartment—a mildewy 
mess of a toilet, with one of those cushy, dimpled seats. Evan crouched beside her, 
mopping her face and murmuring consolation. He reached into the toilet bowl, scooped 
little Augustus or Alexandria with his hand. They took the jar of Gus/Alex to the 
emergency room. Evan’s eyes were low beams of sadness and resentment, and Annie 
didn’t get out of bed for three whole days.

On the fourth day, she plunked down at the kitchen table and said, “We could try 
again.”
Evan patted the silky knee of her nightgown. “No,” he said solemnly. “It’s okay.”

Annie dressed quickly and drove to a department store with an unsightly display of hemp clothing. She bought five new lipsticks that smelled vaguely herbal. Not her usual brand. But even so.

A knock at Room 207. A young man stands in the doorway with a cardboard box and so much acne Annie bloats with sympathy. He wears a black cap with “Chicks Dig It” in shiny white letters. Poor guy. He’s lonely, too. He hates this tofu town. He’s a football fan, a pepperoni lover. He eats Doritos. At last: A man of substance!

He pushes the box toward her and softly says, “Your pizza.”

Annie smiles warmly. “This is a lot of food.”

“Okay, uh”—the young man eyes the order slip stapled to the box—“I have you down for a medium.”

Annie motions inside the room with a coy flourish. “Hungry? Care to join me?”

The young man looks suddenly alarmed. He steps back, stares sheepishly at his sneakers. “I ate already.”

Annie pauses. “Of course,” she sniffs. “Of course you did.” She forks over a twenty and swiftly slams the door.

Evan would like to know just where the hell Annie is at eleven o’clock on a Thursday. Annie is always home at eleven o’clock on Thursdays. Annie has no place to go.

He’s been circling the town for two hours. He stopped home at one point, hoping
to discover her on the couch. No Annie. No messages. He stomped upstairs and rapped on the neighbor’s door.

A portly woman in a pink sweatsuit answered. She chewed, wiped her mouth with a stained dishrag, swallowed. “Yes?”

Evan introduced himself and apologized for the late hour.

The woman coughed feebly. Inside, a TV mumbled. “I don’t even know her,” the woman said. “Sorry.”

Descending the stairs, Evan looked up to see the woman hanging over the banister, her long, stringy hair falling forward like tangled electrical wires. “Good luck finding your wife!” she called out in a 100-watt voice. Evan waved his hand dismissively and trudged back outside.

He has driven by all the restaurants and bars. He has glanced inside every green Jeep. Now, he parks on the side of the road under a buzzing street lamp. Dry leaves hustle the windshield. He hugs the steering wheel, watching the traffic. Perhaps he should notify the authorities.

Annie’s face on grocery bulletin boards and milk cartons. Wakeful eyes. That delightful mouth.

On their first date, Evan took Annie to a bar with a tropical motif. Neon drinks, flowery walls, and a defunct helicopter nestled in a bed of palms. He’d just been to a family reunion on Cape Cod and chattered at length about his brothers’ children, how they called him “knuckle” and rode his shoulders in the pool.

Annie stared blankly, worrying her Blue Zombie with a straw. “Children don’t interest me,” she said finally. “They won’t even talk to you for the first year. You might
as well get some goldfish.’

Evan found this hilarious. Even now, in the car, he has to smile. He chuckles lightly. Laughter thunders his chest, and soon he is crying like the bastard of the millenium.

He pictures Annie shortly after the move, dutifully munching saltines at the kitchen table. She didn’t have morning sickness. She was simply obeying the diet of expectant motherhood. She said, “I’ll get ugly, you know. Really unpleasant to look at.”

Evan tried to be comforting. “You won’t,” he said. “Certainly not.”

“Stretch marks!” Annie exclaimed. “All over! Jelly flesh!” She puffed out her cheeks for emphasis.

The thought made Evan dismal. Hadn’t he encouraged her to keep the baby? Hadn’t he brought home the mobile of fuzzy farm animals, now stuffed in the closet? Hadn’t the move—wasn’t he to blame?

That night, he scooped the crimson mass out of the toilet and quickly dropped it in a washed-out mayonnaise jar, like something toxic to the touch.

One last look along the main drag. Evan passes a sleazy all-night diner, a motel with a burned-out letter. Simply a MOTE.

The rooms are a block of black glass. Evan rushes into the lobby. He points to the Jeep in the parking lot. He says Annie Oliver. The men behind the counter pause their arm-wrestling match.

“I’m her husband,” Evan says.

Still gripping his opponent’s hand, the cowboy spits his toothpick on the floor. He eyes Evan steadily. “Tough shit.”
Evan says, “Please.”

The elderly man in the referee uniform cradles the phone against his shoulder and, with his free hand, dials. He pauses, shakes his head. “No answer. Maybe you ought to let her be.’’

Outside, wind startles Evan’s neck. A three-legged cat loops between his legs. Evan scans the motel windows. Nothing.

He could knock on every door. There is a Subaru sidling the Jeep in the parking lot. Annie’s hemp remarks, her recent objection to blond dreadlocks—it might all be a cover. She could be in one of these rooms, making free love to an environmentalist. Evan could bang on every door. He could try harder. Isn’t that what Annie said when he got this job? Try harder, Evan. Try for New York, Hawaii. Bang on every fucking door. Shout her name.

_Tough shit._

_Give the woman some space._

He could calmly get into his car. He could observe the traffic signs, the speed limits. He could drive home—and this is what he does—go into the bathroom, uncork Coquette. He could lift the shiny tube to his nose, inhaling the scent of her. That’s it. Tangerines.

Annie has the state of Wisconsin on her plate. A three-egg omelet oozing cheddar. Bacon. Hash browns. Toast flattened with butter.

A man and woman sit in an adjacent booth, staring coldly at the bald, fat-cheeked infant in a highchair. The baby kicks its stubby legs, slaps the tray like a munchkin CEO.
The woman tears off a pancake crescent, drops it on the CEO’s tray. The flannel man shovels forkfuls of egg into his mouth, pats his moustache with his napkin. The woman eyes him with disdain. It is the look, Annie realizes, of a woman too lonely to cry.

It is past nine in the morning, and the only thing Annie knows is she can’t stomach the omelet. All last night wind rattled the motel window, and the pillowcase felt like sandpaper against her cheek. She took a long shower. She tried to laugh at the late show. She dialed Evan, but there was no answer. The cheap alarm clock glowed mean red numbers, but Annie couldn’t go home. It was like a girlhood sleepover. She had to stay just to prove that she could.

The man and woman observe their child like a plate of wilted spinach.

Annie pulls her compact from her purse and coats her lips—Barely. At home, Evan must be perusing the front page. The thought of Evan alone with his limp cereal swallows Annie like a tremendous shadow. In the mirror, her eyes look withered. Old.

The waitress with braces and a bleached ponytail silently freshens Annie’s coffee.

What’s that outside? Snow?

*Let it go, let it go, let it go.*


He slides in across from her, gingerly places the fish on the table. For a moment, Annie can’t breathe.

Evan neatly folds his hands on the paper place mat. “Would you care to tell me,” he says, “just who is the bastard of the millenium?”

Annie blinks helplessly. “I don’t know.” She pokes a bacon strip with her fork,
crunching it in half. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Evan nods grimly. “You needed space,” he says in a pinched voice. “I tried to give you some space.”

The man and woman in the next booth zip themselves into puffy parkas. The woman heaves the CEO onto her hip. “Nice baby,” Annie says as they pass. The woman manages a weak smile.

_Nice baby._ It’s what Annie’s mother would say. In restaurants, in shopping malls, her mother always compliments babies. Then she tells Annie, in a vicious whisper, “That was a _peculiar-_looking baby. You were a _much_ prettier baby.”

Annie turns to Evan and quietly says, “That was a strange baby.” She giggles heartily. “We would’ve had a much prettier baby.”

Evan looks at his wife. She’s trembling with laughter, lighter than he’s seen her in months. She wipes the corners of her eyes. Outside, the sky churns the season’s first flakes, and Evan can’t help laughing. He says, “That was a ridiculous baby.” The noise comes in spasms. Inadvertently, he snorts. They both do.
No One Here Sees Anything

My lover’s mother is an astrologer. Before meeting me, she whipped up my natal chart and said: This is a person who needs plenty of sleep. She does a lot of work on the other side. Kate and I joke about this now. Mornings, Kate yawns into her pillow and says, “How was work last night?”

I tell her about my dreams. I say I saw my mother strapped to an operating table, anesthetized for a manicure. Scraps of nail and skin skittered across the linoleum. A nurse rolled a bottle of sensible pink polish between gloved hands. She made a light clucking noise behind her surgical mask and shook an emery board in my face. She told me my mother’s cuticles were in very bad shape.

This is not a dream: My mother’s sturdy Volvo tipped on the side of the highway, passenger windows pressed to pavement. Nine months later, my mother doesn’t remember the confusion of sirens, the pebbly voices. She remembers what came before: crash-punched glass, a blur of green branches. The young man who didn’t signal sprinting toward her from the place where his car squealed to stop. Handsome, she says. Then blank.

This has never happened before. I’ve never taken my lover home to Connecticut,
but I’m thirty and tired of pretending.

       The wedding invitation was addressed to “Ms. Taylor and Guest.” When Jackie called for my shoe size—she wants her seven bridesmaids in matching patent pumps—she said, “You never have a date at these things. Why don’t you bring that—what’s her name again?”

       I said, “Kate. She’ll be there.”

       Kate glanced up from a book on numerology she’s reading for fun. She said, “Apparently you’re a six.” Then, “You sure you want me to go?”

       I said, “I’m blowing three hundred bucks on a strapless, backless gown. I think Jackie can buy me two plates of tenderloin.”

       Kate gave me a long, furrowed look that said this trip could cost us hundreds in therapy, so I said, “If I have to dance to some pathetic rendition of ‘Rock Lobster,’ it’d better be with you.”

       She said, “They’re gonna cover the B-52s? You’re kidding, right?”

       Kate has the benefit of a San Francisco upbringing. Her girlhood friends don’t get married in churches. If they marry at all, it’s on beaches or sailboats or rooftop gardens. The bride goes barefoot, and no one wears matching dresses. There’s no valet parking, no country club. There’s absolutely no meat.

       The night before we fly to Connecticut, Kate folds her new gabardine suit into the suitcase. Rain strikes the sill of the open window, and Kate says, “We’ll freeze, won’t we.”

       Before my mother visits me in San Francisco—twice in five years—she calls for the forecast. I give exact temperatures and precipitation, but she packs for all seasons.
Bermuda shorts and wool skirts and springy crepe pants, as if I might conspire with the sky to foil her vacation wardrobe. She called this morning to tell me what to expect, so I tell Kate below thirty, six inches of snow.

Kate sighs. "Your mother’s not gonna like this. Me going to the wedding."

"Frankly," I say, "I’m not sure she remembers who you are."

"How nice for her," Kate says. "How very convenient."

"It’s the accident," I say. "Her memory’s shot."

Kate and I have been together for three years, and her family remembers my birthday. I’m a daughter-in-law, a sister-in-law. To her nieces and nephews, I’m Aunt Mimi.

My younger brother, Eric, had a country-club wedding six years ago, when my father was alive to waltz me around the four-tiered cake. Eric says what concerns him most is that his kids won’t have cousins.

No cousins? Have I lost my eggs, too?

I zip the suitcase and slip my arm around Kate’s waist. We stare at our luggage like it’s about to explode.

Finally Kate shrugs. "It’s just a weekend." She moves quickly to the bedside table to set the alarm.

The next afternoon, Kate and I pull up to the house in a rented red Geo. Standing at the front door in a gray sweatsuit, my mother sends the arthritic Lab out to greet us.

The dog waddles down the icy brick path and thumps her tail against my legs. I scratch her freckled nose and say, "This is Missy."
In a borrowed down jacket and serious gloves, Kate looks ready for an arctic expedition. She kneels on crusty snow to scratch Missy’s belly. After a moment, I tap her shoulder and nudge her toward the house.

My mother folds me in a long, loose embrace. She’s so frail I’m afraid to squeeze her in earnest, so I pat her lightly on the back and say, “You look good, Mom.”

How could this not be a lie? Her cheek is etched with the feathery folds of her pillowcase. Her hair is teased into a remarkable blond puff, and make-up can’t hide the zigzag pucker over her eyebrow, the ragged kiss of glass.

She turns to Kate with a weak smile. “Well. Kate.”

Kate gingerly touches my mother’s arm. “How are you, Frances?”

My mother winces slightly and says, “Glad to have my Mimi home.” She pinches the tips of my short hair. “You have a new hairstyle, I see.”

I say, “It was like this at Christmas.”

She claps her hands briskly. “Are you hungry? I just made bluefly muffins.” She pads down the hall in her slippers like she’s late for an appointment.

Kate hands me her coat and whispers, “When can we start drinking?”

“Soon,” I say, though the rehearsal dinner is three hours off.

