Dandelions, and other stories

Alicia Ieronemo

The University of Montana

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Dandelions
and other stories

by
Alicia Jeronemo
B.A. Augustana College, Rock Island, IL, 1991

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In the car there are Michelle and Nina and their parents and Michelle's blue and red-stained lips pouting. Outside there are bottle rockets skidding through the air. The air is yellow through the tinted windows, and yellow, too, when Michelle rolls down the car window and sticks her face out. She hustles it back in when her father pushes the automatic window button up, wordlessly.

It's hot outside. There are no bottle rockets in the car because all the kids outside are much luckier. The fathers outside do not worry as much as Michelle and Nina's father, and they give their children real firecrackers on Fourth of July, especially this bicentennial, but Michelle and Nina have only sparklers. There are real firecrackers hidden in a vinyl purse that Michelle stuck under her father's car seat, and while he drives she lights them, one by one, in her mind.

The car is a Suburban but they all call it "the car." Her parents are in the front mumbling to each other, Michelle is stretched across the middle seat with her head on the armrest, and Nina is in the little back seat, chewing gum as if mouthing small bites of ice cream, and staring thoughtfully at Seventeen. Her purple gingham halter top ties around her neck, and the ends flop back over her bony shoulders in equal lengths of lavender rick-rack. The halter used to be Michelle's but she outgrew it and gave it to Nina and then their mother replaced the original ties with rick-rack, and this is so much
cuter. This is the first time that Michelle has noticed it, and she starts to think about asking her mother why she couldn’t have had rick-rack all along, but instead she punches the back of her seat and grabs at the Seventeen and says, “Mine.” She likes her sister but sometimes that is a problem, like now, when Nina appears content, which is most of the time.

Their mother bought them magazines at the White Hen Pantry expressly for the trip—Seventeen for Michelle because she has just become a teen, and Ranger Rick for Nina. Their mother kept the magazines hidden in the White Hen bag for several days before the Fourth, but as soon as they had driven only one block away from the house she pulled them out triumphantly, graciously, and passed them back. It was sweet. Two blocks from the house, on Hawthorne, their mother fished an orange soda from her bag and opened it sheepishly, pretending not to be sheepish by taking a big gulp. But there was still a tentativeness, even in that. The supply of special treats was being depleted before they got out of town.

Leaving was stressful. There were lists of things to bring and things to do. Bring: bug spray, colander, towels, sandals, silverware, underwear, volleyball, mace, spaghetti sauce, potholders, dish soap. Do: call police station and tell them we’re going Out Of Town, water plants, leave directions for Kitty Kat with Danny, set timers, set burglar alarm. Close door, lock door, get in car, start car, leave in car, drive to vacation, have vacation.

On Thatcher her mother said, “Oh. Uh oh. No...Um,” and looked at their father with her hand over her mouth and he said, “What?” sharply, as if he knew what was coming, and their mother said, “I don’t know if I turned the curling iron off...” and soundlessly their father took a left, and then a right, and then they were back on the trail to the house.

Michelle stiffened in her seat and wondered if her father would get mad about
this, and closed her magazine. It didn’t seem right to read it unless they were driving away, somehow. Their mother jumped out of the car and ran up to the front door, her bell-bottoms flapping. She went in and a few minutes later ran back down to the car and buckled her seatbelt again and said, “It was off. That’s what I thought, I thought it was off. And I brought you your sunglasses that you forgot!” and their father said stiffly, “Did you turn on the burglar alarm?” as he did every single time, and Michelle shook her head in exasperation and re-opened the magazine where she had been marking it all the while with her finger.

Their father is a musician and he gets one vacation a year. This is both a sad and happy thing for Michelle. She likes laying out at lakes, getting a tan between the good hours of 10:00 and 2:00, but on vacation there is no school or lessons or friends to break up the long day of their father’s sanguine attention. It is just she and Nina, pretending to care.

Fourth of July is a holiday where kids should get to blow off firecrackers and go to the Priory’s softball field and sit on the hill with Wendy and those guys and burn holes through leaves with the hot red eyes of punks. On Fourth of Julys the D’Arby’s next door always had a picnic in their backyard and it looked so fun: they had a red white and blue striped tablecloth and big red and blue balloons, and colored chalk for the sidewalk and baby Boots had a red wagon that his brother decorated with red tinsel that was actually from Christmas, and Boots rode it like a baby presidential candidate.

That was creative! Michelle had watched the D’Arby’s setting up for the picnic that morning from the back porch where she was sent to shake out the tent. She shook it carelessly, and swatted repeatedly at the geranium pot which finally fell off the deck and onto the curly snake of the hose. Furtively she stared at baby Boots in his clean OshGosh overalls. He shook a miniature American flag at the end of a little popsicle
stick. Mrs. D'Arby came out onto her patio and filled the cooler with red white and blue ice cubes: a layer of red food-dyed ice followed by a layer of clear ice followed by a layer of blue ice, all in a cube. Mrs. D'Arby called out to Michelle and told her to come to the picnic later and Michelle called back that she couldn’t come because she had to go on vacation, and Mrs. D'Arby smiled and went inside. Michelle dropped the tent and ran next door and looked at the cubes in wonder, then carefully picked one up and sucked on it, and now her bottom lip is red and her top lip is blue and the utility tent, packed into the camper they are pulling behind the car, is still covered in dried mud.

They are going to Indiana, to a lake called Loon Lake, and that is only one more hour away. Every fifteen minutes Michelle can’t resist leaning forward and saying, “Are we almost to Loony Lake?” to her mother, who studies the map carefully. He father asks her if she has her seatbelt on and she says, “Yes!” although she had secretly, quietly taken it off while they were still in the driveway. Now they are on the highway, going out of the city. In the car, Michelle stretches her legs out on the seat to make them look longer. She feels her shins for stubble from when she Naired them last week, but there is none. It’s hot in the car, and the air conditioning smells like the burning residue of dynamite, and sweet orange pop. Her clothes feel tight.

Her father opens his window and lights a cigarette and the smoke blows back right at Michelle and she says loudly, “Excuse me!” but he just keeps smoking, “Why are we going here?” she says to the front seat. “We always try to do things like this and it never works.” She leans forward to make sure her mother knows this, but her mother just glances at their father nervously.

Michelle shifts impatiently and sighs and pretends to read the magazine she took from Nina. Nina now sits reading Ranger Rick as coolly as she had perused Seventeen. Her hair is wrapped like two French cruellers blithely above each ear. She is eight. When she puts on her headphones to listen to a tape of their father’s band, the Nutones,
Michelle stares at her and says, “I hate you,” but Nina, headphoned, can’t hear.

At the entrance to the campground there are two giant wooden loons on posts, like the lions who sit on the marble steps of the library. Their father drives through the front gate, and onto the gravel drive toward the campground office. He parks and their mother scrambles, looking for their pre-registration papers, their reservation through the weekend. Michelle hopes to God her mother hasn’t lost the papers, or her father is going to get very pissed.

But then her mother finds them, folded into the glove compartment where she had put them the night before so she wouldn’t forget them. Their father goes into the office for a while and then comes back and they drive the slow loop of the campground to site 60, the last one on the block behind them, right across from the office where they started.

The campground is crowded and bare of trees except for a small patch at the far end, and the road is blinding white from all the gravel. There is the office and the loop of sites filled with campers, and a basketball net next to the bath-house, and just down the slight slope from where they will park their camper, in a dandelion meadow there is a medieval-looking pavilion with a green roof. People are milling around down there, setting some stuff up, and Michelle can’t quite tell what they’re doing but she knows she wants to go down there.

“Time to set up,” says her father, “Nobody’s going anywhere,” and they all get out of the car. A bunch of stuff falls out of the door when Michelle opens it – her thongs and her tapes and pop cans and Nina’s Bugs Bunny deck of cards which Michelle had borrowed. The cards fall all over the gravel and Michelle heaves a sigh and picks them up and shoves them back together, face up and face down, any way.

Her father yanks his jeans back up around his waist and plucks at his beard and
lights a cigarette. He pats the car affectionately, and stands smoking for a long time, just staring around the campground. Then he says, “Michelle, get me a beer,” and Michelle goes to the cooler in the back of the car and gets him one. Nina says, “Mommy, I have to pee,” and they leave to go to the bath-house. Michelle sighs heavily and pulls at her bathing suit under her white running shorts and stares at herself in the car window.

She stands in the grass, and watches her father unhook the camper. The ground is sandy, and she looks off toward Loon Lake, where there must be more sand. She can see just a glint of water from here. After they set up the camper, Michelle knows, they will all have to trudge down to the lake and set up the boat. There is always so much to do on vacation it makes Michelle tired. She is weary just thinking about the afternoon ahead. She goes back to the car and gets the red vinyl purse from under her father’s car seat and slings it over her wrist.

She has on white sandals with wedge heels and her toenails are painted candy-apple red and with the purse around her wrist she feels strangely cosmopolitan here in the plasticky campground. All around, people have already set up their spots. They have picnic tables and hot dog buns and jello salad and baked beans, but nowhere, Michelle will bet, is there anyone here who has red white and blue ice cubes. She doubts that anyone in this campground could even begin to figure out how to make red white and blue ice cubes.

From everywhere is the smell of hundreds of barbecuing hamburgers. Maybe one thousand. It’s like a little village, Michelle thinks, like Robin Hood’s, cooking its meat, the smoke from all the little red dots of the campfires curling up around them into the trees above. Through the air above the tents, arrows whiz by and burst into an explosion of sparks. And she is the career girl/princess visiting them all. She is much different from them, is all she knows. Her father is banging on the camper and telling her mother, back from the bath-house, to move out of the way.
Nina comes over and squats next to Michelle and digs around in the sand with a little plastic figure of a cowboy that she found in the dirt. Her freckled nose is sunburned just pink and her toes splay gracefully on the grass. Michelle starts to line up sticks to make a fort for Nina, and looks around at the people lounging on their lawn chairs around the campground, fat and in gym shorts and flesh colored tank tops, watching their portable televisions, and she wonders if, when they look back at her, they realize that she is really a career girl visiting these people who just seem like her family. After he cranks the camper up, her father's t-shirt has turned an even darker shade of black.

Down at the lake, their father has dragged the raft out of the car. The raft is an "ocean-going" raft, Michelle knows, because her father showed her its picture in the catalog when he was special-ordering it, and in the picture the life-jacketed people were safe and dry in their raft, even though the water around them was whipped white. When he showed her the picture and recited the "specs" he said to Michelle, "What do you think?" and Michelle said, "I think it's nice."

Now her father has his own orange life-jacket on and it strains across his chest. He's a pumpkin. He is wearing the life-jacket even though he is on shore. He doesn't know how to swim, in fact, but even Michelle knows that he is the type of person who will do whatever he has to for the family. Her mother is always saying so. All vacations should always include a boat, and there really is something about this that Michelle likes, because it is normal, it's what the D'Arbys would have, and there is already so much about their family that Michelle knows isn't normal. No one else's father is in a band with skinny hairy people who come and practice in the basement on Tuesdays nights, playing "Brick House" and "Say You Love Me" with all the old basement windows propped open and Michelle and Nina sitting in them, watching, fetching beers for the drummer and the guitar player. Fathers are supposed to play golf, and go to
offices, and eat breakfast.

Her father plays in lounges every weekend, and when you have played in lounges every weekend since you were sixteen, you entertain the fringes of good society, society's losers and wastoids, the riff-raff. Rick rack. You watch them, a cigarette hanging off your lip, your fingers moving in a pattern that the heart knows better than its own rhythm. The lounge is always smoky and blue, the people are always crying the same way, trembling too much, and then you start trembling, too, by association, by approximation to the fringe.

Her father knows the dangers of the world, only a plywood stage between him and them. It's an imperfect line between safety and danger, and that's why they have a burglar alarm, are only allowed sparklers: he is trying to save them from what he knows.

But everyone knows that normal fathers do not go away every weekend and play in lounges and get home at 4:00 am and then get up and go to work the same day, and then come home and stare out the window at the railroad tracks and smoke like maniacs. Most people do not even let the fathers smoke in the house, and they must go outside on the patio and steal smokes with each other and talk about the office, or golf scores. Her father hates both golf and offices.

She likes both, and sometimes it is this, this very simple thing that he cannot do for her that makes her teeth chatter in anger, and her stomach hurt. She also likes the idea of a boat, a normal red boat on blue water and her in white shorts, tanning. It's the reality of the boat that's disappointing.

The lake is brown and shallow and flies buzz around the surface, palsied with their own disgusting nastiness and the heat. Michelle hurls a rock into the water and it plops heavily, and sends up a lethargic wave of mud. There is a peeling rowboat tied by a long neon cord to a cinder block which someone has dragged onto shore and hidden in some weeds.
She swipes the Seventeen at the flies and they disperse like smoke. This is nothing like the ocean, nor anything like the lake in the Loon Lake Campground brochure that Michelle’s mother had showed her before they left. This cannot be “cerulean blue,” nor does this lake have cabanas! The cabanas were never left out of her descriptions of the vacation when she explained to Wendy and her friends where she was going for Fourth of July. She had mentioned the cabanas, told it that way so many times that she had started to believe it herself, she realizes, and kicks the pile of rubber that is the raft on the sand. “Hey!” her father says sharply. “Hey,” Michelle says back, and goes down to the line where the water meets the sand, and Nina follows her.

“Be careful!” her father says, and swats angrily at the flies, at the yellow air around his head. When he says, “Be careful!” Michelle stamps her sandal into the mud and gets it all filthy dirty. This is disgusting, and she feels herself getting hot. She does not want to be here.