Living room, dining room, kitchen—this house always looks the same. In ten years the furniture hasn’t moved. The vacuum lines on the carpet have assumed the authenticity of original texture, as if the carpet simply came this way—streaked. Here is the mat by the door where we take off our shoes. Here is the frayed bath towel to dry the dog’s feet. Here is bathroom—“lavatory,” Mom says—thick with rose perfume. Here is the door to the den where my father had his heart attack five years ago—we try to avoid
that room. Here, nestled among tidy, flourishing houseplants, is the ludicrous card I sent nine months ago, after the wreck. The card features a sheep dog biting a thermometer, holding his paw in a sling. Here are my mother and Kate at the kitchen table with plates, place mats, coasters—the surfaces perfectly protected. Kate is picking at her muffin like a little bird. Here comes the dog, happily lapping at her water bowl until my mother booms: “Missy! Lie down! Quit that racket!”

I say, “Easy, Mom.”

The dog slumps heavily in the corner, drops her nose between her paws. Kate lowers her butter knife and, under the table, touches my knee. Outside, it begins to snow.

My mother turns wearily to me. She wants to know about Jackie’s fiancé and wedding colors. I say Neil’s like Linus with an MBA. I tell her my dress is black.

“A black-and-white wedding,” my mother says with a frown. March, she says, is a dreadful month for a wedding. She’d prefer fall. Summer maybe, but certainly not outdoors. Rain could come and ruin everything. No, it would be in October, when leaves are starting to turn. A black-and-white wedding. How boring! How drab! She’d have green bridesmaids dresses in some yummy fabric. Velvet! An evening ceremony with candles and sumptuous bouquets. Creamy roses. Lilies and freesia. And what’s that other flower? The one with the regal scent? Gardenias! White flowers against dark green gowns.

I stare at my carefully halved muffin. Warm blueberries ooze out of their skins like gelatinous insects. I have the urge to slap Kate’s hand away from her plate and say, “Stop it! Stop eating those bugs!”

My mother sits back with a dramatic sigh. “Your wedding,” she says, “would be
beautiful.” She smoothes the fringe of her place mat. Her cuticles, I notice, are in very bad shape.

“You know, Frances,” says Kate suddenly, “Mimi doesn’t even like green.”

“Is that so?” My mother leans over to pluck puffs of fur off the floor. “Missy’s shedding,” she says, casting the dog a look of pure benevolence. “Poor Missy.”

“Actually,” Kate says, “purple’s her favorite color.”

My mother stands to clear the table and loudly says, “Great muffins, Mom!”

“They are good,” I say. “Thank you.”

My mother plants a quick, dry kiss on my cheek and trudges upstairs to rest.

I line up plates in the dishwasher like a porcelain army. Kate steps behind me at the sink and loops her arms around my waist. “What if I kissed you in front of your mother.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” I say.

“What if I told her I want to marry you.”

“Do you?”

Kate smiles. “Would we have to invite Frances? Would we have to invite your brother?”

My arms stiffen. I’m sick of being the one with the challenging family. I say, “Would your entire family get high for the ceremony?”

“Oh, that’s nice, Mimi,” she says, backing away. “Really nice,” and I know it’ll be several minutes—a half-hour maybe—before she’ll speak to me again.

I pick up the suitcase in the front hall and lead Kate upstairs to the room that’s supposed to be mine. The other spare bedroom is called Eric’s, though neither of us has
stayed here for more than two weeks at a time since my parents bought the house. There is nothing in these rooms to make them ours—none of my old sketches or pottery pieces, none of Eric’s soccer trophies. The yearbooks, posters, and diplomas are boxed in the basement. My dollhouse, early watercolor experiments, and other childhood memorabilia were pitched during a frantic moving purge.

Eric’s room has a queen bed with a plush blue comforter, but my room has twin beds swathed in feeble quilts. There is a rigid wing chair in the corner. There is a creaky oak dresser with a tarnished hand mirror and a pot of artificial mums. There is a flowery little book on the bedside table titled *Happy Thoughts*. The wallpaper is striped yellow, with a thick garden border on top. A row of black-and-white photographs looms on the wall opposite the beds. Here, framed in ornate silver, are my mother’s parents scurrying down the aisle. Here are my father’s parents, my parents, Eric and Susan—all young and beaming.

In the house where I grew up, the wedding pictures hung over the staircase. By the time I was eight, I knew the gowns and smiles by heart. I stole tablecloths from my mother’s ironing basket and draped them over my head. Eric called it “playing ghost,” but I knew I was a ravishing young bride, stepping gracefully down the stairs under my parents’ placid, admiring gaze.

Now, Kate stares at the photographs with her back to me. I say, “You know what my mom told me when she hung those in this room? She said, ‘For inspiration.’”

Kate spins around with a fiery look. She eyes me suspiciously, like I might have a secret criminal history. She says, “I haven’t seen a single goddamn picture of you in this house. I don’t know how you stand it. No one sees you here.”
I say, “No one here sees anything,” but Kate has already disappeared to the bathroom and firmly closed the door.

While Kate showers, I wander downstairs, looking for myself. Eric and Susan are everywhere. They’re sunning on a Hawaiian beach, clutching their puppy in front of their quaint suburban home, cradling my niece in the hospital. Look, it’s Eric by his shiny new grill! Susan swimming with baby Natalie! And here I am, eight years ago in a cap and gown. From the way I’m smiling—eyes on the camera, head tipped in the last notes of a laugh—I can tell my father took the picture. I can see him standing on a grassy knoll, plump fingers steadying the camera, easy with celebration.

I tap open the door to the den. I snap on the overhead light and sink into the wide leather chair, humbled by the bookcases, the chill. My father’s first editions have been packed away or donated to church rummage, and the shelves are dominated by redundant self-help books.

My mother has labeled clusters of pictures in matching photo albums. *Hilton Head. New rose garden. Thanksgiving at Eric & Susan’s. Natalie’s B-day No. 2! Christmas 1996. Mimi’s apt. San Francisco.* There’s a picture of me stirring a pot of spring risotto. A picture of me and Kate sitting primly in our voluptuous chair-and-a-half, labeled “Mimi and Friend.”

*Sanibel Island.* A picture of my mother standing on a dock with her friend, Alice, weeks after the accident. Alice tosses a slender arm around my mother and grins directly at the camera. In a foam collar and pretty sundress, Mom smiles faintly, lips closed. Her
eyes, gray with fatigue, gaze off somewhere.

*Christmas 1997.* A picture of me hanging tree ornaments, just three months ago. A picture of Susan aproned in gingham, rolling shortbread crescents. My mother and I standing in front of the house with the dog. Missy is the only one smiling.

This is where Kate finds me, hunched over the album like I’ve lost something. She’s wearing my favorite blue dress, lipstick and a touch of mascara. Her wet hair tumbles over her shoulders in dark coils. Three years and I still feel lucky to see her like this—fresh from the shower, wise brown eyes glistening, hair slicked in a tangle of vulnerability. I still feel lucky for these private moments, before she steps out into the world.

Kate perches on the arm of the chair and strokes my head. Water burns in my eyes. “Here I am!” I say in a stiff, rosy voice.

“Yes,” Kate says softly. “Here you are.”

I’m evicted from my family. They want me deported, but they won’t help me down from the high, thin roof where I’m stranded with the dog. Shingles cascade onto the lawn. My parents and brother loll at a picnic table in the yard, eating apples and laughing.

Here’s another dream. I’m driving to Malaysia with members of my high-school softball team to go skinny-dipping. The sign by the road actually says *Malaysia Welcomes You!* We get to the beach and strip off our white terrycloth robes. My mother’s head pops out of a bush. She says, “Mimi! Straighten up!” She says, “For God’s sake, Mimi, suck in your stomach.”
At the rehearsal dinner, Kate and I are assigned to a round table of brightly-clad Norwegians who don’t speak English—at least not to us. An American couple sits next to Kate, talking in low voices and swiping rolls from the basket like fugitives. The woman sports a red silk shirt and stylish spectacles, and though I haven’t seen her standing, looks about six feet tall. The man wears a loud paisley tie and marbled cufflinks.

The dim dining room feels like an overpopulated cave. A fire burns relentlessly in the huge stone hearth, and everyone’s sweating—especially the Norwegians.

The toasts are thankfully concise. We all smile wanly, raising our glasses like they’re full of lead. Kate pokes my side and whispers, “A toast from the bridesmaid in the corner! Let’s have a toast from the lesbian!” She is, I realize, quite drunk.

By dessert, the Norwegians have started to mill around the room, mopping their foreheads with sleeves and wadded cocktail napkins. Kate and I are alone with the American couple. The man clears his throat. The woman leans forward and pushes a gray clump of hair behind her ear. “I’m Jan,” she says. “Neil’s godmother. This is Marty.” Marty gobbles the last of his roll. Jan flashes a thin-lipped smile. “We haven’t eaten all day. Airplane food, you know.”

I introduce myself as “Mimi the Attendant,” and Kate as “The Attendant’s Attendant.” I ask where they’re from.

Jan says they live in Boston but came from Seattle. “Another wedding, if you can believe that. I’ve been telling Marty they’re dropping off like flies.” She scoops her chocolate mousse. “You married?”
I shake my head no. Of all Jan’s rings, none register as a traditional wedding band, so I say, “Are you?”

Marty bobs his head, and Jan says, “Twenty years, but we’re not advocates. I said, ‘Neil! Do something nice for yourself! Take the money and buy a house!’”

Kate stares blankly. “Don’t you like being married?”

“Matrimony,” Jan says, “has its perks.”

“Tax breaks,” Marty says with a shrug.

“Sure,” says Jan, “but I’d trade all my Waterford to erase the day itself. The family, the spoiled chicken. That wretched woman I chose for my maid of honor. I think,” she glances at Marty, “it was our worst day ever.”

Marty swivels to his wife. “What about the Grand Canyon? The mules?”

“Well, anyway,” Jan says, waving her hand dismissively, “it’s up there. I cried the whole day. And not because I was happy.” Marty looks up from his dessert. “I was happy,” Jan continues, “but really weddings bring out the worst in everyone. It’s the prom of your nightmares.”

Marty chuckles behind his napkin. “You barfed in the limo.”

“Oh dear,” I say.

Jan’s eyes widen. “I positively puked.”

Kate leans sloppily on her elbow and says, “You have kids?”

Jan pats Marty’s hand on the table. “We’re career people,” she says.

“We decided not to,” says Marty. “As spectacular as our genes are.”

Jan pitches her long torso forward to grant Marty a kiss. She stands and says, “Until tomorrow afternoon?”
I tell her I’ll be the one in black.

She smiles broadly and, brushing past on her way out, gives my shoulder a gentle
squeeze.

When Kate and I get home, Missy’s waiting upstairs. She strikes her tail on the
carpet and rolls sleepily on her back, watching us slip out of our clothes.

My mother has peeled back our bedspreads in neat triangles. In the darkness,
Kate throws her arm across the gloomy space between beds and takes my hand. She
sneaks in next to me and curls around like she’s holding me together, like she’s afraid of
something. We don’t speak. After a few minutes, she drifts back to her own narrow bed,
and her breathing soon smoothes into sleep.

I hear the creak of the big bed across the hall. When I was five, this sound was
the starting gun for the Saturday morning race to my parents’ room, where Eric and I
scrambled under the covers and the four of us wedged together, talking about pancakes.
Now, the timid squawk stirs a vision of my mother glued to mounds of bedding like a
small carved soap.

My mother pushes the door open and tiptoes to my bed in an ethereal white
nightgown. She says my name in a hoarse whisper. I prop up my head and fold my
hands on the quilt, like an invalid accepting an interview. She sinks onto the bed, asking
about the rehearsal dinner. I tell her about the disposable cameras on the tables, the little
orange flowers in the salad. She receives my details with interest, nodding her puffy
head in the dark. I tell her about the Norwegians who, toward the end of the evening,
formed something like a kickline and sang a spirited anthem. Then I realize there’s
nothing left to say.

     My mother fingers the quilt and says, “My wedding day’s all fuzzy now.”
     “It’s okay, Mom,” I say in my most soothing voice. “We all forget things.”
     “Do you suppose,” my mother says, “do you think you’ll ever get married?”
     “You know I won’t,” I say. “Not like that.”

     When my mother visited San Francisco last spring, I told her everything she already knew. I sent Kate out for ice cream and sat my mother in the chair-and-a-half and said Kate’s not my roommate. I said we don’t actually use the second bedroom. And it’s not because I haven’t found the right guy, and it’s not because I’ve confused sex and friendship. It’s because this is the person I love.

     My mother didn’t say anything then, and she didn’t cry. She was as quiet as a brick and, I hoped, that strong.

     The air is still as bones. I say, “Don’t you remember our conversation in San Francisco?”

     My mother’s eyes flash a caged look in the black. Softly she says, “I remember the night you broke my heart.”

     Kate bolts upright. She snaps on the bedside lamp, and the three of us sit in stunned silence. Kate looks at my mother and says, “Why can’t you be nice?”

     My mother says nothing.

     Kate says, “Honestly, Frances. Can’t you think of anyone but yourself?”

     I say, “Kate,” but my mother’s already standing with her small veiny hands on her hips, glaring at me. “Your new haircut,” she says in a tremulous voice, “makes you look like a boy.”
While guests and groomsmen shuffle into place, we bridesmaids huddle in a dark back room with a smudged window onto the sanctuary. A silver-haired church mistress promises Jackie no one can see us with the lights out, but every now and then someone pivots toward the window and waves timidly at our vague shapes. I feel like I’m stuck behind a one-way mirror, watching a psychology experiment.

The bridesmaid next to me frantically rubs her front teeth with her finger.

“How’s my lipstick? Is it smudged?”

“No,” I say impatiently. “Of course not.”

Bridesmaids are kneeling on cold tile, fluffing Jackie’s tremendous skirt and quietly praising her appearance, her fine match, the glorious life she’s certain to lead. Jackie stares at the backs of guests’ heads in the window. She looks like she’s going to positively puke.

Last night I was in the hospital room with my mother again. This time they were performing surgery, removing a faulty organ that would eventually be replaced with my own. A nurse waved me to the operating table. “Come on!” she hollered. “Come stitch her up!” I rolled up my blue sleeves and straddled my mother’s body and neatly sewed translucent flaps of skin. Later I saw the semi-healed spot—a rippled scar between my mother’s breasts.

This morning, when I explained the dream to Kate, she placed her hand on my arm like she was very, very sorry and said, “It sounds like she lost her heart.” I rested my chin on Kate’s shoulder. I drooled toothpaste and cried. Then Kate zipped me into my gown and spun me toward the mirror like a sole sweet angel. Like a mother.
Now, my eyes are puffy and dry. The silver woman ushers us out of the creepy observation room. The processional begins—three violins and a flute. Two hundred faces turn to the aisle. The first bridesmaid moves mincingly toward the altar.

“That’s a good pace,” the silver woman says in a hushed tone. She plants her hand in the middle of the next bridesmaid’s back and gives her a little shove.

A few hours ago, I found my mother collapsed on her bed with a heap of formal wear. She looked up slowly, as if she didn’t immediately recognize me in my gown. She pulled me next to her and said, “You’re lovely.” Then she said, “Stay with me a minute,” and we spread across layers of silk dresses, my mother in her flimsy beige slip, me in my tulle skirt, facing each other on the bed. We lay in tender silence, watching each other’s eyes.

Eventually my mother said, “She cares for you, doesn’t she.”

My throat tightened with surprise. With joy.

My mother sighed. “I can’t decide what to wear to this thing.”

I said, “You don’t have to go. If it’s too hard.”

“I want to go,” she said. “I want to see you.”

I am the tallest bridesmaid and the last in line. I suck in my stomach and receive the silver push. These heels. These goddamn heels are so high. In my strapless, backless gown, I feel my neck flush. My lips quiver in a pleasant plastic smile. All these faces. Two hundred faces looking at me. A woman dabs a handkerchief at her bulbous nose. The man beside her yawns. Somewhere a camera flashes. A tiny girl in a velvet dress thrusts her slippered foot in my path. Jan winks from an aisle seat, and Marty nods gravely.
Finally. Finally I'm at the end. A burly groomsman steps to meet me. We bow to the priest. As Jackie and her father start toward us, I spot my mother and Kate in a back pew. Kate whispers in my mother's ear. Together they look at me.
Translation

Affirmative is yes. Females are women, and I say, "It sounds like you're talking about rats."

ROTC is Reserve Officers' Training Corps, what she is now. ETA is when she'll pick me up for dinner—1900 hours, and it takes me a moment to do the math. MRE is our nocturnal picnic of pound cake or crackers with squeezable cheese leftover from FTX, Field Training Exercise. BDU is camouflage and part of the reason I pursued her in the first place.

Class A is the stiff green uniform with a block of service ribbons. I touch the rainbow pin and say, "How cute. A gay medal."

She says, "Look closer. No purple."

Her favorite verb is indicated, as in, her birth certificate originally indicated she was a male. I point at the corrected box and say, "Maybe that's why you're a big dyke." She is not amused. She calls her sexuality a "situation." She's leaving for OBC—that's Officer Basic Course. She's given me a handbook for military spouses, and I'm trying to learn her jargon.
Hospitality

The handbook outlines social obligations and army dress. If the occasion is formal, ladies wear tea-length gowns. Informal means short nice dresses, dressy dresses, etc. I'll never need to know these codes. I'm not her spouse. I'm her secret.

Identification

On our second date, we watch grainy music videos of Desert Storm. She describes the equipment—armor and F-series and cluster munitions. Words that aren't in my spouse glossary. I see camels and sand pits and smoke, helicopters against orange globes of sun, blackened bodies, family photos papering the inside of a tank. That year, I was attending candlelight peace vigils, but she says the Gulf was awesome, just one big party. And the truth is, she was a little sad when it ended.

Campaign is a pretty name for war. Dog tags are what they jam between your teeth before your body becomes unrecognizable.

Defense

On our first date, she studies the wet circles her can of Coors makes on the bar. She says she can look in a female's eyes and estimate the level of connection.

It is three official dinners, four bottles of wine, two quick kisses and a pack of cigarettes before she makes extended eye contact.

I say, "You really shouldn't drink Coors. It's against the lesbian aesthetic."

She puts her finger to her lips and says, "Shhhh."
Protocol

When military friends come over, she closes her bedroom door to hide the tane pastel postcards of naked women on the wall. I've been sleeping there for two months, and still I don't understand the ranks. She wakes me at 800 after PT—that's Personal Training—and I say, "What exactly is enlisted?" She spoons me in a tangle of sheets. She nuzzles my neck and finds my ignorance endearing.

Bed is the only place she touches me.

Minefield

She's most animated when the conversation calls for battle sounds. She fakes machine guns and explosions. She pops off a three-round burst and says, "That's an M-16."

I've never held a gun, and her noises haunt my dreams. I hear whistling missiles and pounding artillery. I hear winged insects, the decay of flesh.

She's going into Signal—that's radio and digital communication, combat support. She gazes at the floor, chews her lip and says, "Come with me to Germany."

What would I do there? What for?

Ceremony

She asks me to pin her at the commissioning. There are spouses in the audience, females who know about tea-length gowns and dressy dresses. She's being sworn in as Second Lieutenant. She stands awkwardly in her dull green skirt and outdated pumps. Right arm raised, she looks suddenly fragile and uncertain. She finds my eyes in the third
row when she recites the oath: *I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation.* I lead her blind mother to the stage. The announcer lists her degree and hobbies, introduces me as "friend." I help the blind mother with the gold bar on the right shoulder, then secure mine on the left. Applause. I hug my lover like a friend. Thump, thump on the back. See? Just friends.

Afterwards, she hands me a slab of cake with her last name in turquoise icing. I think about Germany—frankfurters, hefeweizen, Wiener schnitzel. I picture myself in a room with wood paneling and a bunk bed and no windows. I imagine not answering the phone, only unlocking the door for her coded knock.

I spear a spongy vanilla cube and say, "Do you have any idea what you're asking me?"

She fingers her ugly cardboard hat. She clears her throat and says, "I was gonna indicate that one of my hobbies was diving." She leans close, sweeps the floor with her eyes. Her voice is conspiratorial, wholly unpatriotic when she whispers: "Muff-diving."

I can feel her blind mother and a pack of officers with stern haircuts staring at me from across the room.

*Reveille*

Sometimes I watch her in the gray morning light. Even in sleep, her limbs are lean, golden, powerful. When I rest my cheek on her chiseled shoulder, I smell Right Guard, menthol and salt. I see her raw, sinewy edges and think: Warrior.

I look at my own body, whalish and pale. A blue vein snakes under the translucent lump of my breasts. I touch my belly. She wants this?
Inventory

I say, "I don't even know German."

She says, "There are books. You could learn."

Retreat

I see crushed Coors in the trash, my toothbrush hidden in a cupboard, thick curtains drawn against the world. This is captivity. The pound cake is starting to disgust me.

She jokes about getting kicked out of the army. She talks about staying. Even without the military, I know her situation won't change. This is how she's been taught to love, but I can't love her, can't love anyone like this. I use these words: responsibility, dedication, patriotism. With conviction we both find surprising, I say, "You simply must go."

Late at night, she reaches for me. She straddles me with hot, wiry thighs, and I pretend to be sleeping.

In the morning, she presses her palm to my forehead. She says, "Are you sick? Why are you so tired all the time?"

I slide away from her hand. "Please," I say, "can I please open the curtains?"

Medals

I am helping her pack for Germany. She wants to keep everything. I say, "Do you need last year's Christmas catalogue? Do you really need an empty tube of Bengay?"

She addresses these items to a friend in another state: pastel postcards of naked
women, credit card receipt from our first dinner, rainbow stickers, burned-down bedside candle, paper napkin smudged with my lipstick, movie ticket stub, yellow rose to commemorate one month, now tan and brittle.

"Frankly," I say, "that rose won't make it."

Crumbling, she looks me in the eye. She is trying to communicate. She says, "Can I keep you?"

The heavy curtains are peeled back. I say, "I don't know. I don't think so."

In the frame of the open window, she lets me press my whole body against her. I stroke her cheek while she cries into my hair.

So Help Me God

Before she leaves, she slips her dog tags into my purse. Name, SSN, blood type, religion. Lutheran—that's something I didn't know. She claims the long chain has three hundred sixty-five beads, the short chain fifty-two. Like a POW, I count the days of her absence. After twenty-eight beads, I lose track.

How will they know her if she dies?

Drills

When my next lover says the word lesbian in public, I raise my finger to my lips:

"Shhhh."

Surrender

A phone call from Germany. The line could be tapped. I speak in code. "What?
Hefeweizen? Drop and give me twenty."

We are quiet for too long, listening to stale rings of static. I imagine silver twine stretching across the ocean floor, past coral reefs and snug underwater communities, connecting her mouth to mine. I think I hear her breathing.

She says, "Do you know I still love you?"

I picture her alone in the cold, wood-paneled room, twirling phone cord with warrior hands. She's indicated the instant she fell for me. It was the night we stood under an explosion of stars, and I cupped my hand to tuck the hair behind her ear.

Germany could be that simple. But there is the fear of hiding, the incongruities of love. Her hazy silhouette in the windowless room, pacing, then still as ice.

Her voice is as plaintive as a touch. She says, "Do you know?"

Affirmative. Over and out.
The Shape of Your Face

Homes everywhere are going public. Travelers can’t get enough. They want a “unique lodging experience” with “a distinctive sense of time and place.” They say: who needs electrical outlets and room service? We want a room with “personality”! Give us leaky faucets! We don’t have any friends in quaint locations—no one who will put us up.

People don’t just want country inns; they want books. They have standards, after all. They need details, ratings, comprehensive guides. Jane Nelson supplies updated reviews, trekking between New England bed-and-breakfasts, taking notes. The backseat of her little red Honda is dotted with sludgy Styrofoam cups and Hostess wrappers. There are maps, brochures, fast-food cartons covered in scribbles.

Evelyn has new porch furniture, satin-covered hangers, stepkids. I think I liked her better blond.

Guest reported allergic reaction to Dominic’s spicy breakfast patties. Ambulance timed by visiting swim coach. Twenty-three minutes: Warn the infirm.

Marguerite has renamed rooms after movies she believes to star Patrick Swayze: Footloose, Road House, Out of Africa. Hums “9 to 5” over spinach frittatas.

Eventually Payton the editor will organize this information. Payton has a way of making the ordinary deliciously wicked (“We’d be splendid together, Jane”), and the
wicked woefully ordinary ("You’re splendid, Jane. But I’m marrying Isabel"). He has a
knack for springy British adjectives, though he’s from Indiana.

"Splendid!" Jane had slung boxers at Payton, who was scrambling eggs in
pompous leather slippers, hair curling dismally against the back of his neck. "My ass."

Payton contacted her somewhere in New Hampshire. "The Egstroms phoned
from Babbling Brook. They said you tried to arm wrestle a guest over backgammon."

Jane vaguely recalled the newlywed with the sprightly pink tube top and a
dwarfish daisy wedged behind her ear.

"They claim you rubbed marmalade into your cuticles at breakfast. Is everything
all right, Jane? I simply have to ask—are you using the checklist?"

Jane squeezed the phone against her ear. "I will never sleep with you again. Do
you hear me, Payton?" Then, fearing she hadn’t gone far enough: "Get a haircut!" Jane
slammed down the receiver, alarming the twenty-pound cat dozing on the chaise longue.
She glanced around the parlor. Victorian furniture and burgundy drapes. Where was she
exactly? Which speck on the map, and for how long? The details of Jane’s Chicago
apartment have grown hazy. She feels like a strange second cousin to her original self.

Several evenings after Payton’s phone call, she pulls up to the two-hundred-year-
old colonial where her aunt used to live. Jane hasn’t seen the house since it was sold to a
dog kennel proprietress-turned-innkeeper, six years ago. Now it’s like all the others,
home but not home, a chintzy masquerade. Green paint splinters off the shutters, and the
hedges look smug, overgrown, like fat recliners hoarding the remote. Moss carpets the
stone walk like bread mold.

Adelaide the innkeeper says she intended to give Jane a luxurious room upstairs
but, well, it’s June, the hatch of the honeymoon epidemic. “Oh,” Adelaide remarks softly, “you’ve got something on your blouse.”