“Can me and Nina go over there by those trees?” she says, pointing behind her mother at a grove of pines and oaks further down the shore, but no one answers her. She does not want to go on this lake, does not want to motor out to the middle of it and then stop and drop anchor and watch her father rest and smoke cigarettes, the gasoline from the engine leaking a slow rainbow around her dipped hand. When her father asks her to pass him the air pump she holds it up as weakly as possible, as unenthusiastically as possible, just a centimeter from the tips of his fingers, and he has to reach for it, move, and snatch it impatiently, furiously, as she stands there pigeon-toed, looking daft.

But there is something wrong with the raft. Her parents shuffle it about and peer at the directions on inflation. Her father wipes his face with his black t-shirt but sweat still runs into one of his eyes. Michelle can hardly stand to look at it. Her mother picks up pieces of equipment helplessly, holding them out to her father and he ignores them.
He tries one more time to shove the glossy wooden floorboard into place, but it will not go, it doesn’t fit and then he picks it up and wings it toward the car. The floorboard skids along the gravel in a dusty cloud, scratched.

Everyone stands frozen. Her father waves his big hand limply toward the trees. He looks at Michelle and says, “Go.”

She takes up Nina’s hand without looking at her. She sees her father staring toward the water. He looks like he is trying to keep control over all the parts of his face. She thinks, for the first time: he knows how much it sucks. She has gotten what she wanted again, and, once again, it isn’t what she wanted at all. She leads Nina gingerly toward the shore of the warm brown lake. The vinyl purse slips down her wrist and rests in the angle of her and Nina’s joined hands.

In the trees it is cooler, fresher, somehow. The lake laps against the shore, but it’s farther away, and she can’t see the flies from here. The floor of the grove is soft and covered with the brown mulch of dead leaves, rotting in the humidity. It is very quiet and Nina says, “I like this, here.”

“Yes,” says Michelle, “This is better.” They sit not talking for a while, trying to be like little dandelions and not bothering anyone. After a while, Michelle feels slightly better and says, “Do you want to make something with me? Do you want to make a booby trap to catch somebody?” and Nina does. Michelle says, “Okay, go run around here and get some sticks, lots of long little ones and then some big ones.” Nina lets go of her hand and starts gathering sticks. This is kind of a baby game but she likes building traps, and now there’s nothing to do anyway.

She starts digging in the sandy soil with a branch until she has a hole, and then she keeps scooping dirt out until it is deep. Nina comes over and lays her branches down and squats across from Michelle and starts digging, too. They concentrate, their
heads bent, the backs of their necks exposed to the dappled sunlight and the fat mosquitos. When the hole is a foot deep, Michelle starts to lay the smallest branches across it carefully, evenly. When Nina tries to lay one Michelle slaps her hand away, and Nina starts looking for the smallest sticks and just hands them to Michelle, and after about five or six she tries again to lay one of her own, and Michelle lets her. When they get the first layer down, Michelle starts to lay fresh, flat leaves on top of the sticks, so the hole can't be seen. Then they hide behind a tree and wait for someone to walk by and fall into the trap.

But after five minutes its clear that no one is going to come this way. Her parents haven't even called for them, don't have any idea where they went. She and Nina huddle under the trees in the dry leaves from last fall and watch the trap anxiously. Through the net of the trees behind her she can see the brown lake, and far off to the left is the campground, and she can vaguely make out the lanterns of the campers and the towels hung on the lines from the people who went swimming in the stupid swamp.

But the people are laughing. They must not have minded the lake that much. Maybe it wouldn't have been as bad as she thought, and just as she thinks this Nina says, "I wanted to go on the raft." They sit and think about this soberly, Nina flicking her stick in the dirt. Every once in a while the whistle of a bottle rocket cuts the silence, and the whistles seem to get closer and closer, and the booby trap is the target. Far off is the pavilion is the dandelion meadow, and in the quiet she can hear music, the vague sounds of partiers.

She snaps open the vinyl purse and takes out the matches and the rectangle of firecrackers that she got from Wendy's brother after school Thursday for $7.00 of her allowance. The firecrackers are covered in a red waxy paper with a dragon twisting dangerously on the label. Nina stops spelling her name in cursive in the dirt and leans over wonderingly toward the package Michelle holds, and when the waxed paper falls
away, Nina gasps. "What are those?" she says and Michelle says, "They're mine."

She rips a few pages out of the Seventeen and walks over to the booby trap and gently puts the pages on top of it, to give the firecrackers a nice place to lay. Nina follows wide-eyed, the blond danishes on the sides of her head bobbing. She looks at the firecrackers skeptically, and stays behind Michelle, fearful. Michelle arranges the firecrackers carefully on a page: a smiling girl in a string bikini eating a huge slice of watermelon. There is only aqua blue water behind her, as if she floats in front of it, magically, her brown belly a hollow dish. No one made her wear a stupid life-jacket.

She opens the book of matches which she stole from her father's drawer before they left, plucks one out, and turns the book cover over, to light the match. It lights and she draws it quickly to the firecrackers, but she's too quick and it goes out. Again. Out. Again. Out. Nina looks up at her quizzically and Michelle says, "Back up, Nina! Do you want this thing to blow your head off?" and Nina creeps back quickly, like a sand crab. "I'm doing this for our Fourth of July."

Again. Pause, and then the quick florescent red fizz of sparks. Michelle is surprised and starts to trip backwards. She falls into the leaves, lands on top of Nina, in fright. The firecrackers go off crazily, like shots, louder than anything for miles and miles of brown lake. It lasts forever, but when Michelle opens her eyes, everything she sees has turned red and blue and white.
Kate and Cecilia are carrying away book bags after their literature class, held every day in a small secretarial school on the other side of the Via del Corso, one of the busiest streets in Rome. They aren't studying to be secretaries; the Holy Trinity High School Abroad Program could find only that particular space to rent for just a semester, so Latin Literature, Baroque Art History, Introduction to Physics, and Catechism classes are set to the plink of secretarial students' typewriters behind plaster walls, and the Sister's soft murmurs.

The secretaries get a ten-minute break every hour. Sometimes, during their breaks, the secretaries walk past the door of the literature classroom, open because of the heat and stare at the girls, and the secretaries are all in fancy shoes and tiny black skirts, their hair pulled back in sleek satin ribbons. They always speak loudly in mysterious Italian as they pass the class on their way to the bathroom. The girls always stop listening to Sister Marie as she reads *The Aeneid*, and look wistfully out the door after them, wishing to pull their secret cigarettes out of their book bags. When she hears the secretaries coming, Cecilia stares at Kate and takes an imaginary puff. "I wish," Kate mouths back. "I'm dying," mouths Cecilia.

Kate and Cecilia already walk around the city as if it were a lifelong habit. They are in white blouses with Peter Pan collars. They are appropriately snotty and
light-footed. They are sufficiently unimpressed with the grandeur of the Forum, of the Coliseum, of the hills, and scratch their knees during field trips with Sister Marie.

They affect what Kate hopes is an air of bored allure, like the secretaries. Having adopted a way of gliding around, dodging mopeds, loving dust, Cecilia with her mop of black curls has even a few times fooled the Italians into speaking the language to her on the street. "Ti amo," Cecilia says to Kate. "You should go to confession, Cecilia," Kate tells her. Cecilia kicks the back of her pleated skirt with leather heels.

There are not many tourists on Piazza Navona on a Tuesday afternoon. At this time of day it's only children with their nannies, old ladies, portrait artists, three fountains, Sant'Agnese. Kate pushes Cecilia off balance as she bends to brush dirt off of her white sock. Cecilia screams and pretends to fall into the fountain in front of the church. She flashes her underwear at Kate. She sprawls across the fountain for a second, staring at her reflection in the water.

The afternoon is hot and loud. The buildings around the piazza are pink, and through the open doors they can see into the dark cave of the grocer's, its heavy shelves stacked high with colored cans of vegetables, and everything in there seems shady and cool.

"This sucks," says Cecilia, and plucks her blouse away from her armpit a few times, "It is so hot." Kate taps Cecilia on the back and says, "The church is cool, I'm sure. You know it won't be hot in the church."

Cecilia pouts, then smiles. "You are so bell-la, Kate," she says to her. "You're the most bella thing I've ever seen in my whole life." Men and boys in linen pants and dark suspenders sit on the fountains and swing their legs, staring openly at the girls and speaking to each other about it, in Italian. Cecilia scoops up a handful of Kate's pale red hair and throws it into a pile on top of Kate's head, then stands back to admire her creation.
But black-haired Cecilia is the one the men look at, as if they can tell she kissed a boy the night before on the steps of their pensione as Kate watched, leaning out into the dark from the shuttered window above. The bedroom the girls share sits on the second floor and is ancient, with pink peeling walls, a marble fireplace, a shower with no curtain, one single bed covered in nappy, butter-colored chenille. Kate sleeps on an armchair that actually folds out into a cot, its scratchy arms protecting her like the sides of a crib. Their school books are in a stack on the mantle of the fireplace, piled up against a mirror, which is black-spotted with age and etched with twining roses. The floor is green tile, and there’s a small table with two chairs to flank the oil-cloth. There is a fountain across the street that trinkles into a pool all night long, and sometimes old men come and fill up wine bottles with water from the spout.

On the walls around the room are painted ferny leaves, randomly, in green enamel. Cecilia has said she wants to paint more of them, a ferny-leaf chain in a difficult maze which will lead eventually to the heart that has been carved into the plaster directly above her pillow. After dark, the light in the bedroom is dim, but last night when Kate had leaned out the window and called down to Cecilia, Cecilia looked up at Kate silhouetted in a white nightgown, and called back: “Got a problem?”

“No,” said Kate, then, “Yes, I mean, yeah. You.” Cecilia, on the stairs below, put her hand on her hip and popped it up toward the window. “Oooh ho ho,” cooed Kate, “What about your boyfriend back home in Illinois?” she said, intentionally staring down at Alesandro, the Italian boy with his arm draped casually around Cecilia’s shoulders. He stared back at Kate, sloe-eyed, as if she were a cat that might have jumped, just then, onto his head.

Cecilia laughed attractively, and Kate whipped a piece of chocolate at her, to see if she could catch it. Cecilia snapped it out of the air and it disappeared.
But this afternoon, Kate pushes Cecilia toward the door of the church and imagines what the inside of Sant’Agnese looks like, and thinks it must be nothing like Holy Trinity back home. Holy Trinity has a microphone and guitars, and its low ceiling hangs banal and white over the blond pews. Even from the outside Sant’Agnese seems like something else already. It probably has real confessional booths. True Romans were always going to confession, sobbing, repenting things; she cannot imagine anything like Father Fahey and the reconciliation room, with its posters of seagulls, in Sant’Agnese.

Cecilia is an adulterer, that is true, but as Kate stands and thinks about it she actually feels a little sorry for Cecilia. If Cecilia goes inside she will have no idea where to go, no clue what to do. Will the priest, dark and ruffled as an owl, be waiting for Cecilia by the door, ready to usher her to her curtained cell small as a tomb, ready to lock its door behind her and keep her there with him alone? Keep her there with him and the stone angels hanging from the rafters, their stone “clothing,” if you could call it clothing, slipping off?

Or, more likely, will Cecilia only walk into the darkened cavern lit with red candles blinking in the thick air, soupy with the mumbles of the holy, and get lost and confused? Even if someone were to come to her and ask her what business she had here, an old woman perhaps, dressed in black with a cross pinned to her heavy bosom like a shield, Cecilia wouldn’t be able to understand her anyway, since all she can really do with comfort in Italian is order gelato.

A wash of worry sweeps over Kate. She pictures Cecilia’s American boyfriend Paul’s smooth face above his hooded sweatshirt, munching on a subway sandwich back in Illinois, alone and unaware.

She sees Cecilia move to the door of the church. Cecilia smooths her skirt and shifts her bag to her other shoulder. Then she heaves a mighty, exaggerated pull against the door’s weight, and gets jerked forward herself. Dramatically. The door’s locked.
Huh. Kate shakes her head as Cecilia looks back at her triumphantly. Smiling, Cecilia hops quickly down to where Kate sits, and says, “If the door wouldn’t even open for me, I must not be that bad then, after all.”


“Because,” says Cecilia logically, “maybe that one kiss just wasn’t really enough.”

Cecilia’s boyfriend back at Holy Trinity High School is blond, 16, named (unfortunately) Paul. Cecilia says she hates that name but there’s really nothing she can do about it, save never use it and call him by the name of her own choice: Stephen, Dax, Antonio. “What’s wrong with Paul?” asks Paul, throwing his sweatered shoulders back.

Yesterday, when Cecilia found Alesandro, she was ecstatic. Alesandro was kind of close to Antonio, she explained to Kate, the name she most adored. Alesandro was playing with a tin can full of colors, wiping chalk onto his jeans as he finished copying The Ecstasy of St. Theresa onto a small patch of dark gray concrete outside the ice cream store that the girls had been stopping at every day on their way back to the pensione. They had seen slides of St. Theresa in art history class, marble Theresa wilting under her draperies with her eyes closed and her mouth open, about to be pierced by the arrow of an empty-eyed angel. But in the two weeks that they had been stopping at the gelateria each day after class, they had never seen Alesandro there.

He shaded slowly and lovingly, and, as they looked on, he finished, and signed his name in a flurry of love for St. Theresa. Alesandro Marchetti. “Oh. My. God,” said Cecilia, and pushed Kate away from the picture. “Just kidding,” she said, and turned to the boy. Actually, Kate thought, he looked much older than a boy.
"Hello," said Cecilia. "Buon giorno," she said. When he picked up his chalks to move on to a different piece of sidewalk, another picture, he waved Cecilia along with him, and Kate turned to leave, and follow the familiar path to their pensione alone. The huge bells rang low and hollow somewhere off in the distance.

The Pensione Marcus, where the girls are staying, is an old apartment actually, not really like a hotel at all. It's on a street that gets narrower and narrower as it winds away from the Spanish Steps and leads toward the river. Apartments hang above the store-fronts a little tentatively, the balconies tilted and dripping with pots of geraniums. Sometimes, in what looks small enough to be considered just a path between the peachy buildings, there will be some spindly chairs and a few tables topped with creamy blue linen, real china and silver, and jars of cut flowers all sitting shady and cool under two giant pale-pink umbrellas and iron lanterns. A little ristorante.

The Pensione Marcus is on the second floor, above a restaurant like this. The pensione's owner, Marcus, runs the four rooms with the help of his wasted, beige-colored wife and his whiskered old father, who sweeps the hall with a rolling carpet-sweeper every morning. Sometimes, when Kate meets him in the hall on her way to get an early phone call or a cup of coffee, his same brown cardigan will be buttoned incorrectly, half of it hanging down like a droopy flag, half of it tucked into his flannel trousers by mistake. "Ciao," he always says to her, and pretends to run over her feet with the carpet-sweeper, dissolving into a brand of hoarse chuckles. The apartment has two glass doors which open onto a breakfast room, where every morning the girls are served a knobby, hollow pastry, and pear nectar. Pear nectar! thinks Kate, charmed. She knows there is no such thing, and never will be, in Illinois.

But now, the Pensione Marcus is as quiet as the church was earlier this afternoon. During the "quiet time" before dinner, all girls staying in the hotel, including Sister Marie, must be quiet or go outside while Marcus watches soccer on the television in the
breakfast room. Cecilia and Kate are in their bedroom. Later they will sneak out past Sister Marie's door while she sips black coffee on the edge of her bed.

Cecilia is in her underwear, trying to decide what to put on for the evening. She walks around, her finger connecting the pattern of leaves on the wall in the way that she would paint the chain if she were a painter, or a chalk artist. When she gets to the heart above her pillow, she kneels on her bed and bestows upon the heart a demure kiss. She sits back, looking at the etching intently, then puts both hands on the wall above it and kisses the heart again, with lust.

Kate sits on her bed-chair and shakes her head, giggling. Cecilia is so duh. "Is it much different," Kate asks, "than the real thing?"

"Oh," sighs Cecilia, sadly, "No." She picks up her school blouse and hurls it at the suitcase. "I wish I had a mini skirt," she says, "in black."

After dinner, they walk down the cobbled street toward the Spanish Steps. The night is threaded with hash smoke and the scent of grapey wine that has been spilled. The sky above is navy blue. Teenagers and drunks sit all over the steps, drinking. Someone is playing a guitar, singing American top-40 songs, and a few Italian kids sing along, reciting words they don't understand. They stare at Kate and Kate thinks the stares last too long. The girls stand at the bottom of the piazza and scan the steps for Alesandro. When Cecilia spots Alesandro's long legs, leather boots, sharp nose, she gives a little yawp, and grabs Kate's hand. "Awesome," she says, and pulls Kate up the steps to where the boys are sitting.

Alesandro's stretched out on his step like he's been waiting there a long time, with his elegant wrists poking out from his white shirt cuffs. He is waiting with his hairy friend Pietro, who speaks a version of English if it has anything to do with women. Pietro's holding a bottle of frascati. Together they've been watching the Italian girls in
short leather jackets, secretaries on their way home from work, zip by on their mopeds.

"Mama," Pietro keeps saying, "mama, mama, mama." When Alesandro reaches for the bottle that Pietro has been swinging between his legs and then tilts his head back to take a sip, the bottle disappears: Cecilia has it snatched. He laughs, and motions for her to drink some, as much as she wants. Cecilia drinks, and doesn’t offer any to Kate, and Kate is half mad, half thankful for that. Half of her wants to be back at the pensione studying with the other girls in the breakfast room. But she stands behind Cecilia and twists her hair into a knot with one finger, balancing on the edge of the step.

"Buona sera," says Alesandro, getting up and giving a little bow, "Good evening little pretties." He points to Pietro, and Pietro says, "I have just taught him to say that to you. I can speak English."

“Oh,” says Cecilia, “Cool.” She says, “This is Kate,” and the boys nod briefly. Cecilia smiles at Alesandro bravely. She runs a hand over her flank absently, and picks at the black dress whose hem she ravaged with a pair of scissors. She plucks a stray thread from where it hangs, stranded, from the button between her small breasts. Alesandro walks to her and touches one of them through her dress, lightly, and she looks up with surprise, then wonder. "Hey," she says softly.

"Hey," says Pietro, "Alesandro want to ask you: You want to be fashion model?"

"Ah!" says Cecilia, "Like St. Theresa!"

Alesandro moves closer and presses his fingers against her. Cecilia looks to Kate and hesitates stiffly, thoughtfully, breathing under his hands.

But then she moves a millimeter into him, and caves.

Kate grabs the wine away from her, meanly. She doesn’t know if she’s jealous or disgusted. But Cecilia has already forgotten her and releases the wine bottle without protest, so Kate turns to go back down the steps toward their pensione, the night hissing
all around her.

In the morning, Kate wakes when dawn is still quiet and dull. The room is filmy at first, but then Kate looks over to Cecilia’s bed and everything focuses suddenly. Cecilia has not come back.

Kate feels a knot of panic bloom over her. Outside the window, the light is just beginning to blush and it is very quiet everywhere, especially in the wake of Cecilia’s absence. She hadn’t noticed before how loud the mere presence of Cecilia was until now that Cecilia wasn’t here, and should have been. The room seems translucent and Cecilia’s stuff strewn about looks like bright flakes, petals, the contents of her suitcase spilled when she searched for something to wear. The wine bottle that Kate had taken from her hand the night before and finished by herself on the lone walk back lies on its side on Cecilia’s bed where Kate had dropped it. She’d never drunk that much wine before, and now she has a headache, and feels shaky and sick. She grabs a pair of jeans from the floor and runs downstairs, and out onto the deserted street.

No one is walking anywhere. The morning is warm already, but empty. She jogs down the street, toward the Steps in the weird hope that when she gets there, Cecilia might be posing in the exact spot that she left her the night before, and for a moment, she almost convinces herself that Cecilia will be there, and goes a bit slower.

But Cecilia is not. The Steps are entirely empty, huge. Kate starts to run, by the gelateria, past Piazza Navona, past parts of the neighborhood she has never been in before, small, dirty alleys. Always the streets are curved and run at strange angles, and soon the street names on plaques pinned to the walls of buildings become entirely unfamiliar, unpronounceable in her mind.

She has no idea how to find Cecilia, no idea where she herself would be if she were a different person, someone who had ever stayed out all night with strangers. She
slows down. There is laundry hanging between buildings and sometimes a string of torn flags. Cats slink around deserted patios of restaurants, sniffing diligently. The sky starts to tint a watery blue.

She keeps walking quickly, and finally, down a narrow brown-walled alley when Kate looks, is an old grandmother stooped over a broom, sweeping her step. At least it’s another person. There is the kiss of the broom over stone, the only noise in the living world. And then: somewhere, shouting in Italian, a couple back and forth in a desperate, well-rehearsed performance.

It occurs to her that she doesn’t think she’d be able to explain what Rome is like to anyone at home, and, even if she could, knows that her parents, her older brother, would not have any things in their memories that would allow them to make up this picture. If she tries to describe the Fontana di Trevi, where they went on a field trip with Sister Ellen, she knows her mother will say, enthusiastically, sincerely, “Oh, well that sounds like the fountain in Jefferson Park, doesn’t it?” and she knows she herself will just say Yes, exactly like that. She could certainly not ever be able to describe St. Theresa.

She thinks about how many thousands of miles there are between her and anything that she remembers and knows, how impossible it would be for anyone, even her parents, to get to her. Distances can be gigantic. Everyone talks about the world being small, but really, really, it is impossibly huge. She could disappear and ineffectual Sister Marie, still asleep with her socks on in her single bed in the shuttered pensione, would not know. She is that far. The sun is rising. She doesn’t know where Cecilia is at all. She turns and starts to backtrack toward the pensione, running too fast for her legs.

But in their bedroom, Cecilia is already there. She’s waiting for her, and when Kate walks through the door, Cecilia is in her nightgown, sitting next to her suitcase lying open on the bed. She has picked up all the clothes and carefully folded them into the
suitcase. Her cheeks are scrubbed clean pink against her pale face. Long strands of her hair are damp near her neck. Kate moves quickly over to her, and Cecilia says, “Where were you?” and then throws her arms around Kate and holds her tight, as if Kate had been the one missing, gone. “What happened?” asks Kate.


The Fountain of the Four Rivers, Kate knows now, is the English translation of Fontana dei Fiumi, the name of the middle fountain on the Piazza Navona. Children sail boats around it, and Kate is sitting on its edge, watching Cecilia stare up at Sant’Agnese again. She looks really small, like a kid, sticking her thumbs under the straps of her backpack. Cecilia looks really little.

It’s late afternoon. A cloud passes over the piazza and lends it the chill of city shadow, temporary and false. Kate sighs at the brief shade. Windows all around the piazza are shuttered against the day in the ancient way of keeping a house cool by blotting heat and sun, and Kate imagines the fancy apartments above, shielded from the afternoon noise, heavy with mahogany furniture and bowls of roses. A secretary somewhere inside is probably just waking up from the night before, nude under the heavy, white sheets, silver rings still on her fingers, reaching for a cigarette.

Kate digs in her bag for the pack she bought with Cecilia earlier. She chooses one and lights it. There’s a little boy in a blue shirt, tiny trousers, tiny oxfords, chasing a flock of pigeons that falls and lands in a wave of feathers always just out of his reach. He roars into a giggle as he flaps his hands in front of his face, fleeing his nanny with delight. As he runs again toward the flock, the birds begin to lift off, except for one. One stays on the piazza even though the boy is moving closer, closer than he has gotten to any bird before. He rushes at it, but the pigeon twists itself in a weird circle, trying to lift off but flopping onto one bad wing.
The little boy slides to a halt, looks strange, and begins to cry, scared, his arms stretched out hopefully for his nanny. The nanny hears him and rushes out to pick him up, throws him over her shoulder where he hangs limply. Clucking with amusement, she strokes his back and goes to her chair on the patio, where the other nannies are smiling sympathetically at him. Wide-eyed and confused, he looks back weakly at the bird.

Kate smother a smile. He's cute. She wonders what it would be like to have a boyfriend. She knows that if she ever did have one she would love him completely, and never even want to kiss anyone else.

She sees Cecilia turn and walk gingerly up the stairs to the double doors of the church.

She stands with her hand on the door handle for several seconds, longer than it should take to open a door. Then Kate sees her pull on it, and the huge door opens a crack.

But Cecilia pushes it closed quickly and turns to Kate and yells, "Aw! It's locked!" She runs down the stairs to where Kate sits, and drops onto the fountain next to her. "It was locked," she says, "Seriously."

Kate nods. "Oh, too bad," says Kate. She's not sure what to do with the things Cecilia says anymore. Cecilia points at the little Italian boy in his nanny's arms sobbing, and reaches for Kate's cigarette and takes a drag. She touches her hair nervously. She says, "Why anyone would want a kid is beyond me."

In the mornings, to get to the classroom, they cross a courtyard and spiral up an open staircase to the top floor of the building, tiled in pale lime green the color of an early leaf, or a frosted inchworm. All morning, echoes from the skinny streets float up high, magnified as though through an outdoor hallway. Out the window, the girls can just make out the tops of the white ruins of the Forum, where mint green trees grow in the mint green grass next to the Basilica Emilia, and the hills above are dotted with
rust-colored scruff.

In class, Sister Marie is still talking about *The Aeneid*. "It was so hard to found the race of Rome," she reads. "Aeneas was *hot*," writes Cecilia on Kate’s book. "He was a fucking *hammer*." Kate rolls her eyes and scratches out the words with her pen so that they can’t be seen. Maybe he was hot.

The secretaries throw open their own door with a bang and make their way down the hall, sounding like bells above the din of a train pulling out. Sister Marie, eyes on her book, shuffles to the classroom door and closes it softly, as if she doesn’t want the secretaries to know she is afraid of them. As they pass, one secretary, the prettiest one with smooth hair and a tight green shirt tied with a piece of lace, turns the knob from the outside, and lets the classroom door fall open again. The secretaries stop and look at the girls. For a moment they all stare at each other, like deer. Then the secretaries smile. Every one of them has already had sex. Sister Marie slams the door with her black-booted foot. Aeneas pitches and rolls on the sea.
Jane knows that Charlie will call after his fiancée has fallen asleep in her white-washed room. Very late at night he will come for her and floosie Anabelle, and they will go down to the quarry. Charlie’s jeans will be warm against her leg as they drive on through the dark trees and spiraling leaves. When the phone rings, Anabelle swoons onto Jane’s bed, then reaches for the receiver, giggling.

After he calls, they go out and lean against the guard-rail of the cul-de-sac to wait for him. It has been a hot yellow day. The street on which Jane lives with her grandmother, Georgia, is a trashy street, but it lies quiet now, and only the crickets are singing. Jane unplaits one of her black braids and re-twists the long strands. She can see Anabelle’s eyebrows even in the dark. Anabelle strokes them. She has just finished plucking them in front of Jane’s mirror. They are now like bows, thinks Jane, on top of the package that is Anabelle: a collage of elbows and big kneecaps and freckled breasts in her bathing suit and cut-offs. Anabelle’s hair sits on top of her head in a spray of tans and golds, dripping pale curls. During the days, she makes hats of her own design to sell to a boutique back home in Chicago – pink chiffon veils, velvet pinboxes, bell-tasseled hoods, enameled hat pins. None are quite as assuming as beautiful real-life Anabelle. The pine trees shuffle in the yard behind them.