Jane glances down at her T-shirt. She plucks the wilted lettuce mayonnaised to her chest and drops it in her pants pocket. She smiles feebly and says: “Dinner.”

Adelaide murmurs sympathetically. She looks late thirties, maybe five years older than Jane. She has thick auburn bangs and red nails filed in sensible squares. Her earlobes droop with beaded clip-ons the size of Christmas ornaments. She leads Jane and her overstuffed, half-zipped duffel through the former master bedroom—now a public area with paisley loveseats, peach walls, standing lamps with opaque glass shades—to the door just beyond the fireplace, Jane’s bunk for two nights.

“It’s not terribly glamorous,” Adelaide motions to dog sketches on the walls, “but it’s cozy.”

In a sense. This used to be the master bath. The room always seemed too spacious, the carpet too thickly blue for a toilet and claw-foot tub. But the slim cast-iron bed shoved in the corner doesn’t seem quite right either.

Adelaide promises a full tour tomorrow, once guests have flocked to the seaport museum and historic shopping district.


Adelaide smiles uncertainly. She bends to lift a crumb off the carpet, stares wordlessly at Jane for a moment, then bids her goodnight.

Jane unzips her bag all the way. This is her version of unpacking and seduction. She plops down on the narrow bed and gazes out the window at the dense patch of trees
where she was, as a child, attacked by a Mafia of bees. She retrieves a coffee-stained napkin from her pocket and jots a few notes.

Original toilet and tub an easy stroll from the bed. Light fixture dotted with fried moths. Checklist. Crickets, present; plumbing, functional; bed, single. Ideal for unwed pregnant women and other compromised bladders.

Laughter breezes from the parlor, the tenor of a toast. Jane picks up the cloth-covered guest book by the bed. She flips to an entry dated last September: *Came here to enjoy divorce. Asked for plush accommodation but got this. Hounded by honeymoons, anniversaries, other nocturnal events. Discovered sherry in armoire. Bathtub could use a new stopper. Next time I'll save for Club Med.* Signed: **Marv**.

The fact of being single feels oddly external to Jane, quiet but inevitable, like a genetic condition, a numbing of the heart. There is, Jane thinks, a natural course in life, a kind of maze through sculpted hedges. A few false turns, and you’re dashing down the wrong path, toward a lonely brick wall. She’d hoped Payton would redirect her—*Hey! The party’s this way!*—but ultimately he was like other men she’s dated, with more tennis shorts and cologne. When Jane finally reaches—if she reaches—that grand couples fete, she’s convinced there will be no more hors d’oeuvres. There will only be a few bottles of ginger ale and some stale crackers with the cheese teetering off like berets. Jane gnaws a fingernail, closes the guest book and sighs.

A dainty cough at the door, followed by a knock. A blond woman stands barefoot in a lemon sheath. "Excuse me," she says, holding up a withered pink mass. "I think you dropped this."

Jane recognizes her cotton underwear discretely balled in the outstretched palm.
She should be wearing satin or lace. She should be wearing shiny black thongs. “Those aren’t mine.” Jane sounds steely, like a suspect disowning the bludgeoning pipe in his hand. “I’ve never seen them before in my life.”

“Really?” The woman dangles the panties between her index finger and thumb, for closer inspection. “My husband found them on the floor out there. We figured they belonged to you.”

Jane shakes her head, smiles. The woman shrugs, smiles. These places require too many expressions of amusement and cheer. Jane firmly shuts the door.

During childhood summers, this house often gave her the flu. Horseflies and meringues. Small darting frogs in the backyard pool that Felicia, her aunt’s geriatric collie, gobbled for breakfast. Jane rifles through her duffel and taps several vitamins from a bottle, as a precaution.

Finally light fades to the eerie screech of night insects and occasional thuds overhead. Jane slumps by the phone in the empty parlor. She used to dance to old records in this room, swinging around her aunt’s four-poster bed, parachuting off the high mattress with embroidered hankies and pillowcases. Jane remembers The Pajama Game. In particular: “Steam Heat.”

“Careful on the bed,” her mother used to wink. “You might catch something.”

Her mother and aunt weren’t terribly close. There was the problem of the modest inheritance, which dropped directly to the older sister since she was childless, alone in this world, whereas Jane’s mother enjoyed the wealth of family—such as it was. There was always a fierceness between sisters, some subtle competition that kept them edgy, critical, conscious of hemlines. Still, Jane’s mother insisted on annual summer trips to
this house. It was the closest thing to vacation, though her mother sometimes called it probation—*Here we are on probation*—a joke which, even now, confuses Jane a little.

Jane spies her reflection in the black windows. The aged glass rumpled her image. She looks murky. Glazed. A donut lacking proper curves and definition.

She calls her aunt, whom she hasn’t seen since her mother’s funeral. Lunch. Tomorrow. Fine.

The next morning, Jane appears just past the breakfast hour—a strategy she’s developed for avoiding tranquil murmurs, those smudgy post-sex eyes.

The dining table is bleak with granola flakes, cantaloupe rinds, and wrinkled linen. A youngish man sits at the far end in a plaid shirt Jane recognizes from a catalogue full of freckles and sharp white teeth. She shakes a used napkin over the Oriental rug and surveys the coffee mugs, each depicting a different canine breed. All the big dogs have lipstick stains about the rim. Stuck with schnauzer, Jane sits.

The man lifts a tiny pitcher. “Cream?”

Jane shakes her head.

“Are you the niece reviewer?”

“Yes,” Jane says, sipping. “I review nieces. I make sure they’re getting their allotted jewelry and derision.”

The man laughs handsomely. He has abundant black eyelashes and a stately nose. He arranges his hands in an inquisitive steeple under his chin. He asks how it feels to be back.

Jane frowns. Morning is not her best time of day. “Are you a psychologist?”
“Almost,” he says, eyes twinkling. “I’m a plastic surgeon. I give good lifts.”

Jane bites a fingernail. She asks him to explain the evolution of Michael Jackson.

The surgeon scowls. “No one,” he says, “can explain that.”

“How about Cher?”

Adelaide emerges from the kitchen with a brown apron that reads “Mutt Lover” and a plate of almond-topped scones. She asks how Jane slept.

“Like a baby,” Jane says, feeling the skin around her eyes for looseness and crinkles.

There are old photographs of Jane in this room. Stiff albums and dusty frames hidden in the closet of her apartment. An early picture shows her propped in a chair in the corner, a miniature debutante with a long white gown and papery grin. One year old and still no hair. Later her mother’s head would look like that. An alien moon.

Jane brightens as the surgeon pushes back from the table. “Planning any historic shopping? Pick me up a powdered wig!”

The surgeon smiles in a troubled sort of way—“Nice to meet you”—and disappears up the winding staircase.

Adelaide sits across from Jane, watchfully, like an interviewer. She observes Jane biting her nails and says, “It was like that with me and the pups.”

“Excuse me?”

“An addiction.” Adelaide takes Jane’s hand and examines the shorn nails, running a finger over each jagged crescent as though dusting. She sighs deeply. “I finally had to give them up. Cold turkey. Bed-and-biscuit to bed-and-breakfast. A clean break.” She looks from Jane’s eyes to nails to eyes, and gently pats her hand. “I’ll give
you a manicure later. I went to cosmetology school once, you know."

The day is bright, not too humid, so Jane decides to walk to her aunt’s, following Adelaide’s loose instructions. She strolls the curvy blacktop, courting low stone walls. There are parched meadows punctuated by heavy pockets of trees. There are tidy pink gardens and tall windows and German shepherds halted by invisible fences. A cemetery slants upward on a hill with headstones like worn gray soldiers. On the road, a tooting wedding caravan. A car covered with blown-up condoms, those sexy balloons.

Jane’s sandals squeak with perspiration. She should have worn socks. She should have brought water. She shouldn’t have wandered close enough to the cemetery to make out the dull markers—ordinary, like sidewalk squares—and remember her mother’s glossy marble headstone, just three years old.

Jane’s father died before her fifth birthday. She couldn’t understand—how could she understand?—so busied herself with white paper napkins at the wake, making little ghosts to string from the shower curtain. Years passed before it occurred to Jane to miss him. It was in junior high, on parents’ visiting day. Jane’s mother sat through language arts and science, smiling with interest and, to Jane’s embarrassment, eagerly raising her hand. Other students boasted crowded desks, parents clamped on either side like bookends, and Jane felt suddenly uncertain alongside her mother. Parents eyed her mother with concern: Poor dear, raising a child all by herself. Jane looked at her mother’s sunny yellow dress, her hand frantically waving in the air, and realized the importance of two.

Jane’s father proved irreplaceable. He was a kind man, and Jane’s mother,
embarking on yet another first date—a journalist, a bike doctor, or one of those vague 
“professionals”—often said he was the last.

Her mother actually tried to kill herself once. This was in Massachusetts, after Jane settled in Chicago, with pills. It was a feeble attempt, mildly whimsical, like drawing three careless lines on a scrap of paper and calling it a floor plan. When the cancer came a few years later, it was a surprise attack in the bushes of her mother’s front yard, a knife to her throat. Her mother fought hard, scraping like a cat, as if she’d suddenly discovered all the reasons to go on, those small pearls packed in the cerebral garage, gray with neglect.

The street is smattered with lush maples and short houses in tasteful neutrals. A patchwork of beige and green. Jane visited her aunt’s new house five years ago, with her mother. Her aunt called it a ladies retreat and served chilled broccoli soup with cucumber sandwiches and booked herbal body wraps to be done together, like a team. They drove two hours to a spa, where Jane’s family and a trio of Texans were laid like railroad ties, or gauzy burn victims in a morgue. Jane’s mother didn’t appreciate the stifling mummification of towels, which smelled not of lavender or rosemary but vacant, like lint. From the end of the row, Jane heard her mother’s nervous call to the attendant and her aunt’s reply, muffled by steamed cloth: “Stuff it, Sarah. Think of the toxins!”

Afterwards Jane’s complexion turned splotchy. An invasion of cranberries.

Now, her aunt greets her in an icy blue dress and an overwhelming mane of chestnut curls. Recalling her breakfast companion, Jane recognizes her aunt as the kind of woman who’d have a face lift or three but just missed the window, or got scared off by a late-night documentary on cable. Her body has thickened slightly in the middle. Her
figure is less an hourglass than a pale cheese log. “Call me Gloria,” she commands briskly. “‘Aunt’ makes me sound seventy.”

Jane attempts quick calculations in her head.

“I’ve got a few more years!” her aunt cries. She plants a crimson pucker on Jane’s cheek, steps back and stares.

Jane looks down at her T-shirt and shorts, as if confirming that she is in fact clothed. Her nails move instinctively to her teeth, but her aunt promptly grabs her hand away. “Lemonade?”

“There’s someone you might like at the B&B,” Jane says, watching her aunt—Gloria—pour drinks in the kitchen.

“Is he rich?” Gloria loads a flowered tray with glasses and two small plastic tubs of fruit salad.

Jane sighs. Her aunt’s teeth are entirely too yellow for this line of conversation.

“Cosmetic surgeon.”

Gloria bats her hand, jangling bangles on her wrist. “I’ve discovered something far superior.” She smiles confidentially and whispers, in italics: “Facial massage.”

“Hmmm,” Jane nods absently. Her aunt won a beauty pageant once, but it was sufficiently obscure that she retained her original title: Peggy Mead. Later she switched to Gloria. “Don’t think she was inspired by Steinem,” Jane’s mother hooted. “Oh no! This had nothing to do with women’s lib.”

Jane’s mother was pretty, too. A quieter beauty, without all the hair and eyelashes.

Gloria floats down a narrow hallway. Jane follows with the tray, passing through
thick shades of dusky perfume. The living room is white with afternoon rays. Gloria
screeches, “The light! The light!” and lunges for the blinds. She settles into a plush
armchair and pats a napkin across her lap. “Well!”

socks. Examining her aunt’s extravagant eye makeup, the black globs pooled in the
corners, Jane feels mildly frightened, too. This is family. This is what’s left. “I’m
sleeping in your old bathroom,” she says finally.

Gloria releases a spasm of laughter, then spears a strawberry. “I hear Adrienne’s
not keeping the house up.”


“The men from the museum,” Gloria nods. “Must’ve been quite a thrill.” She
smiles slightly. “You really don’t look very well, Jane.”

Jane remembers an entry from the guest journal at the inn: I’ve just had
abdominal surgery and it’s true I don’t feel very well. Thanks anyway for the Gruyere
soufflé. “Yes,” Jane dries her forehead with her napkin, “that’s probably true.”

She hears flies troubling a screen, the distant rhythm of a clock.

Eventually Gloria blurts: “I found something for you!”

“Splendid,” says Jane.

Gloria exits, quickly, like a squirrel. Jane studies the oil portraits commissioned
by her grandparents twenty years ago. Over the fireplace, Gloria reclines seductively in a
leather chair, then a natural brunette, her blouse stoked in a breezy V. Off to the side,
Jane’s mother perches on a sensible white couch, her mouth tightened in a secretive
smile. Her eyes are bright with what her life held then: a daughter achieving puberty and
boxed dinners, money enough, this artist—whoever he was—giving time to her features.