They tell stories of small disasters to each other while they wait for the glow of
Charlie’s truck. The disasters that happen to them are big things, Jane believes, and real. “My old lover,” Anabelle snorts, covering a half-smile with her hand, spinning her finger in a circle at the side of her head, “finally blew a fuse on the Fourth of July. It was raining and we were sitting on the roof over the screen porch trying to light bottle rockets. I said to him, ‘I wish you were dead,’ and he said, ‘I wish I were dead, too,’ and right after that, without another word, he got struck by lightning. Swear to God. I mean, he didn’t die or anything, but I was so surprised I almost fell off the roof and got killed myself. No kidding,” she says, confidentially. “Since then, I’ve known my words are filled with special providence.” Anabelle bangs the guard-rail with a little stick for emphasis. She makes noise at whatever she does.

Jane nods seriously at her, and pictures Anabelle’s lover, his face long and pale as a lizard’s, staring at her in mock horror as he flies toward the rain gutter. Anabelle would’ve been sitting haughtily, a star-spangled cloche tilted patriotically over her feathery eyebrow, holding an imaginary wand, a lightning rod to his temple. “Poof!” Jane says out loud, picturing this, and Anabelle just raises her eyebrows. They sit quietly, then, and sigh. Jane thinks of earthquakes, spontaneous combustion, magnesium bursting into white.

She sees the lights of Charlie’s truck coming from far down the road and sniffs. How far would she have to be before she could not tell that they were his? Maybe a thousand miles, at most. When Charlie jumps out of the truck and runs toward them, Anabelle yelps coquettishly, but Charlie pounces on Jane. She has to let go of her one unfinished braid and her hair unwinds, half of it hanging over her shoulder and the other half still plaited. They wrestle for a minute until his face is above hers in the dark.

“Hiya, girls,” he says, smiling, to her mouth. “Up for a swim?”

Their town lies quiet and sleepy in the dark, surrounded by farmfields reaching far across the state. The lights of the houses are dim now. They drive down the middle
of the bridge and turn up the radio. Charlie beats a rhythm on the horn, he is moving like
a guitar string, strung out on himself. He is thin, brown, loose, as familiar to Jane as a
dog she might have raised. He is steamy, a graceful nerve, sharing with them a bottle of
Jack Daniels which he rests expertly between his legs. The truck whistles on down the
road and Charlie lets out a yodel, loud and clear like a liberty bell. It has been the
hottest day of the summer so far. The air blows into the truck like a thick blanket.
Anabelle rests her delicate head on Jane's shoulder, her earrings dangling.

The girls are only new friends. Anabelle had been in town only two days when
she saw Charlie scraping paint off his forearms on Georgia's sagging front porch,
baseball hat backwards on his sweaty head, and crashed her bicycle into the tall curb.
What it was that drew her down a dead-end street she might not know, but the
magnetism that is Charlie accounts for certain strange, inexplicable attractions.

By days, shirtless Charlie paints houses, a job which seems to suit him fine, and
pays for mushed baby peas and diaper service. In two days, after he and Molly are
married, he will move into Molly's father's house, where Molly already lives with their
baby, Susie, just until he can finish college and get a real job.

But most days, after work he cuts across the empty, grassy lots between town
and Jane's grandmother's house by the railroad tracks. Most days, Jane greets him at the
door with a slice of cake in one hand, her wine glass in the other. She's always in two
long dark braids, or a red sleeveless dress with fringe, or a white eyelet apron with an
embroidered heart. She's always saying hello in a sugar hiccup. Georgia rocks and
smokes Sobranies on the porch swing. Charlie spits his tobacco over the porch rail into
the tiger lilies, and mouths cake happily as Georgia frowns and Jane smiles. Georgia likes
Charlie only in spite of her better judgment.

Poor Jane. Somehow she has not been able to forget, no matter where she goes or
who she meets, about this old love, and how it allowed her to be pushed back into the
shade of the viaduct, the ties of her halter-top dragging on the pavement, the sky overhead thick with the green light before rain, and Charlie whispering, “Quiet now.” There are other memories like this, too, but this is the one that always returns, no matter how she instructs herself to forget: his hands around her ribs, his hips confident, perfect, “Quiet now.”

Georgia says that Charlie is probably not a good idea because he is obviously stupid, stupid enough to have chosen another for a wife, someone who cannot even bake a cookie, probably. There are so many other trout, sunfish, minnows in the sea, Georgia says, waiting to be caught, but she is always nonetheless sniggering at Charlie’s jokes, taken in by his silly laugh.

It happens to everybody. When Anabelle crashed her bike in front of the house, she wound up sprawled seductively on the gravel, bike wheels spinning, perspiration in a fine mist across her forehead and her mouth full of dover. Smitten, Jane had thought to herself. Done for.

They are not the only girls, of course. Charlie’s fiancée Molly is small and china pale. She wants to be a nurse. Jane thinks of her studying in the library, knowing as she thumbs the pages of *Human Anatomy* that somewhere in campus-town a party will happen and girls in neon green necklaces will remember how he used to dance and call him up. Will he go or not? Once when baby Susie and Molly and Molly’s father had gone out of town for the weekend to visit relatives, Charlie took Jane to Molly’s small room, and lying in Molly’s bed Jane thought of sailing: just she and baby Susie out on their Mississippi River to the clear blue ocean in a little skiff. In a little skiff rocking and moving with the swelling waves and pink sky toward the ancient island of Mykonos. She thought of floating past the flood-worn town dock every morning and reaching out to touch the weathered wood, grabbing the baby bottle that mysteriously appeared, forever replenished, before pushing off again.
So she can understand that the room, no matter how white, will never be big enough for Charlie. Although it is a bigger room than the slanted dormer where Charlie grew up, where he lives now, he will still be cramped. Soon, after the wedding, he told Jane, maybe they will move to a bigger place. But she wonders whether any bedroom will ever be big enough to hold Charlie. He will fill it up and then drift out like a huge, burdened cumulus cloud, eager with rain.

At the quarry, Charlie strips and dives. Jane and Charlie have been swimming here since they were little, when Jane began spending every summer with her grandmother. Back then, she would always go in the water too, naked and freezing and skinny at twelve, bigmouthed and hollering at the cold. But that was almost ten years ago. Now she knows that there are snakes in the water, and she stays back. Charlie knows it too, but paddles and splashes anyway.

The girls sit on the rocks and smoke cigarettes, order Charlie to do his water ballet. He shows off, spits water at them in a huge invisible spray. He tries to pull Jane into the water but she flexes her ankles and splashes back. The moon is out and she can hear their own echoes across the dark surface of the water. Anabelle is saying things like, "If you could be any star in the sky, any star, which one would you be?" and, "I stamped and mailed my bills on time today. I think things like that make me a better person," and, after an hour, "I can feel myself slipping into some sort of love thing."

Charlie pulls himself out of the water, pushes up between Jane's legs dangling in the warm ripples and kisses her hard. She pushes him backwards with both flat palms and he does a backflip. "Bullshit!" says Anabelle, looking at them. Anabelle shakes her hair and sighs.

Charlie says that he is truly in love with all of them, sweats at night reviewing their subtle and enchanting charms: freckles, breasts, teeth biting on his collarbone. She
pictures how he holds them steady at arms' length, muscles in his way, hair in his face, holds them one second past all personal breaking points and then: they’d do anything for him, they are his. He runs miles a day on the paths near the cornfields, chasing his hyper Dalmatian dog wildly, his soccer shoes slapping the dirt in irregular rhythm, and still he cannot rid himself of energy. He could probably run all day, if he had somewhere to go. He does not tire and slow, but skids to a halt in a spray of gravel, throwing a log for the dog who bounces away from him in huge perfect parabolas through the sunny, dusty corn. His addiction to girls scares him, sort of, but fills him also with a kind of awe for his own capacity for passion. His hands still shake, his eyes close involuntarily, he will cry to one or two of them with his face nestled deep in the hollow of a throat, leaning against the chain-link fence under the flickering, acidic lights of the Seven-Eleven. He surprises even himself with the authenticity of his tears. “Don’t get me wrong,” he says, “I mean I love her and I love the baby, but man, you know what I mean?” And they do. The girls always seem to understand.

Anabelle takes off her cut-offs and even her bathing suit, strips down to skin. She is silvery in the dark. Then she screams at the top of her lungs and jumps straight into the water like an ice pick, smooth and clean.

Even Charlie looks surprised at this: she’s the craziest girl! He turns to Jane and smiles, then dives under again like a seal. Anabelle’s echo crawls across the cool, dark limestone of the quarry, bouncing off the line of spruce on its other side. Charlie bursts up in an explosion of waves, a water volcano. Jane leans toward him slowly and he shakes water everywhere.

“You better watch out, baby,” he tells her.

“I’m watching,” she says. “Watch out for me.” A laugh explodes out of him like a bomb. He turns and dives after Anabelle. They swim away from Jane in the sparkling dark water, slippery and sure as baby snakes.
Each morning this summer, Jane wakes before her grandmother, starts the coffee pot perking, and sets out for the grocery store to get what they will need for each day’s lesson. Georgia is teaching Jane how to bake, teaching her something useful, and that’s what Jane wants: something she can use. Georgia says that men are quite simple – they can be caught with honey, a little sugar, really, and that’s the interesting thing: the catching, not the keeping.

Georgia wants to teach Jane a few tricks before one of them must leave, as Georgia is getting on these days, and won’t quit smoking for anything. Jane knows that Georgia will always believe that Jane should have just gone to study at *La Varenne* cooking school in Paris, instead of college. The French have all those good things, and in France you can smoke in whatever restaurant you damn well please.

Each day the cake is different. Jane never decides beforehand what she wants to bake, but as she pedals Georgia’s ancient bicycle to the corner store for ingredients, the name of the cake inevitably presents itself to her like a billboard of the mind, a marquee, the words made of black letters announcing their pending birth in pastry: BLACK FOREST, ALMOND BUTTERCREAM, STRAWBERRY SHORT. Today: Charlie’s wedding cake — RASPBERRY ANGELFOOD SPECIAL SURPRISE. Of course. Almond extract, cream, Swann’s Down flour, eggs. The bicycle basket is a patchwork of provisions.

After the store, she rides to the brambles on the old shortcut through the railyard. Small cats slink around the tracks, looking for curiosities, ignoring her. She drops the bike into the overgrown ragweed and makes her way through the thorns to fill up the colander with berries. The raspberries are sweetly swollen with juice, nestled behind their thorny screens. She thinks: Perfect for the cake she will make for Charlie and his
wife.

After tomorrow, she will be like a raspberry herself, nestled from Charlie by the thorny screen of his official marriage.

That's it. She is not the type of person who would have an affair with a married man, really. She is just a raspberry, private, nestling.

The morning is heavy and still. In the bushes, Jane scratches her ankles and picks berries slowly. When she hears the smack of shoes running on the gravel and the jangling of the dog's collar, she turns with mock surprise, holding the strainer in both hands.

"Whoa!" says Charlie, slipping to a stop, already shirtless in the humid morning. "Wow. What a surprise. How's it going there?" he asks, pointing to the berries in the strainer.

"Good," Jane says. She climbs out of the bramble to stand on the path. He scuffs the pebbles with one foot. "That's good," he says. He pretends to inspect the fruit.

"Whatcha making?" he asks. "Hmmm. Well, you know," Jane says. "I can't tell you that. It's a secret special surprise," and Charlie nods, "Uh huh." He stretches his arm across his chest to scratch his shoulder.

Jane picks up a berry and puts it slowly in her mouth. Charlie looks at her as if he's remembering every single thing he's ever seen her do. He picks up her braids, one in each hand, and pulls on them gently, then stops and drops them back over her shoulders. "I really really hope you'll like it, though," she says. The air is stange. She shakes her berries as if fluffing them.

"Well," he says. He turns and glances around, looking for the dog who's snuffling for something in the soggy leaves. "I'm definitely going now," he says, "cause I've gotta babysit. It's gonna rain, so maybe you should get on home." He nods, half to her, half to himself. "You know what I mean by that? Get on home? That's where I've gotta go."

"That seems perfectly obvious to me," says Jane. Charlie makes no move. Then he pokes her slowly in the stomach, looking at her face, and smiles one more time, then
sprints down the path following the tracks, the dog barking stupidly and trying to bite at his feet.

The baby Susie is sweet as sugar. Charlie’s daughter. Maybe she will make her her very own big, happy cupcake, Jane thinks. The sky has turned gray and purple. She rides back to her grandmother’s house in water-squeaky silence on the bike’s flat tires.

At the house, Jane rests the bike against the porch bannister. The house itself is pumpkin-colored, sagging with the weight of many years under oak trees. The kitchen is the biggest room, usually confetti-spackled as the sun comes through the stained-glass windows on two walls.

But today, it’s cloudy, and Georgia is up and already has the lamps lit inside: a double paper-shade laced with leather, a Tiffany repro in blue and purple irises, a black desk halogen, and a candle for good measure. These days Georgia uses electricity liberally, and rain depresses her. She sits on a high stool at the wooden kitchen table, drinking thick coffee and smoking a brown cigarette. “Hi Georgia,” says Jane when she comes in, “How are things?”

“Ah, ça va mal,” Georgia says, frowning, and points out the window at the sky. Jane shows her the grocery basket and the metal pot of berries, and Georgia brightens, and picks out a berry to suck on. “RASPBERRY ANGELFOOD SPECIAL SURPRISE!” announces Jane, and Georgia widens her eyes, clicks her tongue and smiles. Then she coughs like a tremendous truck starting off.

Jane rolls up her sleeves. Her grandmother rebelts her kimono and puts on her Edith Piaf tape. She grabs a wooden spoon and begins. “The wedding cake,” Georgia lectures, “has its roots in ancient cultures, as you must know.” Jane nods and begins to line up the groceries on the counter. Georgia puts her finger to her forehead in thought.

“Wheat has often been used as an offering to the spirits, because it symbolizes
fertility, and hope for an abundant crop. *That* of course is not a problem in this case." She laughs at her own joke. She walks around the kitchen, shaking her spoon. "The tradition of throwing rice at the bride actually began with grains of wheat, which were eventually ground into flour and baked into cakes!" Jane can tell that Georgia loves this story, and Georgia stops to pull her glasses down farther on her nose. "And those were crumbled up, and then thrown at the bride."

She pulls out her recipe and they begin, together, cracking, measuring, sifting, folding. Edith Piaf trills through stereo speakers. Their classroom, the kitchen, has become a snowdome of powdery flour, crystal sugar that spins in a flurry, landing softly again just out of Jane's reach. The oven waits, warm in its dark corner. They pour the cake batter and slide the pan onto the oven rack, lightly shutting the oven door so as not to rattle the chemistry.

"This he will love," says Georgia. There is a crack of thunder, and then fat, doltish circles of rain hit the window screens. They sigh, and rest, and wait for the bake.

Jane sits indian style on the floor and stares out the back door, blowing her own smoke rings into the dark, heavy drops of rain. The yard and trees beyond are obnoxiously green. It's still fairly early in the day, but already Anabelle is darting between the trees, in fringed boots, with ribbons in her hair, as if she could dodge arrows of rain. What does she want?

Anabelle has had more boyfriends than anyone Jane has ever met. Anabelle, in black magician's hat, would have known how to turn Charlie into her own. The thought makes Jane want to kill her.

Anabelle, one can tell just by looking, has always been entirely popular, entirely brave.

That spring Jane had reached a saturation point of want of everything. What she wanted was a sort of justice. She had waited and waited, she had assumed that what
she was looking for had also been looking for her, in turn, even if that thing didn't know it was looking at the time. She would catch it as it came spinning toward her off of the wheel of fate. The equation of want worked by laws bigger than she or Charlie or any of them, she suspected, by laws that turned engines or threw sphere's into orbit. Neither thorny screen nor the likes of Anabelle could stop want's simple command: get.

All the same, she wishes Anabelle would just go away.

"Jane!" Anabelle calls, looking up toward the house. Jane scoots back from the door, tries to make herself invisible, but she knows that Anabelle can surely see her through the screen. Anabelle's ribbons bounce like bright birds in the fizzy drizzle. She's on her way to the house and Jane wonders if she can be stopped.

Jane screams, "STOP!" at the top of her lungs, like a cartoon character in mid-air. STAHHP! It's kind of funny, and it works: Anabelle amazingly stops dead in her tracks. She looks around quizzically and then decides to forget it. Jane cracks up. "I can see you," Anabelle says, and hops across the yard and up the back steps. Jane looks away and blows another smoke ring. She stays seated where she is, blocking the door. "Bonjour!" Anabelle calls to Georgia, who waggles her fingers at her and puckers her lips, kissing the air in Anabelle's direction. "Birds of a feather," Georgia mutters and turns away.

Anabelle looks confused, but just a little. An unexpected obstacle in her path, but no matter. She stands quietly on the other side of the door, dripping, expectant, and finally: "So, you are blocking my entrance," she points out to Jane, and then pulls on the screen.

Jane eyes her warily and slowly slides back so she can come in. Anabelle shakes off her raincoat, picks up the mixing bowl and scoops some extra white batter onto her finger, licks it off.

"Jane," she says, looking determined. "He wants me." Drops of rainwater flutter
around her and she licks batter from the full length of the mixing spoon.

"I have to crash that wedding," she says, as if just saying it has left her no choice.

***

In the daydream Jane has of Charlie, it is always summer. Charlie in a pale yellow striped suit from the old attic of Molly's house, standing on the edge of a shaded road that shoots through the golden prairie. A storm is rising somewhere in the future, the summer sky swept into dusk and gray heat, purple clouds hanging low over the fields. She likes this sky.

Charlie, in this dream, stands hip out as he does in life, hand shading his light eyes, his hair blowing in waterset tangles. He is talking his head off, speaking in ultimate truths, deciphering complicated codes and meanings of life, and surprisingly she understands the vocabulary, but he is putting the definitions in a way she couldn't herself have thought of awake.

This can't be Charlie. The trees are heavy and hot, the bugs and seeds lofting themselves above the sunflowers facing the sun with their curious stares. Charlie looks off toward the west, where the road leads straight and sure into a small glade, where the pastor waits. Jane knows that upon waking she will never remember what he is trying to tell her. She will remember only how they stood in the road in the wind at the end of the summer, the look in his eyes as he turned to her, and the weariness with which she stared back. The sound of a siren far off in the distance. His hair still funky with cake.

At the end of summer in Illinois there's still sun and bright sky, an August afternoon sliding toward sunset and Jane's dress growing transparent in the heated light.
Jane and Georgia walk slowly. They are going to the glade where the wedding will take place, a small forested retreat for deer and squirrels in the middle of a cornfield. Jane has put her cake in a white box, covered by a white dishtowel to reflect the heat of the late afternoon sun. She carries the box by strings she has wrapped around its sides for a handle.

Georgia holds Jane's other hand and tells her of her own wedding to Jane's grandfather, where she wore a wedding gown made of French lace, and Jane's grandfather swore Georgia was the only woman in the world he could ever have loved, and they danced every night of their honeymoon in a little outdoor bar with wine and wooden tables, floating candles, in the south of France. “Yes, yes, the south of France,” Jane says. “Yes, in Dordogne,” nods Georgia. “Good for you,” Jane says. “I mean, that sounds tres charmante,” and smiles her sweetest smile. “Now, please,” she says, looking around at the crowd, “shut up.”

Chairs have been set up on either side of a small path, which leads to the spot where the pastor waits. Guests step over scattered cornstalks on the ground, the sounds of their voices sprinkling lightly across the crop. Jane sits, holding her cake on her lap, to protect it. Her dress is old yellow cotton with a pattern of rosebuds, fluted sleeves, fragile pleats, the dress of a woman in disguise. Jane and her grandmother sit toward the back, not speaking to the other guests, silent and watching.

She sees Anabelle, snaking her way along the paths through the oaks, wearing a black veiled pinbox, sneaking up on the occasion. Her cheeks look flushed and innocent, her elegant wrists draped in silver chiffon. In her hands is a huge pink ribboned present. She is surrounded by leaves, standing behind a tree with her box. She winks at Jane conspiratorily.

“Meow, meow,” Jane says.

Anabelle slinks around the crowd and comes to sit with Jane and Georgia. She
“Well, do tell,” Anabelle encourages excitedly. “No. It’s a very special surprise, Anabelle,” Jane says, “Private.” Anabelle’s eyebrows raise inquiringly, and she taps the box again.

“Ooooh,” she says, sitting back in her chair slowly, squinting at Jane as if she were about to solve something that hadn’t occurred to her as needing solving, “This is interesting.” Anabelle looks down at her own gift like she doesn’t know how it got to her lap. “I’m wondering if this is too big. I’m wondering if this is too obvious,” she says to no one in particular. “But I’m only wondering for one minute.”

Music begins to quiet the crowd, and then Charlie is standing at the top of the path looking expectantly down the aisle. Molly appears at the end of it, thin and white. She glides up to the front as if arriving on a wave with her eyes half-closed. They touch hands. They speak. They marry. They kiss. It’s done.

And Charlie in his seersucker suit steps back and looks at Molly intensely, and suddenly sweeps her up in both of his arms as if she is a child herself, and he buries his head in the curve of her neck and sucks at her collarbone, in front of everybody. She turns her face up towards him, her mouth opened in a heart-shaped smile. Her dress hangs white and low, white ribbons tied around the bodice, an amazing nurse uniform, thinks Jane. How does she get that thing to stay on? Charlie spins her in a circle and her dress billows. “Yes!” Charlie yells to the crowd, and everyone begins to whisper and cheer.

Jane feels the box in her hands move. Almost imperceptibly at first, and then with a definite jolt against the buds on her yellow dress, Jane’s box shifts on her lap. She takes off its lid and breathes in the smell of the cake. It’s perfect. She’s an excellent baker, she thinks. She knows exactly what Charlie likes. “He always says ‘yes’,” says
Anabelle, and Jane says, "I know."

So when Jane watches her hand dip into the box and dive into the top layer, crushing the sugar pillars and greenish leaves, she knows that it doesn't matter, that there will be more cake tomorrow, she will make another and another. She scoops up a handful and crushes the layers together, and as the first piece goes flying it takes on a momentum Jane could not have predicted, an aim she never knew she had. It whizzes through the air and slaps Charlie in the face, hard. He's shocked. His mouth hangs open like a target. A blob of cake and icing falls off his face and dumps down onto Molly's belly as he holds her across his middle. Molly lounges there lightly in his strong arms staring at Jane, icing on her wedding dress, her pale eyes serious and understanding. She is not surprised. Jane digs out another piece and cocks her arm. Charlie is hungry, she knows.
Once I saw Olivia walking across campus, not on one of the sidewalks, but right across the middle of the lawn. She was alone, carrying her bag in her arms, sort of smiling to herself.

There was a large red maple leaf stuck in her hair, on top of her head, and she made no move to get it out, as if she had no idea. That’s art, I thought, that’s natural. But I wonder if she knew it was there all along, or worse, put it there herself.

In winter now, I try to forget all that has happened, turn the heater up in this creaky apartment, and sleep under a fat yellow comforter, a lemon cream-puff next to the peeling, painted radiator, thinking of summer.

I still haven’t decided what I will major in.

Up until November, my job was to make clay at the college in this washed-out, unemployable river town, with its gray wedding-cake houses bumping up the wooded hills above the Mississippi like so much foamy flotsam. It’s ugly.

On winter mornings the sun breaks dull and sleep-gray, the bells of St. Xavier’s ringing on the other side of the splintered park, and the park’s trees always nude and pitch black, wet looking. A little painting I made one day, a watercolor of the park at night, hangs next to my window. When I wake with my nightgown twisted around me, it
is still dark outside and in my room. I have a dented, aluminum hot-pot and a bowl for my oatmeal, and a fancy rose-carved spoon that I stole from the cafeteria at the college, although how such a beautiful thing got to the college in the first place I can't imagine.

Through my small window, the hill in the park dips down to the wobbly stone amphitheater, where drug deals are staged. Cars roll up and down the road and none of the cars are new. They are all old and brown and bumper-stickered, and if I had a car I suspect that mine, no matter what it looked like when I got it, would surely metamorphose into something soup-colored and saggy after only a couple of weeks, or a couple dozen trips through the park.

And I would hate it, really, if my car were ugly.

But I've never had a car, so I don't mind walking, even though it can be dangerous because this town is so shifty. In some places the sidewalks have just disappeared. In front of the Maid-Rite chopped meat diner on 5th Avenue, and the Five-Point doughnut shop with its peeling pink linoleum floor and flashing turquoise and red star sign, and my dentist's, Dr. Kneet's place, there are only rocky chunks and a ghostly indentation where the concrete used to be. What happened to that, I would like to know.

Even in front of the college, which from far away looks red-bricked, sweet and quaint, perfectly safe, the sidewalk on 7th Avenue is a mess of gravel and shards of cement. In late winter now, after the snow piles up, the sidewalk becomes a pan of ice with the frozen black pools of early footprints scattered going back and forth. At the entrance to the campus there is a black wrought iron gate with a big circular double door, like a gothic wreath. The campus buildings have gabled green roofs, but inside them the carpeting is worn through, and the furniture is plain and Scandinavian. The pottery studio, where I used to work, was in the old physical plant building, that looked like a lunch box, with a long row of cracked paned windows that push out and a big smokestack on one end of it. On winter mornings, if you stand on the hill in the park and
look out over the flat ribbon of river and the dotted sister-cities, you will see the pot shop and everything powdered in white, and the sky blunt and almost white, and the chimneys of all the little houses and stores and factories below exhaling warm white into the sky.

I spend a lot of time looking at things, now that I don't go to school.

This story, I think, has been told before, although I don't know when. Art, I am sure, has been destroyed for love, but I don't know where. When New York City Vera the ceramics professor questioned me in an interview for my job in the pottery studio, she was fumbling mail in the department office, trying to hold catalogs, postcards, xeroxed memos and her new baby, Lorelei. On the second day of the fall semester I picked up my schedule and went down to the Art Department to see if they had any work available. I wanted an artistic job. I had just arrived in town (being originally from Coal Valley, then Sterling, then Freeport), having come to attend college here, so I would be able to learn more about things than I could have at home, where I was just reading and thinking on my own, and where we had no artists.

But when Vera asked me why I wanted to work specifically in the Art Department, I could not think of anything to say for several moments. "Have you ever worked in clay before?" she said, slicing open envelopes with a shake of her peach colored hair. "How much do you know about aht? Do you know anything about aht?" Vera's baby stared at me with brown eyes like two buttons, and fingered her top lip with a miniature pink hand. Her baby blanket had small versions of Van Goghs sprinkled all over it: his room at Arles, his self-portrait. I stared at the blanket and puckered my lips at her, then blew gently in her face. Her eyelashes fluttered.

"Oh yes, I know lots about art," I said to Vera. I looked at her seriously. "Art is very dangerous."
Vera jerked her head up from her mail, squinted, and set the papers down on the desk, tilting her face toward me curiously. Lorelei's small nut of a head followed, the two angles of their tiny noses parallel.

"Oh my God, yass." She smiled warily. "So very."

Up until November (when I was fired), I was making great clay. I became part of the Artistic Community.

Not really. I was only a spectator of the Community, really. What I should remember is that making clay was just a job, a source of income (which holds even more significance now that it's gone, and I have no money) and, even if they let me back into the school, without the job I can't get by.