Her mother didn’t like the way the portrait turned out, the morbid pronouncement of chin. (“It could be worse,” Gloria said, pointing at the caramel-colored oval on her sister’s cheek. “At least he left out the mole.”) Jane’s mother didn’t want the painting in her house, but after their parents died, Gloria said, “I’ll take it!” Gloria always said I’ll take it.

She returns with a large rectangular box, catching Jane transfixed by the portrait. “You were always,” she says, “why were you always so hard on your mother?”

Jane wasn’t hard on her mother. Of course she moved away—all the books, therapists, sitcoms recommended this—but even during the illness, especially during the illness, her mother seemed to understand. She said, “Families are like wrinkles. The more they develop, the less you’re able to see them.” Or something like that.

Gloria tosses the box lid on the floor and pulls out a long white dress, carefully, as if it might crack. She holds up her sister’s wedding gown, beaming. “I never wore one of these, but I suppose you might. Pretty, isn’t it? Though I have to say it didn’t exactly flatter her hips.”

There are details Jane couldn’t have noticed in the pictures. The beaded neckline and smocked waist. The tiny satin buttons along the cuff. Is it even possible to marry after thirty? Isn’t there some statistic or code? Jane can’t imagine getting hitched. Too many failed relationships stand in the way, a line of neon roadblocks barring her from the parade. Looking at her mother’s aged wedding gown, the possibility of mustering her own family seems even more remote.

Gloria shakes the dress a bit, rustling the skirt. “Want to try it on?”
In the guest journal, a woman wrote: *What this place really reminds me is that I am alone without my cat.*

"Actually," Jane says, rising, "I have to get back to the B&B."

A slow smile spans Gloria’s face. "Dinner? With Dr. Youth?"

"Someone else," Jane says, swatting her hand noncommittally. "I have some cleaning up to do. As you can see."

Gloria lowers the gown onto the couch, clutching the back as if it’s a person, an invalid with flaccid arms. She offers Jane a ride.

Gloria is always furious behind the wheel, as if rushing to a private jet to Paris or the Academy Awards. (She buys *People* magazine’s Oscars edition, for the pictures. Jane once accompanied her aunt to a department store. "Do you have anything like”—Gloria whipped out a crinkled photograph of Melanie Griffith in ruffles—"this?") Now, she zips around wooded curves like someone dizzy on sequins or inhalants. Jane grips the door handle. "If she didn’t have that thing for uniforms," her mother once said, pivoting to Jane in the backseat, "maybe she’d slow down." They were returning from a day at the beach, and Gloria, donning a robe-like cover with a hood, slapped her sister lightly on the thigh.

(The uniform was the military officer who resided with Gloria during several of Jane and her mother’s summer visits. There was nothing martial—or marital, Jane’s mother said—about him. He had pink swim trunks and wide pale legs and, though no one mentioned it directly, a bit of a lisp. He also had another woman, which is how Gloria came to refer to him as “The Deceased.”)

Pulling up to the B&B, Gloria sighs heavily. Jane asks if she wants to come in.
"No," Gloria says, "I don’t guess today’s the day.” She taps the steering wheel with clear-coated nails. “Tell me,” she squints at Jane, “what do you think is your best physical feature?”

Jane’s finger travels to her mouth. With her palm, she cups the dismal southern angle of chin. She considers her eyes. Yes. The fickle hazel dimes.

Gloria receives Jane’s answer with a thoughtful cock of the head. “I can see why you’d think that,” she says, “but you’re wrong. It’s the shape of your face.”

Adelaide has taken it upon herself to transform the dining table into a little beauty station. Nail clipper, emery board, orange stick.

“You’re back!” she says, tossing her magazine on the floor. She gives Jane a strange loose hug and ushers her into a chair. “I know you want a tour, but first things first.”

Jane obediently splays her hands on the towel. Her mother used to encourage manicures. She sent checks for this purpose, which of course Jane spent on newspapers and lattes. “I just don’t see why I should invest in anything that permanent.”

“Permanent!” her mother snorted. In a dim Chicago restaurant, she plucked Jane’s hand off the table. The skin around Jane’s fingernails was puffy and scabbed. Her mother’s tone turned gentle, like a lullaby. “Sweetheart. Who’s gonna hold this?”

“This is the nineties,” Jane said, pulling away. “We’re not a hand generation.” There was something too familiar about her mother in that moment. The prospect of alone.

Wielding the nail file, Adelaide narrows her eyes. “So,” she jerks her head in the
direction of the driveway, “she didn’t want to come see us.”


Adelaide files vigorously. “When dogs chew themselves, we use bitter apple spray. With humans we rely on”—her voice goes limp, like a phone sex operator—“a universal appreciation of beauty.”

Jane remembers the first time she visited a beauty salon, which, it turned out, was entirely different from a haircutters. At the salon, an alarmingly chic Asian woman handed you a smock at the door and pointed you toward a changing closet, stuffed with fur coats. When Jane asked how much clothing she should remove, the woman shrugged: “As much as you’re comfortable with.” Unlike salon women, who appeared to subsist on celery and tic-tacs, Jane was *fine* with her body. She didn’t own a scale. She never even used a tape measure! She undressed, slid into the flimsy robe, and was only a tad embarrassed when, settling in Luigi’s chair, she noticed other women still had on their pants and shoes.

Adelaide looks up, fluffs her bangs with the back of her wrist. “Someone called for you. Peter?”

“Payton,” Jane says. “Speaking of dogs.”

Adelaide frowns in an offended sort of way, and they are quiet.

*The innkeeper offered to braid my hair. Is this hospitality?*

“Hands show the first signs of age,” Adelaide says eventually. “It’s all the weather and washing. Yours,” she blinks at Jane’s chapped knuckles, “have been through a lot.”

Jane thinks of the grief group she attended after her mother died. *Be kind to*
yourself. *Pat, pat. You've been through a lot.* A dozen women gathered in a circle of folding chairs, exchanging sob stories and sisterly hugs. They’d lost infants and husbands, siblings and friends. They’d lost their inner child and, Jane decided, their sense of humor. The room turned heavy with tears and cigarette smoke. Even the little oatmeal cookies looked somber, ruined. Jane became indignant. This was no way to live. This was no mood for a cookie! She started cracking jokes, just anything she could dream up to stop the whining or interrupt a hug. The women grew pensive. “Jane,” they’d say. “That’s not funny at all, Jane.” Laughter was the best medicine. Why wasn’t it working? At last a woman named Grace took her aside and asked her to leave. She said, “We’re addressing dire issues here, Jane,” or maybe it was “higher issues.” Grievous women were always pulling rank.

Adelaide squeezes a generous pool of lotion into her palm, smacks her hands together and whispers, “This is the best part.” Her brow scrunches with concentration. She rubs lotion onto the back of Jane’s hand, attending to each nail and knuckle, gently pulling on the fingers. She massages the forearm, and Jane feels her body go slack in the chair. She becomes a small weightless creature. A doll with a head of yarn. “You’re relaxing,” Adelaide says softly. “That’s good.” Jane’s neck loosens. She tucks her chin into her chest and closes her eyes. Her breathing slows. Adelaide makes circles on her palm. There is a smell—eucalyptus, is that a smell?—and a cooling sensation, like a breeze. There is a dull nub of pain. A hollow spot in Jane’s chest. It is a frosty globe, a patch of blue ice that her mind skitters across. It is a vacant birdhouse, or a block of Swiss cheese. A series of holes where family should reside. Her mother never should have left her like this. How could her mother leave her like this? Adelaide works the
other hand—a push, a tug, a flick—coaxing Jane’s complicated sadness up to the surface, that dead sheet of cells. When Jane got sick in this house, her mother brought trays of juice and saltines and sat humming at the edge of the bed. There is no one to take care of Jane now. There is no music. Jane floats into a downward tunnel of loneliness and fear. There must be a mattress at the end. There is padding at the bottom of all things. She feels herself falling, disconnected, through a black chute with rattling walls, ending someplace near her tingling foot.

“Jane?” Adelaide is shaking a bottle of nail polish. A little ball rattles inside the glass. “This color all right?”

Jane nods lazily, gradually returning to this room, this dining table, these windows on the waning day. The air seems dense with mist. She clears her throat. “My foot fell asleep,” she says.

Within minutes her nails are a short but shapely pink, like the inside of an ear. “I’ll walk you around,” Adelaide says, suddenly businesslike, “but they’re still wet. You have to promise you won’t touch anything.” She blocks the stairs. “I mean it.”

The rambling series of bedrooms is mostly as Jane remembers, with more dust ruffles and fringed pillows. There are empty champagne bottles and chaotic suitcases and pantyhose draped over chairs. There are striped ties strewn about, vials of lotion and pills. It is a museum of early matrimony. An obstacle course of aspirin and shoes. At the back of the house, a needlepoint sign dangles from the doorknob of room five. This is where Jane’s mother slept.

Jane feels loopy and dazed. She could be on the scene of a movie set, or a long detailed dream. “Nice sign,” she says.
“My sister made dozens of them,” Adelaide says, “when she was trying to quit smoking. Do not disturb and Stop or I’ll shoot and Jesus would love you if you weren’t so damn ugly.” Adelaide sighs. “She took them to craft fairs but there weren’t any buyers, so she gave them all to me for Christmas.” She leads Jane downstairs. “I’d offer you a swim, but the pool’s drained. I’m having it painted next week.”

Holding her arms in a gesture of somnambulism or warning, Jane pauses in the foyer. It’s nearly evening, and she doesn’t want to eat alone. She wants the stiff clatter of conversation. A warm body in the passenger seat. She says, “Is there anyone at all who might be free for dinner?”

Adelaide says the man in five. A regular. Here on business. Terrific sense of fashion.

Jane thanks her for the nail job and retreats to her paltry bathroom. Someone has made the bed, freshened the towels, emptied the wastebasket painted with dog bones. Someone has placed a pink lump on the dresser. Jane’s back stiffens. She lifts the underwear, cautiously, like a laboratory specimen, and drops it in the trash.

The restaurant window shows swooping seagulls and a tired gray dock flanked by chunky weeds. Jane’s dinner companion unfolds his spectacles to study the menu.

“So Kyle—it is Kyle, isn’t it?”

An hour ago, Jane found an orange linen dress scrunched at the bottom of her duffel. She changed, marched to room five, knocked with the heel of her hand: “I’m Jane. I understand you’re free for dinner.”

The man rubbed his smooth forehead. His hair was cut in clean, expensive lines,
and his sand-colored shirt was neatly rolled to the elbows, as though pressed that way. At last he said, “Dinner. Yes.”

“Splendid,” Jane said, lifting her hand to her mouth, then forcing it—forcing it—back to her side.

Kyle peddles art to local galleries and restaurants. Jane gropes for connections. “You and I,” she says, sipping a nice Merlot, “we basically do the same thing. We make other people successful. We’re the stepping stones. The bank machines.” She taps her fork on the table for emphasis. “We are the steroids.”

“Well,” Kyle coughs lightly, “I don’t know if I’d put it that way.”

“What we do is important, Kyle. We’re people with a purpose.”

Kyle is staring at her hands. “Great polish,” he says. “This season’s azalea.” He pauses. “I used to get manicures. I like the look of a well-buffed nail.”

Jane smiles weakly. “Who can resist a good buff?” Kyle is beginning to remind her of men she’s dated. The ones with leather sectionals and sculpted young companions named Nick or Rod. “Tell me, Kyle. Do you have any family? A girlfriend, perhaps?”

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “We all make our own family,” he says. Jane wants to punch his meager bicep: “Say it, sister!” Instead she gulps her wine. “Yes. Well. I guess I haven’t gotten around to that yet.”

Kyle gives her a soft, concerned look, like a lightbulb fuzzy with dust. He leans forward, resting tan elbows on the table. “What do you like about B&Bs?”

“What I used to like about B&Bs was the editor who sent me there.” Jane gazes out the window. Payton’s killer martinis, his jazz collection and fancy olives suddenly seem very far off. An indifferent memory, like something she read in a magazine. Jane
chuckles quietly.

"And now?"

"Now I’m just glad to be in places where people can get away with banana pancakes.” A chirpy blond server arranges plates on the table. “Places where people actually drink sherry.”

Kyle glances up from his meal. “There’s sherry?”

“Check the armoire,” Jane says, chewing.

They dissect their crab cakes. A tedious silence settles between them, like a drought that warps flowers and slows hearts.

Jane asks if Kyle’s read the guest journal in his room.

“Once. When I forgot my sleeping pill.” He dabs his mouth with his napkin.

“Frankly, I found it depressing.”

She nods in sympathy. “The couples.”

“The returning guests complain about art—if you’d call it that—disappearing from the room. Where are the watercolors? Who took the watercolors? They all want to know.” Kyle holds up his hands and shakes them dramatically. “Big mystery.” He tears off a hunk of bread. “It’s incredibly distressing that people have such poor taste.”

“What were they of?”

“Pardon me?”

“The paintings.”

“You know,” he says, “I really don’t recall.”

“In my aunt’s house, there were just a few portraits and some of those dried wreaths with all the sticks jutting out.” Jane thrusts her elbows at odd angles, like a
chicken. “She thought they were stylish.”

Kyle’s tone turns quizzical: “I see.”

The sun falls. They split the check and get into Jane’s car. Plastic wrappers crunch under Kyle’s loafers. Jane sets the radio to scan. It plays like this until they reach the inn, leaping from love song to love song at startling intervals. Jane finds the spasms familiar and soothing.

They pause and stare at each other in the foyer. Jane says, “Would you mind very much if I came up to your room?”

Kyle’s eyes widen, as if catching Jane with a metal bat. “I’m quite exhausted,” he says. “I have to pack.”

None of the other guests will play Marco Polo. Perhaps they don’t know how to swim.

“Just for a minute,” Jane says, and follows Kyle, who exhales deeply, up the stairs, through the dim hallway, to the back of the house, where her mother slept. Kyle opens the door, flicks the light, spins around with a silent, pleading look.

The walls, which used to be lime, are a gentle maize. The carpet has gone worn white to blue. The bed is in the same spot, nestled between two windows at the far end, layered with Kyle’s neatly folded shirts. There is still the long mirror mounted on the left wall. Jane glimpses her reflection. Not unlike her mother, really. The tall legs and short torso. Same hair, mouth, chin. Jane remembers her mother standing here, pinching and tucking, finally smiling, at least halfway. Maybe she felt in this house how Jane feels now. An impostor in a wrinkled frock. Dressing, but for whom?

In Jane’s apartment, there are photo albums to unpack. There are letters and
trinkets to peruse, framed pictures to display. A closet of her mother’s stuff, musty and waiting.

Jane steps to the open door. “Sweet dreams.”

Kyle smiles sternly, hand on the chiseled glass knob. “You too,” he says.

“Goodnight.”

The next day, Jane is roused by an early, emphatic knock. Adelaide smiles in the doorway with a Rottweiler stitched across her chest. “Rise and shine! You have a special visitor.”

Morning truly isn’t Jane’s best time of day. She’s come to like this room, though, with its spatial efficiency. She feels at home with the characters in the guest journal: Holly, Sydney, Jordan, Tom. She splashes her face at the sink and fumbles into yesterday’s rags.


The pool is hidden behind tall brush at the far end of the yard. Jane moves barefoot across the lawn, in a kind of trance. She passes the terrace on the right, now governed by ivy, and the rose bush that justified Gloria’s gardener—a fetching young Italian named Vito.

This is the solitary walk Jane took each morning as a child, when she wasn’t sick. Her mother would already be in the pool, face up on the blue raft, holding a mug of coffee at her side. Eventually Gloria would come out in one of her big hats to announce that Jane’s mother was looking awfully pink.
And she was. Very, very pink.

Jane’s toes are slick with dew. She hears singing voices. She’ll have to make a note: *Morning medley by the pool. Is nothing sacred?* The musty shed where suits and towels were stowed is buried by fat bright leaves. Unreachable.

Jane pushes through the wheezing metal gate and rubs her eyes. Gloria is down in the empty pool, crooning the cuckoo song from *The Sound of Music*. She kicks up her heels, flounces the skirt of her sister’s wedding gown. The dress is, of course, too small, so she’s layered it with an ivory cardigan, to cover an unzipped back. Jane spies a flash of pink on her aunt’s exposed rear.

Jane brings her nails to her teeth, sees this season’s azalea, stops.

Gloria grins broadly. “I’ve come to see you off!” She assumes a quick dramatic pose, hands on hips, chin in air. “How do I look?”

Jane gazes down at her aunt and yawns. “It’s a little early.” She sinks into a tattered lawn chair and hugs her knees to her chest. “Besides. Isn’t that bad luck?” Jane feels suddenly serious. “The dress, I mean.”

Her aunt stands still for a moment, resolving some inner tangle. Trees bordering the pool seem to billow forward, listening. Gloria circles the dull white bottom, holding out her skirt as if waltzing. She bursts into a sort of dip, wobbles slightly, rights her torso, and curtsies to her niece. “I call this combination ‘Elizabeth Taylor having a cocktail at the Ritz.’”

Sometimes, when Jane danced to records in her aunt’s bedroom, prancing around in her thin nightgown, her mother would come in and set down her wineglass. She’d clasp Jane’s back and try to teach her the box step. It was, Jane later learned, the only
dance her mother knew, and Gloria would stand smirking in the doorway, arms crossed in a kind of resignation or pride.

Gloria isn’t a skilled dancer. Jane sees that now. Skilled dancers are graceful, even in jest, but Gloria’s moves resemble—what? A turkey scrambling from the hunter. A bird who imagines it might fly.

“You call yourself family? Get down here and dance!”

Adelaide arrives with three glasses of juice and a plate of muffins. “Go on,” she says, shooing Jane toward the white floor, now smudged with shoe prints and crushed bugs.

*Who’s gonna hold this?* Gloria waves her arms impatiently, tosses back her generous curls. Her face is wild with wrinkles and some stubborn hope. This is what’s left. Jane climbs down the concrete steps, into the pool.
Did Neil Armstrong Eat Here?

Reservation

The person Astrid is to dine with used to have long, loopy hair and a many-voweled name whispered in corners of lesbian cocktail parties, softly, like unfolding bed linens: Olivia.

A year ago, just before Astrid moved away to the mountains, replacing silk with flannel, Olivia demanded a new pronoun. She wanted to be called "he," and let's face it, the transition was a little difficult for the lesbians, even with the haircut, since Olivia's breasts stressed shirt buttons when she reclined on leather sofas, palms propping her head. A generous handful of women knew these gems intimately, not including Astrid, who wasn't instantly charmed by lawyers like Olivia with twelve-month tans, cufflinks and woodsy cologne. (Astrid could especially do without the woodsy cologne.) To curtail confusion (she? he? it?), to avoid sounding like a downhill ski experience ("shhh-hee"), Olivia chose a name. Nearly thirty, she could take any name, Connor or Mitchell or the truly robust Dalton. Options heaped like a vat of melon balls—Spencer, Augustus, the delicious possibilities!—and then s/he settled on Bob.

Testosterone injections, mastectomy, hysterectomy, and now Bob's mostly a man.

Five feet tall, but a man.
The lesbians hadn’t known any female-to-males, personally. People like Bob appeared in art books or on afternoon talk shows—lurid, vaguely pornographic, like a vibrator on a coffee table. Many women wished for male attributes at one time or another—to pee without sitting!—but honestly. Wasn’t this taking it a little far?

Astrid can’t fathom this desire for surgical alteration. She can’t imagine feeling that your body is a lie. Except maybe your thighs. Astrid has always believed that her thighs belong to someone else. Her ex’s new girlfriend, for instance. Charlene Peterson, aerobics instructor.

_Apéritif_

On Astrid’s first return to the city, she bunks with her friend Madeline, a computer technician. That’s software, not evening wear, and Madeline doesn’t own an iron. She suggests steaming clothes by the shower, leaving Astrid’s shirts wrinkled and damply warm. Astrid buttons blouse number two and spins to her friend, who sits primly on the bed like a flight attendant braced for take off.

“Pond or plum,” Astrid says, hands on hips. “Cast your vote.”

Madeline shrugs. “I’d prefer you didn’t bring her back here,” she says.

“Him.”

“And call if you’re gonna stay at her place.”

“His place.” Astrid smiles weakly. “He’s a he, remember?” Certainly Astrid won’t bed Bob. Can he—she doesn’t even understand the state of his equipment. Astrid has a girlfriend, besides.

Madeline exhales deeply: “Right.” She moves to the doorway. “Do you need a
Astrid occasionally chatted with Olivia at these events. Olivia said things like, “You’re an intellectual lesbian. I love those.”

“You’re intellectual?” Astrid’s neck flushed with the compliment. She’d majored in Communication Studies, after all, and only once made the dean’s list. A fluke.

“You’re among the five percent who choose to be lesbian,” Olivia said. “For social or political reasons.”

Choice seemed to Astrid the dirty word of dykedom. You “discovered” or “realized” some latent desire, you didn’t just wake up one day and “decide,” like selecting a pair of socks. All right, maybe it was a choice. So what if it’s a choice? Astrid admired Olivia’s bold statements, the mix of flattery and presumption. She found Olivia mildly fetching, like a dress with a surprise zipper down the front.

She was startled to hear from Bob, six months after she moved, three months after she broke up with the woman who was the reason. His new voice had the tinny musicality of a teenage boy’s. “I look better than I sound,” he said. No acne. Intact hairline. He’d lucked out, so far.

On the phone, Bob dizzied Astrid with questions, pressing her like a courtroom
witness. He wanted to know if she’d move back to the city, and which qualities she most treasured in a man. Astrid’s answers were full of question marks. “Kindness?” she said. “Sensitivity?”

“Okay,” said Bob, “but you don’t need a guy who’s gonna clean the toilet or anything.”

Bob, Olivia, this person has always had an unusual effect on Astrid—a cage of tangerine butterflies set loose in her chest. Lately she’s departed his phone calls winded, electrified, mysteriously rearranged. Bob makes her feel like she’s run a marathon without enough oxygen.

Madeline’s doorbell chimes. In the mute foyer, Bob clasps Madeline’s birdlike hand. “I think you met my sister, Olivia.”

“Oh yes,” Madeline quickly sips her scotch. “Striking resemblance.”

Then Bob eyes Astrid like a lingerie salesgirl who might model for him—privately, in the dressing room—and promises to shuttle her home before sunrise.

Frizzy salad, fishy cakes

Bob chose this restaurant on the basis of square-footage and lighting. “Above all,” he says, holding the door for Astrid, “you don’t want to feel like you’re in a cafeteria.”

The roomy circular booth has an arched red back like a spaceship or millennial throne. It reminds Astrid of the soundproof shell that hides Miss America contestants while finalists are interviewed, one by one. Those girls! They all want to be nurses! Their hearts quiver over preschoolers and rice cakes!
Sliding into the booth is like trying to ice skate across chenille pillows. Astrid heaves to the elbow of the crescent. Bob sits close, lovingly massaging stubble on his jaw. He touches Astrid’s lavender sleeve, hopelessly rumpled from her suitcase. “You look stunning,” he says.

Astrid’s cheeks cherry. She has a flirtation problem. That’s what friends, bartenders, postal workers, nephews have said. A flirtation problem. Can she help it if she blinks often? If her crossed-arm stance presses her breasts in an upward direction? Astrid sighs lightly and studies her menu. The script looks complicated, dense, like moon graffiti.

“Are you surprised?” Bob glances at his pectorals.

Astrid says she might be. If he hadn’t sent the pictures. Shirtless Bob muscling a barbell, bending to shadow twin scars on his chest. Suited Bob, tie loosened, jacket flung gamely over one shoulder. Sultry Bob propped against a blank wall, squinting appealingly into the morning light. There were these photographs, and letters replete with possession—My dear beautiful...My sweet—casting Astrid as a pregnant young wife in Jersey accepting epistles from overseas. There was the typed thirty-page journal entry documenting a lap dance Bob purchased in Vegas. Astrid leaked this missive to several friends, parading it like a tropical bird or ten-dollar suede coat from the thrift store. There was the draft of Bob’s book—Why Women Choose Women: Be a Better Man, Win a Lesbian!—which Astrid tossed in a remote drawer and left there.

Bob lifts his leg. He yanks his pants at the ankle to reveal a furry calf. “Monkey boy!” he says proudly.

Astrid sees a dog in pink booties, out for a twilight stroll.
Bob’s little forest vanishes under the table. He says he’s still hoping for chest hair.

“Won’t be long now,” Astrid says. “If your legs are any indication.”

Bob examines the puffy wine list. “This is my first date in months. I’ve been hibernating. Waiting for my voice to settle.”

“Date?” Astrid brushes wispy blond tufts behind her ear.

Bob grins Hollywood teeth. “Are you flirting with me?”

“People always think that,” she says hotly. “Why do people always think that?”

At the next booth, a waitress with a tall pale neck grinds pepper on a ring of salads. The muscles in her forearms twist like serpentine ropes under water.

Bob resumes the elementary explanation of stocks he initiated in the car, though Astrid has no investments and very little interest. The Dow, he says, is just an average of the thirty biggest companies on the stock exchange.


“That’s how I’m financing my surgeries.”

“Wontons?” Astrid remembers an e-mail joke. What’s the difference between men and government bonds? The bonds mature. “When do you get your—” she slows, like a semi approaching a toll booth.

“Lower surgery? April first.”

Initially, he only planned to do the upper. “She’s perfectly happy to strap it on,” an ex told Astrid. “I mean he.” But there was the confusion of pap smears, the problem of completion.
Now, Bob says if he had to choose between being six feet tall and having a six-inch functioning dick, he'd take the height. "How tall are you exactly?" he asks.

Astrid says five-nine.

Bob sighs heavily. He likes the idea of a woman resting her head on his shoulder while dancing. He wants to carry his bride across the threshold. He's dreamed about it since he was three.

The waitress with cordy arms eyes Bob like a sequined feast, tucks the wine list against her side, vaporizes. *What do you call a woman who knows where her husband is every night? A widow.*

"The surgery isn’t about gender anymore," Bob says, "it’s about surrender. Time to stop bucking at the universe."