Before I came here, I had never even touched clay, not since kindergarten where we made pinch pots. In the pot shop, I would take slop, which is water full of clay, out of big rubber garbage cans and put it into plaster bats, which would wick the water out. Then, when the clay was dried enough to be sort of solid, I put it in the pug mill, a trough with a huge bladed screw which would turn the clay around and around and force it out a hole. Then I would put the fresh clay in another garbage can and cover it with plastic for the students to use.

This might not seem like a big deal, but if you think of it how I came to, that every piece of art that came out of our pottery studio began with me, then you will know that I had to take my job very seriously. There are no museums in this city, no artsy movie theaters, no mountains or wide beaches, just a cloudy river, and abandoned factories that had once made farming equipment. The city needed art. The artists were driven with importance, and that was something I wanted to surround myself with. And I became important too, because their projects depended on me, in a way.

Besides, I felt good in the pot shop. Inside, the walls were painted aqua blue with
violet trim, like a cabana, and in the early fall when I first started, the maples outside of those paned windows would turn the color of tomato soup, and fill the windows with an emberry glow. There was an old clay covered stereo on which we played blues tapes very loud, or cranked a demo of somebody’s boyfriend who was the lead singer for something. There was a bulletin board on which people wrote snippets of philosophical wisdom and reprimands: “Touch my bucket and go to jail — that’s the law!” or “Tobacco — nothing like it.” Olivia was the only ceramics major in her class, and Vera, desperate to find a sensation among her students, told her she could set up a private studio in the back of the shop, and use as much clay as she wished to, as long as she proved to be a genius.

Hugh, on the other hand, had never thrown a pot in his life before September. He was older than most of the students, a transfer, and needed to take an art class to fulfill his requirements. He wore corduroy jackets and sweatpants, clogs, and carried a worn patchwork bag with a collection of philosophy and religion textbooks, and paperbacks about mysticism, which he had just discovered. For the first few weeks he would always come to class early, prop his feet on the pottery wheel and read, munching on Triscuits. He was in the beginner’s pottery class, and participated with attentive skepticism until he saw Olivia and became a zealot.

Even before I had ever seen Olivia, I began to find myself tip-toeing through her studio all the time. Towards the end of my shift, when no more students were likely to come in to work on their hand-building assignments, I would think of a reason to head to the back of the shop, broom in hand, and slink through Olivia’s workspace, looking at her things. Even though no one else was there, I was incredibly stealthy and quiet, and I didn’t know how to explain that. Her studio was behind the kiln room, and behind the closet with its wooden shelves where we kept the greenware, and she had a whole wall of her own shelves. She also had an old electric wheel, a little bench for her tools and
buckets, and a bookshelf filled with books and topped by an old coffee percolator. Next to her stool she had a Matisse hanging in a purple frame, and on the other side, a pyramid of cloudy soda bottles balanced in a delicate triangle.

The best part of her studio, though, was an old pink-shaded floor lamp, bulb-burnt in one spot and circled by faded pink-fringed pompons. It stood like a gangly angel over where her left shoulder would be if she were throwing a pot on her wheel, and it was things like this, things that in my room would simply look shabby and out-of-date, that over Olivia’s wheel became perfect little stars among which she sat, spinning vessels.

Sometimes I still wonder if she could’ve gotten that lamp from Trash Can Annie’s. Trash Can Annie’s, on the Iowa side, is not far from my apartment, just before you go under a big rusty viaduct that leads up the hill away from the river.

It always gives me a strange feeling, that antique store, because it is so queerly ancient itself, on the second floor of one of the oldest buildings downtown. It looks like an old ballroom, and brittle old lavender Annie, the proprietress, has the store sectioned into different time periods: 1800’s, 1900-1930, 1940-1950, 1960-Present. Instead of donating this stuff to a museum, Annie just hangs everything on wire hangers, and sells it. There are old dresses and feathered hats hanging all the way up to the high ceiling, too, and piles of old button up boots, and stained and torn slips and underwear with milk stains around the breasts. I’m disgusted and intrigued.

Annie usually watches all of my moves when I am in her store. She spins in a hobbled circle as I make my way from rack to rack, decade to decade. Last week, during an almost-blizzard, I decided to go for a walk downtown and continued past the decrepit library and St. Xavier’s to Annie’s, it being one of the only things open, anymore.
Annie and I were the only two in the shop, and we stared at each other with curious gazes, as if we both wondered what the other was doing out on such a day. Every once in a while we could hear the wind pick up outside and would turn our heads simultaneously toward the tall windows, but all we could see through them was the white pus of the sky, and wisps of smoke rising into it. Annie squatted behind her cash register, fumbling with the radio for better reception on her oldies station, all the while keeping one eye cocked just over the level of the counter, on me. I picked my way through the dresses. Around 2:00 p.m., I had to go to the bathroom. It was still snowing fiercely, from what I could tell. Finally I greeted her, “Hello, ma’am. Excuse me, ma’am.”

“Yes, miss,” she replied quickly, “What is it?”

“Well, I said, “I was hopefully wondering if you have a toilet around here.”

“Why yes, we do have one.” Her face fell. “But it’s condemned.”

“Oh God,” I said.

“I suppose I could let you use it, if you promised not to tell anyone, especially the city man.”

“Well, of course not!” I assured her. She shuffled worriedly through a drawer and pulled out a skeleton key tied with a pink ribbon and we went through a door at the back of the store and she locked it behind us. Then we went further up a spiral staircase and came to a tiny, crooked door which she also unlocked with the key. The bathroom.

She left me, and when I went to sit on the toilet, it fell over with a crunch of porcelain, and I held myself up by the wall. Around the small room were hung a million fashion drawings ripped from department store catalogs from the 20’s and 30’s, many of which featured the same lovely, liquid-eyed girl. Annie. Annie in white gloves to her elbows, smoking a cigarette from a long black holder. Annie in a feather boa, kicking off a Chinese slipper. She had been beautiful once. Next to the sink was a pink pom-potted lamp, but I thought I had asked for too much already.
I can hardly blame Hugh, really, for not being able to conventionally express what it was about Olivia that caught and held him so tightly. To have simply asked her out on a date would have been ridiculous to him, an event so common it was not even close to being worthy of her.

I think he must have loved her the minute she saw her, sliding into the pot shop on a late autumn afternoon with her mushroom-colored eyes, lifting 50-pound bags of dry mix over her shoulder. She would stand loosely at the canvas covered work-bench wedging clay with her strong arms, tossing it over and over onto the table with a flip of her wrist, pushing the blob into her other hand. Then she would take it to her wheel and, sitting there with a bucket of water at her side, she would shape the clay into bowl after bowl.

One afternoon I stood in the corner watching this, shy, nervous. Her walnut tan hair hung in a rippled panel over one shoulder, and her skin was brown as an oak leaf, with freckles dusting her smooth cheeks. She looked like a postcard from the 1940’s that I had hanging in my apartment of a calico-kerchiefed woman sipping iced Ovaltine through a straw between her kiss-shaped lips. Hugh sat at his wheel smearing clay over the metal rings, swinging his feet and watching her out of the corner of his eye. I had a broom in my hand and pretended to sweep. I was in dungarees and kneesocks, and was several years younger than she.

"Hello, you," she said to me, "I’ve been wanting to meet the new person, and I bet that’s you, huh?" I nodded and my stomach shivered. "Yes," I tried to say.

She nodded and went back to the clay. I kept standing in the corner and watching her hands move over and over. Finally, she looked up at me again, at first with a curious gaze that I suppose wondered why I wasn’t working, and then with a pearly
smile: "Would you like to learn how to make a bowl?"

If she was explaining something, I don't remember what it was. If she was cautioning against air bubbles, I don't remember why. All I do remember is watching the pot rise out of the cup of her hands like a flower, and her strong fingers moving around the brown form as if they had again found their home. The bowl blossomed out of the stump she had started with, and she moved the clay into different positions effortlessly, as if it had its own mind in harmony with hers, and all the while she was speaking, "See? Like this," and demonstrating what to do at each step, and giving examples of thin walls, fat walls, a rim, a lip, a spout. All the while the afternoon filled with a weakening light, her chatting lightly, the wheel spinning. When it slid smoothly to a stop, Olivia's pot presented itself to us, and almost took a little bow.

"Oh, fuck it," said Olivia, and Whump! went Olivia's hand, and smooshed the pot into a folded, soggy mass of meat-colored clay on the wheel. She looked up at me and smiled

Hugh keened on his bench, and ran out of the shop.

I read, in Dr. Kneet's waiting room, that physicists are increasingly aware that our inquiry into the nature of the universe by use of mathematics is really just a mathematical projection onto whatever is out there.

Hugh was convinced immediately, without even having met her, that he loved her, and so much so that he was positive that no amount of time or even ordinary knowledge of her — what she liked to eat, what she liked to watch on TV, whether her parents were nice or mean, whether she took baths or showers — could increase the fascination she already held for him. Because deep down he knew that nothing would be enough, that even knowing those things and so much more (the names of all of her childhood friends, the color of the sun as it set over the backyard of a house in
Pittsburgh) could not make him love her more.

As we worked on our clay late into the night, Hugh began talking to me and told me that when he would think about her, he knew that she would eventually escape him in words as she did in life, filling up what he needed to say before words connected, and became too obvious, and left him, too. He could sometimes imagine her there at the studio, even before she arrived, imagine her in winter, coming in from the narrow streets off-campus in her tawny coat and snow in her hair, roses in her cheeks, flinging letters from the Art Department box, bringing coffee beans for her percolator, and he could only sit there on the pot shop couch and watch.

Because as soon as she walked through that door, he knew, she had to be closer to leaving than to arriving, even before the flakes melted on her hair and the studio reached its full shade of afternoon pink. And he would furiously become aware of a certain immobilizing, tongue-tying anxiousness, a desire to find a way to entertain her, to keep her there forever, the room's own personal and eternal sun, Christmas-tree light. It seemed to me, as Hugh and I worked, time was cut into a clock which moved around Olivia, her coming and staying and inevitable going back out the door, when we would deflate. We would have captured her, fed her cookies and orange juice all day if we could have. But the world was waiting for her and it was dark out there, and as rush-hour began over the Arsenal Bridge, she was gone, trailing berries and brush, heat, burrs, the relics of summer love behind her.

It was not really berries, of course, but that was how it seemed to us which remains important, that was what we saw which remains at stake. And how can you argue or deny that? She, then, was a plum, she was an early winter doe, and I was breathlessly jealous. I knew, deep down, that I would never be any of those things.

The day after Olivia showed me how to make the pot, Hugh came to the pot shop at 6:00 in the morning, as I was there making clay for the day's classes. He tried to
make pots for six hours, and the next day began working morning and night, cutting
other classes, pushing clay non-stop. He moved to a wheel far off in the corner, but from
where I stood stuffing clay into the pug mill I could see him. Day after cool November
day I watched him as he worked, deep in concentration. He tried to wedge the clay as
smoothly and thoroughly as he could, but repeatedly, as he pulled up the walls of a
bowl, an air bubble which he could not press out would invariably appear. As he
pushed in the spout of a pitcher, the entire wall would collapse. A small, perfect cup
would begin to grow, then inexplicably move off-center, become lopsided, crumple.

Olivia moved through the shop during all of this, and although she might have
 glanced his way quite often, curious if nothing else, she spent the majority of her time
back in her own studio, unaffected by the life in the front of the shop. I had witnessed
only one exchange between them in all of their time there together, and in it Hugh had
walked back to her studio, seen her working there, told her that he liked her stuff. That
was it. This was in the first days of his own constant working, and she thanked him
graciously, nicely, I thought, as if they two were office-mates working toward a
communal deadline. But in the endless days that followed it was impossible to tell what
she thought, with a slight smile on her face, rubbing corn husker’s lotion into her hands.

He didn’t talk to her because, as he explained to me, words were only symbols.

I think he had believed that he could make a pot that would make Olivia fall in
love with him, a pot that would be not like love, but the actual embodiment of love. Hugh
was sure that if Olivia would only see his pot, hold his pot, drink out of it, touch it, she
would understand this, understand how he had loved her so much that this pot had just
effervesced out of him, and could become a part of her, as well.

How patiently he worked over those pots, hair falling into his eyes, lips pursed
as if in prayer as he shakily tried to coax life out of the wet earth that I had mixed. And
the pots would seem to come up, seem to rise without trouble, and over and over again,
just as he was thinking that he had arrived, he had it — perfectly thin, perfectly balanced — the pot would hesitatingly begin to melt back into the wheel, and he would curse his fingers, and shake his hands in the air, insult the muses. I think Olivia knew what was happening the entire time, her obliviousness to it rejection enough. It was as if she knew as soon as she looked into his eyes that his love had more to do with him than with the real her. And if she were to tell us this, with the refusal to be vain that is sometimes born with great beauty, she knew she wouldn't be saying anything about herself as much as she was simply stating a fact, a situation that could be boiled down to vocabulary. She was simply walking to the sink to fill up her bucket, lowering her face to the stream of water and taking a drink, uninterested in him, her own agenda private and vague to us.

Hugh was the one who worked in metaphor. Olivia just made pots.

Over the next month, he practiced so much that he was there more than I was, and more than Olivia. I was taking a few classes during the day, still, but it seemed that there was more and more work to do at the pottery studio, and Vera had increased my hours. Some days I arrived early in the morning, and left long after all the lights in other campus buildings were out, and only the street lights were left burning on 7th Avenue.