"All right!" says Astrid. "Bye-bye buckaroo!"

Bob raises his pinky in a kind of toast. "I’m gonna have a tiny penis," he says, with only a freckle of sadness.

Astrid’s eyes widen. In truth, she has encountered several negligible penises. There was the vegan football player. The cellist. There was the surly young yachtsman, but that was years ago. *What do men and parking spots have in common? The free ones are mostly handicapped or extremely small.* "Well," Astrid says finally, "what can you do?"

"The big ones are totally unreliable," Bob says. "You pay a hundred grand, give it a test run, and it falls off. I'm going the natural route. To keep sensation. The clitoris grows anyway with all the testosterone."

The wine bottle is sweating. The waitress’s tongue flicks the coral corners of her
mouth as Bob takes the inaugural sip. Astrid studies the waitress—isn’t it time for a haircut?—and orders the frizzy salad.

“Frisée,” Bob corrects.

Astrid waves her hand dismissively. “Just bring me something green.”

Bob orders the seafood appetizer. He slides out of his jacket. “Science is improving all the time. Eventually I could get an upgrade. But the shrink at the sex confirmation clinic”—Bob clears his throat—“she said, ‘What you will find is that women want most of all to be loved.’” He lifts his glass. “You’d date a guy with a tiny penis.” His voice is like a peep of light in an inky corridor. “You would, wouldn’t you?”

_Tenderloin_

Astrid has passed a quarter of her twenty-eight years as a lesbian, with the perplexing exception of her twenty-fifth year, devoted, at least mentally, to a lanky, lisping man who moved pianos. Seven years ago, she lay limp in her college dorm, dumped by the yachtsman. She waved off friends’ ample-hearted tea offerings with crusty tissues, punctuated the soupy silence with an occasional howl. One week of this, and suddenly she found herself chanting lewd songs at women’s rugby parties. A keg, an athletic jersey, and hello, sister!

Astrid conceived the switch as a kind of nouveau vegetarianism, independent of morals and politics. She could backpedal at any moment, perhaps not without a night of stomach cramps. Astrid was flexible, fluid, fearless. A product of liberal education and bean burritos.

She graduated from college. She moved to the city. Her neighbors were lesbians.
Her co-workers at the gallery were lesbians. The bus driver—"Buenos dias, sunshine!"—lesbian. The almond-eyed Italian at the deli counter, also a lesbian. Even in her new home in the mountains there were lesbians. (Were they really lesbians, or did they just have that hair?) The straight world snapped shut, sharply, like scissors. This suited Astrid fine. *How many honest, intelligent, caring men in the world does it take to do the dishes? Both of them.*

"I get it," her mother said later, dressing for a New Year’s masquerade. Her costume consisted of red tights and an antique sword. A tarnished silver sheath shielded her chest. "After all that heartache, you needed someone softer." Then her mother shot a smile that said Astrid would eventually return to the realm of true challenge and pleasure. The galaxy of men.

But Astrid doesn’t choose soft women. Her lovers have spiked hipbones and narrow lips. Her lovers have notched fingernails, and startle at the words *intimacy* and *commitment*. Their bathrooms frequently lack toilet paper. Their sheets are rough, like mulched potato chips.

It’s like dating men. Without the perks.

Sometimes Astrid still feels surprised. She’s taken ballet, after all. She doesn’t check her engine oil. It’s only been two weeks since she learned how to open the hood! How did she arrive at this place of parades and potlucks? Astrid likes the film festivals, though. She likes tank tops, and the cunning smoothness of a woman’s cheek. There is nothing quite like waking up next to a woman’s familiar curves, the feeling of singularity—*We are the only ones*—does desire always feel like that? There is nothing in this world like a woman’s kiss—gentle and hungry, sweet with completion.
In the regal spacebooth, Bob asks when Astrid’s been single. He says he never had a clean shot, even when he was a she. He pokes his beef dinner, lowers his fork and sighs. “Tell me about this latest.”

Astrid describes her new girlfriend, Ida. Pastry chef. Fisherwoman. Ida has a wolf tattooed on her thigh.

“I have a tattoo,” Bob says eagerly. He pulls his thin white shirt taut over his bicep. “The male and female symbol. Intertwined.”

Astrid nods—“I see”—but she can’t really make it out at all. Bob’s armband looks hazy, like a clouded constellation.

“So she can bake a pie,” Bob says, his voice elevating to an adolescent soprano.

“What about passion? Does your stomach drop when she walks in the room?”

To commemorate their five-month anniversary, Astrid wrote Ida a poem, aided by library research (“You capture me/like a sinking fly, like a nymph catching trout,” etc.), and Ida cried. Sparse tears, but sweet nonetheless. Wasn’t that passion?

Bob offers his recipe for passion. A wraparound porch in Napa. Weekly bouquets. Ballroom dancing—“But,” he says, “under no circumstances can you wear heels.” He fills Astrid’s wineglass. “We’ll have a cleaning woman. You can pick out my ties. Women love picking out ties. I’ll call you when the Dow is up and say, ‘Honey, get yourself dressed. I’m taking you out.’” Bob’s eyes are shimmering brown pools.

“Really,” he says, “I don’t see how you could refuse.”

“Get yourself dressed,” Astrid repeats. She sees herself naked on a chaise longue, dizzying the crimson contents of a tall glass with her finger. *What are a woman’s three favorite animals? A mink in the closet, a Jaguar in the garage, and an ass to pay for it*
all. Astrid touches the chunky chain at her collarbone.

"You’re doing it again," Bob twinkles. "You’re flirting with me."

Astrid nibbles a forkload of salmon and studies obscure murals on the wall.

Astronaut or angel? She can’t decide.

Bob touches her hand. “I’d make a devoted husband.”

*What’s one thing all men at singles bars have in common? They’re married.*

Astrid picks up the sprig of parsley on her plate—"garnish" her mother says, wives know these things—and eats it. "I don’t know if I believe in marriage," she says. "It’s all a bunch of garnish."

Her eyes blaze with a joke. "Why are married women heavier than single women?"

Bob shakes his head.

Astrid grins, encouraged. "Single women come home, see what’s in the fridge, go to bed. Married women come home, see what’s in bed and go to the fridge."

Bob slumps against the booth. He gazes at the waitress, now shoving a pencil into her hair, then back at Astrid. He dishes a multiple-choice question. If a guy insulted Astrid on the street and Bob went after him, would she be shocked by his response, charmed or offended?

Astrid crinkles her nose. "None of the above."

Bob frowns.

"What’s the insult?" She’s dimly aware of failing the quiz. "I need a few specifics here, Bob."

"You’re missing the point entirely."
“Scared,” she says finally. “I’d be scared.”

“But you want male protection,” he says, filling in the blanks. “You like chivalry.”

Astrid remembers boyfriends. The physical bulk. Safety, like an August patch of shade. She had liked the sturdy arms around her, the plainly mapped future. But there was always an undercurrent of exasperation, the throwing up of hands and desperate fumbling out of clothes. The frail cry of the zipper. A certain roughness always rolled in. A dog came to pee on the picnic, and where were the napkins? Despair seeped through, the product of some indelible difference. There was no way to mop it up.

The waitress returns. Here’s Bob with his sleek shirt and graceful, sooty eyes. Forget gender-bending: Bob’s busted the seams right open! He’s man and woman rolled into one. The perfect package. The waitress plants her palm on the table and leans forward, predatory. Her name must be Doreen. Doreen the Space Invader!

Watching Doreen depart, Bob says, “I may be vertically-challenged, but I always get numbers from the sexiest women in the room.”

Astrid nods. “They intuit your female energy.”

“Female energy?” Bob regards Astrid like she just waxed his legs. “You think I have female energy?”

“Well,” she says, “you spent a lot of years in a woman’s body.”

Bob says he never, ever felt like a woman. A kid on the playground, he always wanted to be on the boys’ team. And everyone thought he belonged there. He folds his napkin in a tidy, sympathetic square and smiles feebly. Astrid wants to trace his rich pink lips with her finger. She wants to rub his bristly cheek.
Bob says, “What are you gonna do if I meet someone else?”

Astrid shrugs. “Be happy for you, I guess.”

“Wrong answer!” He smacks the table twice, fiercely. “You prefer someone in waders?”

“Hey,” she makes a flat, choppy gesture with her hand. “Leave Ida outta this.”

Bob eyes Astrid like a brilliant canvas. Like a twelve-pound amethyst dropped from the sky. “Look,” he says, “I’m trying to behave.”

Instinctively, Astrid cups her hand around the back her neck. She wants to fill the silence. *Say something*. There is nothing to say.

He inches toward her, kisses her in the safe zone, on the cheek. His lips. Like blushing ribbons. Like the silky insides of a pumpkin.

*Intermezzo*

Astrid and Bob promptly rise for the restroom, disappearing, of course, through different doors.

The stalls in the ladies room are the color of portobello mushrooms. It’s a relief, Astrid realizes, to not have her date in the bathroom. Toileting in pairs prevents her from checking her teeth, only to later discover pepper lacing her gumline like a humiliating disease.

A gravely voice by the sink: “If I lived in China I’d be happy with rice patties and straw hats. But noooo. I have to fall for this, like, totally unavailable guy.”

talk to myself,” the woman says. “Someone’s gotta do the voiceover.” She fluffs her yellow linguine hair, exits the restroom with a weighty sigh.

Astrid takes special care with her lipstick. She thinks about Ida’s drafty log house, her diffident sheets and bearskin rug. She considers Ida’s waders, rubbery billboards for muck. It’s true: Ida can’t dance. She can’t even snap her fingers with audible success.

Bob’s Napa sanctuary. Sapphire summer, and from every angle the wraparound porch shows coarse blond grass. Astrid’s barefoot. Bob wears a linen suit and smells like a florid sunset. Music thrills the floorboards, and they are spinning. Her head is on his shoulder—well, at least tipped in that direction. Astrid’s mother appears in a sensible cotton dress and pastel shoes. She stands by the French doors, beaming with a tray of canapés.

What would it be like, returning to the galaxy of men after a seven-year stretch? Olivia would be Astrid’s secret. She’d sacrifice generous boxes of heeled shoes to Goodwill. She’d start wearing those cutesy sandals with the meek rubber soles.

Astrid studies her reflection. She looks—frankly, a little rugged. Mountain air has dulled her complexion. Tiny creases have hatched, multiplied. Her eyebrows recall abandoned hedges. Is she woman enough for Bob? Where are the tweezers? Who outlawed perfume?

She unfastens another button on her blouse and returns to the vacant booth. She tries to arrange her limbs in a glamorous configuration. Elbow on table, hand splayed across exposed chest. Legs crossed at the knee. Loosely.

Tick-tock. She empties the wine.
At last Bob emerges from the men’s room. “Bathroom etiquette,” he says, breathless. “Last week I stopped off at a bar with no doors on the stalls. This quarterback-type walked in, and I had to say, ‘C’mon, man! I’m trying to take a dump!’”

“Are you serious?” Astrid places her hand over his. “Did you mean it about the cleaning lady?”

_Fruit tart_

“That waitress stopped me by the bathroom.” Bob flashes a tawdry cocktail napkin. “She said, ‘I know you have a girlfriend, but just in case.’” He tosses his head back and laughs, laughs, laughs.

Astrid considers April Fool’s, the day Bob’s vagina will be yanked out, his urethra rerouted. He’ll go eight hours under for labia sculpted into scrotum, expanded by saline injections and finally implanted with silicone balls. Stitching. Mending. Closure. The guys—Bob’s transsexual buddies—say the pain’s so wrenching you want to crawl to one of the city’s five bridges and fly.

The wraparound porch. Little brown toasts slip off her mother’s canapé tray. Astrid’s twirling with Bob, and her mother’s forehead scrunches like she’s caught her daughter in a Dolly Parton wig—wrong style, volume, hue. _These are not your jokes._ The music stops. The French doors glaze over. Astrid can’t any longer make out that interior. Not the vases spilling wild iris. Not the chaise longue.

She watches Bob delicately dissect their pastry dessert, and hasn’t he always looked this way? The broad, shadowy jaw. The furry hands and firm chest. Just a guy with lifts.
Astrid envisions Ida wading into the river, flanked by six-foot reeds. She senses the insistent pull of the line and wants to stay hooked—*What you will find is that women want most of all*—to persist. Time to stop bucking at the universe. Some choices are immutable, gathering precious momentum across seven years. Astrid looks down, pretends that last button was a mistake, hastily refastens it. She corrects her languorous slouch.

Bob would carry her across the threshold if she’d let him. In an hour, maybe two, he’ll pay the bill, fold the waitress’s napkin into his pocket. He’ll escort Astrid to Madeline’s door. And when she hugs him goodnight, when she says he smells nice—what is this mist—and pleasantly pecks him on the cheek, he’ll look up to the murky sky and hold on.
So your mother tries to kill herself. In spite of the daily parade of antidepressants, those marching caplets with batons, flags, kazooes. In spite of psychiatrists with angular names, a series of Vs and Zs, like elbows or passwords. In spite of the fact that you’re home for your biannual visit, and the backyard roses are so full they’ve started to draw bees.

You were at the family dentist. At twenty-nine, it’s possible you should have your own dentist, in your own town—another stamp in the passport of adulthood, smudged blue like a bruise—but there’s something strangely comforting about the family dentist, who’s forty with braces and a little treasure chest of spider rings, who’s watched your teeth grow—okay, his father watched your teeth grow—but this dentist has all your records and tracks the recession of your gums. This dentist gives your mouth a gold star, just a light reprimand regarding floss, and you decide to celebrate with something special for your toes, the feet’s teeth. The leather bands pinch your ankles a bit, and you’ll have to take care of that corn, but at 20% off who could resist this season’s strappy sandal? The salesgirl smiles lovingly at the ambitious heels, those tall windowless towers: “So comfortable you can wear them everyday.” Maybe she can. She is seventeen. You wear your new shoes right out of the store, with your cutoffs and tired gray T-shirt, like a kid
with a silver balloon.

Your parents’ new dog does not know you or like you and continues barking several minutes after you enter the house. You have tried all the tricks. A bone, a pretzel, a stick, but the dog just grabs it away and retreats under a table or shrub. A scavenger with a people problem. You’ve dated a few of those. Now she wants to scrutinize your sandals—*a little fancy, don’t you think?*—and eat the knobby hoofs of the dining chairs.

Your mother, queen of post-it notes, is not upstairs napping. There is no scrap of paper on the kitchen counter that wears your name, or even your initial. They all say things like: *bran flakes, artichoke hearts, floor wax.* Or: *I can only focus on one person at a time. Today is not your day. Tomorrow doesn’t look good either.* Artichoke hearts? Since when do they eat artichokes? Since when does your mother cook? She doesn’t want you to know where everyone has gone, two hours before dinner.

A voice message. Your father, calling from the emergency room. Your mother has taken a bunch of pills, but do not be alarmed! Do not come to the hospital! Someone interrupts him at the pay phone, and your father, generous with change, takes a moment to rattle out a few coins. He would like very much to talk with you. He will call back. Soon.

Maybe it was something you said.

This morning after your father left for work your mother wanted to know—yes! She really wanted to know!—whom you’re spending time with these days, and because you had that big chat a year ago, because she actually got dressed this morning and swiped apricot shadow across her lids and drank her nutritional beverage, hungrily, right
from the can, you ran upstairs to your suitcase and grabbed the photograph you planned to take out only at night, when your parents were asleep, raced back to your mother’s side and panted, “This is my girlfriend,” a designation that often comes with a space—girl as adjective, Tuesday night drinking buddy, fellow bachelorette, majorette, whatever—so you paused meaningfully and added: “My significant other.” Your mother turned quiet as a stone and promptly positioned herself behind the vacuum cleaner, fanning spectacular streaks in the carpet, banging the machine into furniture as if sleepwalking, her lips clamped in a firm pink line. Then she tackled the laundry, polished the silver, bathed the dog, gently, with moisturizing shampoo.

You asked what she’d do while you were out. (A standard check-in, but where is your check?) She said she’d lie down for her nap. She said she’d go for a bike ride, which frightened you a little, since your mother is not terribly steady and even in a car forgets to signal, slowly weaving across lanes, like a duck. “Well,” you said—what can a daughter do? Nothing! A daughter is lint in the belly button! “Be careful.”

You thought your mother would like the picture. Your lover has a good haircut with soft, flattering lines and, on that particular day, took out her nose ring and wore a skirt. A very short skirt, but a skirt. Your lover: what a trooper.

Your mother has never done this before. It was definitely something you said.

When your mother became a regular in the psychiatric wing five years ago—spring and winter, like a spa—you experienced each episode as a missile to the chest. You’d stagger around your apartment, collapse on the cold bathroom tile and howl. You’d fast on raisins and cheese puffs. It was a sharp, mean surprise each time. A gradual funeral, without resolution.
Now, sitting limply at the kitchen table, you can’t believe how calm you feel. You are a Daughter of Steel—your mother must surmise this—or maybe you’re just tired. Maybe you’re Daughter of Yawn.

The dog prances over and plops a gummy tennis ball in your lap. She regards you with genuine interest, then steals away to the living room to piddle—your mother’s verb: *Does doggy have to tinkle-sprinkle?*—on the freshly vacuumed rug.

The phone rings. It is Babette from the Hosiery Club, which your mother apparently belongs to. Babette has a kind, fluttery voice like a late-night radio personality with an ocean by the window. She says, “Just the usual then?”

You would like to keep her on the phone as long as possible. You say, “What’s the usual?”

“Three pairs of nude.”

This doesn’t seem right. Your mother and three nudes. Does she even wear stockings? Lately you’ve only seen her in nightgowns and deceptive jogging suits. You say, “Do you have anything more dramatic? She’s going through a very theatrical stage.”

“Perhaps I should speak with her directly.”

“She’s in the emergency room. Getting her stomach pumped.”

“Oh dear,” says Babette, sharply, like a sewing needle. Your mother as overage sorority girl, keg master with a lei.

While you talk hose—is there any way to wear white without looking like a radiologist?—your father leaves another message. You don’t see how you will ever get to talk to him in this age of phone-order undergarments and elect to walk two blocks for cigarettes. A closet smoker, you’d quit for this trip, but now: cigarettes? Why not! You
hook the dog to her leash and set off on the pocked sidewalk.

The drugstore clerk wears her hair in long braids. She peers over the counter and says, “Terrific shoes.” This is the nicest thing that’s happened all day, except for—no, including the family dentist, who kept you waiting through two Self magazines and was, frankly, a little pokey with the scraping implements.

Outside, the dog is enjoying a full body massage from several children who eye you like a potential kidnapper and flee into the bushes when you light up. On the way home, she tugs her leash and decides to squat on the sidewalk. You do not have a plastic bag. You might not use it even if you did. You thrust your cigarette in the air, tipsy with nicotine. You raise your fists to the sky, “How could you let this happen?” The dog bats her tail against your leg.

The truth is you always suspected this day would come, sluggishly, like the prom. You could eat rice cakes and go to the tanning salon—which, let’s admit, you did a few times—and practice walking in your dyed-to-match pumps, but you couldn’t fend it off. You could not avoid the date who drank wine coolers and abandoned your corsage in the limo and refused, finally, to kiss you goodnight. It isn’t supposed to be this way! Your mother likes to talk about the terminally ill, how they wait for their family to gather before dying—“expiring,” she says, like a book from the library, a baggie of lunch meat—but your brother is vacationing with his wife in Tahiti. Your sister is choosing drapes for her new bungalow on the coast. Your mother has saved the entire show for you.

Your father calls. He’s keeping your mother company while she drinks charcoal to clean her out. She made off to the bathroom at one point and tried to flush it down the
toilet because, poor thing, she doesn't like the taste. Your mother! The stunts she pulls! She'd like a lime with that, a citrus chaser. What a comedian! Tears pour down your cheeks. You snort lightly and say, "Has she mentioned me?"

Your father says no, not once. A spongy variety of amnesia or absolution.

A sticky note by the phone says: You are not my job.

Your father tells you the story, how she hopped on her bike and peddled to three different churches (Where was God? He called in sick to go sailing!) before steering to a nearby park with her ziploc of pills. It is difficult to imagine your mother, who uses antibacterial soap and loathes public doorknobs, slurping algae and goose water from the pond, or crunching pills in her mouth like mints, wobbling home under the influence, promptly calling the psychiatrist—I stopped myself—who called the therapist, who called the husband at the office, who finally found her face down on the bed—shallow and groggy, like an overseas connection—shoved sneakers on her feet and sped to the hospital.

You say, "I guess I'll cancel the dinner reservations then."

You and your father have a good scholastic relationship. You take joint field trips to the wine mart. You read quietly together and call it study hall. He delivers pop quizzes: What's the percent chance you'll marry a man? Feeling generous, you say fifteen, and he frowns deeply. You flunk. Family is an educational institution, and you are learning—what? Be wary of invitations. Hide your bones and sticks.

Your father says he hopes to be home in a few hours. He'll pick up some chicken breasts for the two of you to grill outside, with bug spray. He has a great mango marinade. In the meantime, please feed the dog.
You glance at the dog, who’s sniffing the hardwood floor for crumbs. Where was she this afternoon? Why didn’t she do something? Let her lick varnish.

You stand in the middle of the kitchen, phone in hand. You don’t have to put up with this. You could call the airlines, change your ticket. You could fly back to your dim studio with bars on the windows and large dusty plants. To your lover, who will wonder what she’s stepped into, what you might become. To your friends with advanced degrees in social work, theology, political science, who will put down their martinis and say: “You caused this? You think you have that much power?” Yes. You have the power. Your mother has given it to you, a nubby black cloak with too many buttons. Family responsibility: who needs it? You aren’t even thirty and already you have corns. An exchange, please. You’ll take anything. A nylon windbreaker. Let’s see the second-hand sweatshirt. Hell, you’d take a felt scarf.

You dial your sister. She’s thirty-five, tall, blond, pretty in a Days of Our Lives kind of way, married to a plumber whose brother’s wedding toast consisted of obscene knock-knock jokes about hot tubs. Your sister’s been trying for three years to get pregnant—infertility specialists, yoga, relaxation tapes, which have made her the kind of woman who cuts people off with her grocery cart and backs her Jeep into telephone poles. Accidentally.

“What is it?” she says, already alarmed. You tell her about the vacuum, the family dentist, the pills—it might have been something you said—and she says, “This is shit! This is crap! I mean, fuck!”

Your sister teaches second grade. Her language worries you. You say, “I might change my ticket. Leave tomorrow.”
“Don’t be an idiot,” she says. “You can’t leave now. Christ.”

The youngest child is supposed to get off easy. Why does the youngest never get off easy? You wish you hadn’t called. You babble about the dog’s ill manners, but this is insufficient diversion for your sister, who bangs around her new bungalow until you promise to call with an update and finally hang up.

You creep upstairs to your parents’ room, expecting crime-scene chaos, nude stockings swinging from the ceiling fan, but finding the bedspread taut, the pillows perky, and just a few rumpled tissues scattered across the rug, like water lilies. You lie down on your parents’ bed—an opulent mattress, with crisp pastel sheets. Your senior picture from high school stands on your mother’s dresser. Bangs and pearls. She liked you better that way. She liked you home on Friday nights, baking muffins. She liked you in the church choir, though you have a wretched voice and only joined to make her happy.

Happy. What a joke. You fold your arms over your chest and stare at your sandals. Your mother didn’t even comment on your lover’s beauty, her starry smile and bewitching eyebrows. This is the finest woman you’ve ever landed, and your mother couldn’t even say: I suppose I’ll get used to this eventually. She couldn’t say: Just give me time. She could only say, “Hmph,” and I’d rather die.

On the phone, your father kept using the word fortunately. Fortunately she had the sense to bike home. Fortunately she called the psychiatrist. Fortunately she decided against the second fistful of pills. Fortunate is to suicide as hammer is to foot. You hug a knee to your chest and examine the fresh blister on your ankle. Fortunately you had the sense to grow out your bangs after high school. There is only so much compassion.

And if she died? It would cost you years in therapy and anti-aging cosmetics.
Which you probably need anyway.

You sit up, leaf through the phone book by the bed. Air conditioning, Air quality, Airlines. You don’t have to put up with this. You have more interesting things to do. You jazzercise. You’re learning guitar. Tomorrow your lover will meet you at the baggage claim, and you will hurl yourself into her arms. You will topple her with your vulnerability and love.

Your mother’s wedding photo on your father’s dresser. A three-quarter turn with bright young eyes. What happened to that woman? The one who, in the next frame, grins from a deep velour chair, clapping you and your siblings in a tangle of pudgy limbs? Just yesterday, she ran her fingers slowly through your hair. “You have such beautiful hair,” she said. She touched her own curls, crisp from years of dye: “Mine used to be pretty, too.” Your mother has grown so thin, pierced by a string of disappointments, that motherly necklace of teeth. You shouldn’t have shown her the picture. She cannot share your little patch of happiness. Your mother can love you, but only so much.

You see her hours from now, lying on a narrow hospital bed in her turquoise jogging suit and sneakers. There is the distant treble of the nurse’s station, some schizophrenic jabbering down the hall. The room is dark, and she curls on her side, hands pressed flat under her ear. Her cheeks glint with smeared eye shadow. Her eyes are nervous with shame.

You blink down at the phone book in your lap. Ink blackens your fingertips like an admission of guilt. Don’t be an idiot. You cannot leave. You don’t even know how. Airline reservations scare you, with their strict terms and conditions. You have to feed the dog, eat mangos with your father. You have to attend hospital visiting hours.
tomorrow. Muster some mix of honesty and humor. A clown with a downward smile.

You bend to unbuckle your sandals. There is no resolution. There is only the post-it for you to plagiarize: *You are not my job.* And just now, the dog bounding up the stairs to your side, planting her paw on your knee. Scratch her feebly on the chest. She’ll bow her head, the little daffodil. She’ll jut out her chin and belch. *Thank you, thank you very much.*