Every once in a while on those late nights I tried to throw my own pot, but it never worked out well, and I would get frustrated. It was hard for a beginner. Even so, Hugh became a fixture behind his wheel, in his solemn concentration, sometimes going out to smoke a cigarette on the stairs, and hang his head between his clay-spattered knees. He became void of humor or anecdote, and when I would try to make jokes about certain romantic songs on the radio, or make fun of beginning students' hand-built creations — lopsided ashtrays, chunky mugs — he would ignore me so thoroughly that I often wondered whether I had spoken aloud, or had just imagined myself to have
spoken. And on one Tuesday night, suddenly it seemed that his bowls were standing. It was as if one pot was collapsing, and the next pot stood, and then the next bowl stood, and the next.

And then I knew that he would get it. I was standing at the sink, past 2:00 in the morning, when out of the corner of my eye I could see Hugh straighten on his bench, and seem to grow somehow bigger as I watched, and as I looked down to the pot on the wheel I saw that something had changed, and his pot was no longer tentative, but sure.

After he made the pitcher, Hugh sat for a while on his bench, staring at it. He didn’t look at me or speak, just sat, hands on knees, his face bright and amazed. Slowly he cut the plaster bat off the wheel, and carried the pot like an offering to the shelves to dry out before bisque-ing, the first stage in firing where all moisture is dried out of the clay. I stopped what I was doing (cleaning dried clay off the wire tools and ribs) and watched him. He came out of the back room silently, dazed, smiling, and walked out through the back door, forgetting his coat. As soon as he left the circle of light that was thrown onto the steps by the opened door, I lost him in the darkness, and he disappeared.

I went back to look at the pot. It sat on the highest shelf of the waiting room. How he had gotten it up so high I didn’t know, as no one ever put anything on that shelf because it was impossible to reach. I turned and went down the rotted stairs of the old physical plant and searched through the basement for a ladder, which I finally found. I dragged it up, trying to be careful the entire time of knocking all the little pieces of pink and green and blue student pottery off of the tables and shelves, but some of them fell and shattered. I kicked them, gently, out of my way as I went through to the back room.

I cleared a space for the ladder and planted it on the dusty floor next to the tall shelf where Hugh’s pot was, and climbed up. The pitcher stood beautifully on a perfect
foot, curving into a spout, two handles on either side arching like seahorses, the curve of Olivia's hips.

He had done it. I think that until that moment I had not believed that you could think that you knew someone that you had never even touched before, and be right about it. That pot knew exactly what it was, and so did Hugh. So would Olivia, I knew.

I left the pot shop for three days. I realized that nobody knew anything about me at all.

I might stay here, in town, for a while. Even if I can't convince the Administration to let me back into the college, I think it wouldn't be bad to be a part of a place, so that if you were traveling, and someone asked you where you were from, you would be able to say the name: River City. And you wouldn't have to think about it beforehand at all, and make something up and spend the rest of the bus trip working under the cover of your lie, the family you had created for yourself, your potential career, your current aspirations and what you were doing to fulfill them. I need a job, and if I did stay here, maybe I could start working for Dr. Kneet, as a receptionist or something, or even sweeping up the dental office, and in the meantime I could learn some things about teeth, and maybe become a dentist. Teeth seem so straightforward. They are so practical.

I think I am starving.

Dentists do not starve like artists do.

During the three days I stayed away from the pottery studio, I sat at the 14th Avenue Waffle Shop, listening to the conversations of the other people who were strangely available in the middle of the afternoon. The shop is on a corner in a residential neighborhood where all the houses seem sided in wide metal siding, and have porches covered in spinach-green indoor/outdoor carpeting.

At the waffle shop, I ordered coffee and a large water, and I thought about all of
these things, and about how much nicer, easier the afternoons were in the waffle shop, with the linoleum tables and the radiators popping and the sun striping my table through the blinds, the stripes getting thicker as the afternoon wore on. There was a waitress there named Moll, and she had sculptured nails but stringy hair, and an old man named Rod in a John Deere baseball hat whose thumbs had been chopped off 17 years ago, and he spent the first afternoon telling Moll all about it.

I couldn’t believe, somehow, that she hadn’t heard it before. She was a good listener, in her pink dress that looked like a dress you would draw for a cartoon waitress, and big white gym shoes, and after Rod was done with his story, they spent the rest of the pleasant afternoon discussing politics, and health, and divorce, very amiably. They reminded me of people back home, but now I felt different. “It’s such a shame!” Moll would cry after every observation made by either of them, and Rod would conclude, “Ah, old girl. It’s the way of the world.” The world, to them, was just how it looked. They were content. I liked their conversation, and by the third afternoon, I tried throwing in observations of my own about the icy sidewalks, the shopping malls billowing out at every edge of town, and my comments were expectedly acknowledged with the same flimsy shake of Moll’s ponytail, and her old line. Even though I had a little money then, I never ordered anything, and one time, after I commented to Moll and Rod that waitresses have to work just as hard as artists sometimes, as if artists had the hardest jobs in the world, she gave me a confused but pitying look, and brought me a waffle. After I left, I could smell the waffle shop smell on every single piece of my clothes.

I went back to the pot shop. Vera was there viciously sweeping up and she hollered at me when she saw me, and threw the broom down.

“Wheah. Have. You. BEEN!” she yelled, and I walked over gingerly and picked up the broom, mute. I began sweeping the middle aisle. “Do you know,” she asked me,
"that we are firing the kiln tomorrow, or do you not. Know. ANYTHING!" I told her that I knew. "Do you know then, that I have to put all that shit in it," she said, (her arm sweeping dismissively over the student work, Hugh's pot included), "and still make it to Suzahn's gallery opening?" she asked.

I didn't answer her and stared toward the back room where Hugh's pitcher was.

Vera stopped for a minute and looked at me. "You know what?" she said, "You can do it, since you've decided to grace us with your presence. Heah." Here, I thought. "You can do it," and she very deliberately took the broom out of my hands, and put a pot in them, a student-made incense burner with a lopsided hole and olive green splashes all over one side. She looked at me seriously.

"You can load the kiln, can't you?" she said. "Say 'yes', you can. You can, can't you? I deserve someone who can help me, don't I? SHIT!"

"Yes," I said. "You deserve it."

"Thank you," she said.

If I had thought it was serious work to make clay, it was even more serious to fire it. Vera left the shop with a bang of the door, and I was left alone, holding the incense burner. I walked back to the kiln room and looked at the gas kiln.

I had helped Vera fire the kiln once before. It wasn't very big, and shelves were set up inside it for the pots to sit on as they were fired. It would get so hot in there that after the firing we wouldn't be able to open it for at least a whole day. I went back to Vera's office and got her notes about firing, and carefully stacked shelves and started bring pieces in from the waiting room. I checked the pots for glaze on the bottom, I checked them for cracks, I picked out the best fireproof shelves I could find in the stack against the wall. There could be no cracks in anything, especially the shelves, or the firing would fail.

I tenderly loaded all the pieces in, and there were dozens. Dozens of ashtrays,
and egg size cups with thick walls, mugs with wobbly lips, and shapes whose function I could not determine. I cradled each in my hands before I looked for the perfect place for it in the kiln, where it would get just the right amount of heat (I thought) to bring out all the lustre of its glaze. I wanted the firing to be perfect.

It was late afternoon, and snowing. The sky was a strange violet-blue, and the trees that I could just barely see through the one window in the waiting room rested black and still as the snow fell on the branches in a delicate little wall of snow on each branch. Across the street I could make out the cafeteria, and the golden lights of the patio doors, and I could see students eating early dinners at the tables, and I imagined them laughing with each other and worrying about dumb parties, or talking about decorating their rooms with posters of rock stars. I came to the top shelf in the waiting room. Hugh’s pot was there, now bisqued and glazed, it’s thin coating of white hiding all the secret colors that would manifest themselves during the firing. I lifted the pot by the base so as not to break off the handles. I turned it over and over in my hands, looked inside and under it, smoothed its cool walls with my fingers. It was a piece of work.

And I brought it to the kiln, looking at it the whole time, walking between abandoned tables and stools without even taking my eyes off the pitcher. I wondered where Olivia was, and wondered if she knew this pot was about her, or whether at that point Hugh would even care who or what it was about, because he was in love with it, and maybe not even her anymore at all. It was the one beautiful thing, and it had been because of her, but it had nothing to do with her, it was wrong. He didn’t know her at all. I had thought that the city was ugly but I saw that it was as elusive to me as Olivia was, and that I had not been looking, had not seen something that Olivia did, that Moll did. Vera’s notes lay in a scattered mess on the floor but I did not pick them up, or even try to read them anymore. It was useless, I thought nervously, to try to control it. I just put the pot in the middle of the middle shelf. I shut the heavy kiln door without caring,
turned on the kiln then, and left.

Later that night, the kiln exploded, heaving bright red sparks into the cold air as the pottery studio burned down.

In the morning, it was still snowing. I woke and ate my oatmeal before I brushed my teeth, and then sat in my little wooden chair in my white bathrobe and looked out the window. I felt calm. If I say that the air had a smoky quality, if I say that the sky seemed duller than usual, it would be a lie, and the truth would be that I felt more myself, my childhood and honest self, than I had in a long time. I stayed by my window for about 45 minutes, looking out onto the park where some children were walking through in florescent coats, hoods gathered tightly around their dirty faces. I got up, brushed my hair, dressed. I looked for my own coat and threw it on.

I walked to the school slowly, stopping carefully at all corners, crossing with the lights. Little squirrels bounded ahead of me on the sidewalk cutely, and everywhere there were bushes with red berries hanging like small lanterns from their branches. A block from the entrance to the campus, I could see through the wrought iron gate that a firetruck and two firemen were standing talking to Vera, and behind them the pottery studio balanced in a heap of smoky brick. I hung onto the bars of the gate and when Vera saw me, she screamed, and ran at me, and grabbed my jacket and pulled on it, and tried to push her hand at my face. One of the firemen stopped her, and she caved into his arms, put her slight hands up to her face and sobbed in huge, gulping breaths of air. Hugh was running around, tumbling over the snowy, blackened mess, disgusted, shaking his head, convinced that ceramics was not the answer.

Olivia was there, and she just walked, stepping through the rubble and trying to pick up pieces of different things, looking for pieces of her exploded pots, just to see if the glazes had worked the way she expected, I suppose. When she turned toward me,
she shrugged, and forgot it, and moved on.

Lately (and this is strange) the neighborhood has been looking better to me. When I used to go up the back alley from the campus toward my apartment, I could just barely wait to get home. But the alley now seems to crunch pleasantly, precisely under my boots. I avoid ice and snow and huge holes in the dark, and the roots of huge trees bulging out from under the concrete, but instead of looking down, I look at the backs of the houses in the neighborhood, and their tiny kitchen windows facing backyards and the alley, small bottles with herb cuttings greening on their sills, even in winter. The squares of windows are like squares of pure yellow light, and sometimes I can see far through the window, a small, silent TV further back inside the house. And all of this seems lovely to me, homey and warm. Sometimes I cut through the back lot of the old people's home, up a hill dropping sharply away from a line of trees, sloping to a brick building with double staircases leading to the green door. Hugging the row of trees where the snow is flat, I look down over the clearing and out over the river, to the Iowa side, and the courthouse clocktower lit in white against the black sky. At night, the river cuts through the tiny lighted plan of the city like a dull black wire, perfectly dim in its wide center, occasionally cut into shadow by a barge making its way down to New Orleans, hundreds of miles away. Here it is cold, and my breath rises like a frosty dream.

And lately, as I walk around, something seems different to me. Things don't look so bad. They're almost beautiful.
Mr. James and my mother leave before dawn for Vermont, where he is going to
teach her how to ski. When the slam of his car door in the driveway below wakes me,
the sky outside my windows is still dark, a white line of light hovering at the horizon.
My room is cold and I can just vaguely make out the loops of my colored bead strings
nailed to the wall. My father has been gone 26 days.

My brother Kelly is still asleep in his own midnight blue room which my mother
painted herself with golden stars. He sleeps bare-chested on his futon in the corner,
covered with rosy quilts. His dark hair is sweetly damp against the pillows and the cats
curl around his head and under his arm. His halogen desk lamp shines away like a small
protective eye, watching him through the entire night. A paper bird flies from a wire
hanging in his window, and his small cacti pots are on the windowsill, labeled with their
Latin names in his careful first grade printing. When I walk across his room, he stirs in
his dream and the cats shift with him, and I try to be as quiet as I can when I pull the big
comforter out from his closet, and lay it out on the floor next to his futon. Then I lift
Sing-Sing from the crook of Kelly’s arm and she stretches into a parenthesis of fur, and I
take her with me to the comforter that used to be on my parents’ bed and lay down. I
kiss her head about 20 times and we rub noses and I know she is so happy.

Later, when I leave for my school, the sky has turned gray as ashes and my
breath is frosty in the sharp air. Small flakes of snow swirl in front of me. They land and then disappear against the pavement, as if they had never been.

I go to the Hopkins Academy now, since last year they let me skip past eighth grade at Parker. Hopkins is a progressive school. It's a lot different than Parker, aside from the fact that Parker was K-8 and Hopkins is a high school, and I have to take the train to get there. At Hopkins we can call our teachers by their first names if we want to, and we don't get real grades but "progress reports." Last month I even started sneaking into classes I'm not taking, depending on what I've heard the other kids say the teacher is doing that day, and nobody even cared. So now I do it all the time. Herr Steinhausen, balding but smelling of sour milk like a baby, doesn't even notice me this afternoon as I go into the huge, funnelled lecture room where the first period class said he was showing his slides of different European cities covered in snow, in honor of our pending holiday vacation.

We quiet down when we hear the music start. A sharp beam of light skims the top of Herr Steinhausen's head, and the silhouette of his remaining hair sticking out like wisps of shredded-wheat blocks the corner of the Hofburg, the Cathedral of St. Steven, a skating party on a frozen inlet of the Danube. His voice seems full of longing. He is back in the mountains of Austria, on that silver bridge (he points at the screen with his walking stick), the snow falling slowly on the house of his sister's friend who was to die, two years after this visit, in the war, he explains. They had gotten snowed in, and drunk Cognac as the snow fell blue up to the door, and he was inspired to play the penny-whistle for three hours, while his sister was so overcome by liquor that she insisted on dancing under the table, he tells us. He squats and imitates her and we all laugh. The pretty friend laughed too, he says, and clapped her hands in glee. He had been infatuated with her lips, always looking as if they were about to fly off her face and go
fluttering around the room. A redbird. Winter.

That had been love, he tells us. That was a long time ago. He shakes his head and goes on to the next slide.

My father is in London with Shelly, I think, because I know Shelly was from London, and we went there once two winters ago, and my father loved it. My father had banking business to do for the company, and he was allowed to take us along sometimes. Shelly worked for the bank in London, as the liaison between it and my father, and she met us at Heathrow with funny Sherlock Holmes hats for each of us. When she put mine on my head, I watched her prism earring swing instead of looking at her face.

The whole time we were there my father kept saying things like, “Look, that little church has a red door, but it’s a brighter red than we have at home, don’t you think?” or “The English really know how to make a good bowl of oatmeal, my favorite food,” even though we all knew oatmeal wasn’t his favorite food at all. “If we lived here,” he told me, “you could have your own horse.” His cheeks were pink and flushed, his hat flapping as he grabbed my brother’s hand and ran for the Underground at King’s Cross, turning to look back eagerly at my mother holding her coat closed at the neck, running with her head down. Her hair brushed at her buttons. I watched her and grabbed at my own collar.

Mr. James is an artist who has a studio in the same ex-warehouse on Lill Street as my mother. I don’t know what he makes. I overheard a conversation between him and my mother once when I visited her studio, and it was only about gesso.

In the two weeks since my mother has been on her ski trip with Mr. James, Kelly and I have begun to make lots of things for dinner, things from the kitchen cabinets that
have been there for a long time. We invent dishes: canned Campbell’s soups over fettucine noodles, marshmallows dipped in pudding for dessert. Wheat germ pancakes topped with baby food, which my brother thinks is the greatest treat ever. Kelly likes the table fancy, and helps me set it elaborately with the Spode and the lace placemats, and I put on an apron, and neatly lay out everything for him to make orange juice for us: pitcher, can of Tropicana, wooden spoon, two china cups.

After dinner we do the dishes together and then play games until one of us falls asleep. We never even put the games away, now that my mother isn’t around to tell us to clean up, but we go into the TV room and sit on the stuffed plaid couch and pick up where we left off the night before in Milles Bornes, or Life, or Sorry. I let Kelly win a lot of the time, but he is good, and watches me constantly, and asks questions I can’t answer. “Rache,” he says, “what’s ‘Milles’? What’s ‘Bornes’?”

We leave the TV on the whole time and it’s nice. Sometimes Kelly brings his books for me to read to him, carrying a stack of them in two hands, running back to his room to get Sing-Sing and Minta (hanging from his arms, one cat at a time). Then he climbs up onto the cushions of the sofa with me. The room is warm and smells of cinnamon, and the pictures of our family hang above the fishtank so that if I want to, I can sometimes pretend that maybe my parents are just out for the evening, are coming back soon.

But then Kelly falls asleep, and I have to wake him and walk with him upstairs to bed or he will bump into the walls, and then I have to check, every night, all the doors and windows and make sure they are locked. Check them again. Look out the window into the dark street, and check them again.

Me, Willa, Beth. From far away, we are just some girls walking down the street in black tights and wool coats, pink-cheeked with cold and red-lipsticked. We have tell-
tale schoolgirl book-bags on our shoulders, and we walk slowly, kicking litter on down the street. It blows away ahead of us, the cigarette butts and smashed waxy drink cups and other things you are allowed to throw on the street. Sometimes we scream and try to push each other off the sidewalk, and the other people around just keep walking.

In December, it gets dark early. It is windy and brittle, and the sky has turned that electric blue that it turns just after the sun has gone and the highest stars just start to come out, and you are close enough to the bright hazy sky of the city to know that these are all the stars you will ever see here, as long as you are here. The earth is dark. The red lights of cars flash by, people in silhouette behind the wheels, people with somewhere to go. The lights of the public library, the apartment buildings, the restaurant on the corner with tall tables and green glass lamps — the light from all of these things falls out through the windows and onto the sidewalk where we step. The streetlights are on and the trees are old and bare and black and have bricks in fancy patterns inlaid around their trunks. Beth lights a cigarette and passes it to us so that we can all share.

In four days it will be Christmas vacation. My mother and Mr. James said they'd be back on the 24th. Beth and Willa talk about what they are getting for Christmas, and when I am quiet they feel bad, and try to blame Mr. James for my mother's being gone, as if she didn't really want to go to Vermont. They say, "I bet your mom is gonna bring you awesome stuff from Vermont," and I say Yeah, and think about ice skates and new red and blue snowflake sweaters and bottles of maple syrup tied with red ribbons under the tree, maybe skis for me or Kelly. I think about the party we could have, and the tree that will be tied to Mr. James' car.

I think about last winter, and what I was doing then, and then I think about one night in particular when my mother and father were making chop suey together in our brick-walled kitchen on a Sunday evening. My father must have already been seeing Shelly, although none of us knew that yet, and as I remember him that night chopping
vegetables and pretending to be a Benihana chef to make us happy, I am sad, because I know that even then he had a secret he was keeping from us all, and he was all alone in knowing that his antics were false. Kelly and I giggled at him and bounced around with anticipation and appetite, pouring tea and wedging glasses with lemon. We lit the small lamps around the room and put the stereo was on, koto music, and all four of us ate around the wooden kitchen table by firelight, my hair pinned up in a fancy chignon secured by paper cocktail umbrellas and my mother’s fragile, frantic hands.

The 24th. Beth and Willa shake their heads. “Isn’t Mr. James an asshole,” they say. “Doesn’t he just know how to fuck everything up.”

That night after dinner, instead of playing the games, Kelly and I go down to the basement and get the huge box of Christmas decorations from under the stairs. We don’t have a tree, but there are lots of lights and ribbons and tissue-wrapped ornaments and fake holly leaves in the box, and Kelly sits on the big sofa while I take the things out and hand each one to him to unwrap. He is very serious, and handles each glass ball, each garland of stars carefully, and lays each decoration in a long row across the coffee table. They are all so familiar, once I see them unwrapped.

Then we go around and hang all the things from anywhere things will hang: ornaments from the curtain rods and lamps, ribbons tied onto chair backs, holly leaves and berries spread in a rustic display across the kitchen counter and my father’s desk, garlands across the stove. We do not leave one corner of the downstairs untouched, not one wall left without at least a snowflake taped onto it.

And it takes us hours, but finally the only thing left on the table is a strand of tree lights. I put them up, stretching them only half-way up the front windows, which is as far as I can reach, and Kelly hits the overhead switch off, and the room is suddenly beautiful. “It really is,” he says breathily, his hands clasped in from of him. But his eyes
are turned upward, looking at the unlit top half of the bare window, and I remember how my father was so tall that he could put the star on top of every Christmas tree we used to have without a ladder. "Do they have Santa in London?" Kelly asks, and I say Yes.

We drag the comforter downstairs and sleep on the rug because Kelly doesn’t want to leave the lights, so I make him a kind of fort between the sofas and the coffee table, and bring him Sing-Sing and Minta. I lie awake under the tent of the sheet and look at the lights for a long time and think about what my mother is doing, and wonder again about the presents that Beth and Willa said she would bring me, and I picture myself skating in a red skirt on the pond at Freedom Park. The pond is empty but for me, and I’m practicing big, uninterrupted figure eights, but when I turn backwards to look at my tracks, I don’t see anything, the tracks are invisible.

And suddenly I have this thought that there aren’t any ice skates; that my mother doesn’t even know that I want ice skates, and that when she and Mr. James come back it will probably be night, and as dark as it was the morning they left, and my mother will be tired, too tired to talk to me, too tired to even wake me up when she gets home. And what surprises me then is that I am so surprised.

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Sometimes I pick up Kelly from St. Francis School. He seems smaller than the other first graders who come out, in his little red coat, and he holds my hand so tightly as we walk home through the snow. The late afternoon is quiet and dark, cars driving only occasionally and peacefully down the wide street. I try to picture our village before it was settled, when it was only forest and still calm. "Rache, guess what?" Kelly says. "What?" I ask. "Oh nothing," he says. "I just don’t like it when nobody’s talking." I lift
him up, although he is a boy now, and whisper all the words I can think of quickly—

*frog, orange juice, bumble bee, telepathy, hipster*—into his ear to make him giggle. He wraps his arms around my neck and I carry him down the street. After a few minutes, his little voice comes again, hopefully: “Guess what?”

Sometimes I think I see my father, wearing his camel hair coat and getting off the 5:40 with the flood of commuters from the city. He’s walking with his head tilted and his shoulders hunched, the way my father does, and he’s carrying his briefcase and his newspaper and a white bakery bag with four eclairs for all of us, only I know it is not him or he would come to me. But for the little second in which I make my mistake, my heart romps inside my chest so loudly that I get nervous, and hope it isn’t really him at all.

It’s always just someone else’s dad, though, everytime, and I walk on with a strange feeling of excited disappointment, relieved and flushed, furious.

Papa! I howl inside, calling after him. Mama!

Guess what! Guess what! Guess what!
Tim watches Eliza as she stands in the apartment courtyard with her palms raised toward the sky, feeling for rain. “This is the ultra perfect spring,” she says. She has her eyes closed, and her black eyelashes rest on the papery thin skin beneath her eyes. He’s pretty sure she is memorizing the lacy magnolia tree on the lawn so that when they get back home she can do it in watercolors. She is always doing things like this. Things he would never think of to do. She is wearing a men’s red gingham shirt that is not his, that he has never seen before, and he wonders if it belongs to her brother-in-law, Simon.

They are standing in the apartment courtyard waiting for Simon to come back downstairs with Eliza’s younger sister, Sara, and his raincoat. Simon and Sara have already been married for eight months, and still, if one forgets a raincoat in an apartment upstairs, the other just laughs, and they run across the garden to the front door, together. When the Dudleys come down with the raincoat and umbrellas for everyone, they look at Eliza with her hands over her head, then look at their magnolia tree. Eliza says, “I just felt something,” and Sara glances at her sister and puts her hand out too, waiting for another drop. Their hands open at the same angle, and Tim is amazed, again, to think that there is anyone like Eliza. “I am now prepared,” says Simon, “Rain away!” He shakes his blond ponytail against the back of his second-hand
raincoat and smiles at Tim, and Tim is secretly pleased. He feels suddenly lighter, happy about everything.

Tim gave the raincoat to Simon as a gift when he and Eliza arrived last week to visit. This is their last night in Oregon, and Simon wants to walk over to campus before dinner to show them his darkroom and studio. His stuff, he tells them, has been really well-received here in Oregon, he's even got a print being published next month, and Tim is impressed. It is an early Sunday evening, and, as it has been every evening since their arrival, the air is transparent and moist, green with rain. Several times a day since Tuesday the clouds would sprinkle them in a soft mist, and in the violet afternoons people would walk down the streets of the little city as if they were further south, in sun, in California. No umbrellas. The smell of potting soil wafts on the air. Everything is green here. "They're just several weeks ahead of us, it looks like," Tim told Eliza when they were driving in. "We'll catch up back home, you'll see." But Eliza looked out the window skeptically, as if she didn't believe that.

The darkroom is only a short walk from the Dudleys' apartment building. The four of them kick rocks down the alley on the way to the darkroom. No one else seems to be out at all, and the only person they have seen for blocks is a woman with a long scarf like a veil carrying a huge brown paper-wrapped painting as if it were weightless. A few yards ahead of Tim and Simon, Eliza and Sara walk, stride in stride. Sister strides, thinks Tim, same legs, same hipbones and bony knees beneath their long pale skirts. Same kind of skirts. "We're wearing these," Sara called out from the bedroom earlier, when the sisters were getting dressed, "in honor of spring. You're an April Queen!" she shrieked at Eliza. "Oh yeah," said Eliza, "I am." Tim wants to catch up with them, walk next to Eliza, hold her hand, but he knows that she will keep her arm linked in Sara's.

A few blocks from campus there is an old cemetery crouched under dripping
firs, ringed by a crumbling stone wall which has fallen away every few yards. The small hills and dales of the cemetery are freckled in fluorescent green against the dark, wet trunks of trees, and the tilted slate gravestones. It is darker in the cemetery where there are no wide streets. Simon jumps over the short wall and places his hand on the top of a gravestone, turning to look back at them. "Check it out," he says, and they all stop.

"Wow, look at this place," says Eliza. "This place," says Simon, "is where I met the All-Knowing."

A little arrogant, thinks Tim, but then figures: Simon would, if anyone he knew could. He points to a stone bench on the path. "Just sitting here, smoking a roll-your-own." Sara peers at the bench curiously, as if she hasn’t heard this story before.

Simon steps onto the bench as if he is onstage. "Well, okay," he says. "The other day I went home to grab a tuna salad sandwich on rye for lunch. And after that I was just riding the bike to the studio." Simon, on the bench, pretends to ride a bike, funny smile of his face and zigzagging crazily. Eliza laughs.

"And when I got to this bench this guy sitting here was like, 'Hello,' and I said, 'Hello,' and he said, 'Where are you going,' and I said that I had some work to finish." He jumps down from the bench and sits on it, imitating the guy rolling a cigarette carefully. Tim has always wanted to know how to do that, but it’s obvious that Simon can roll like a pro, even pretending. He says, like the stranger " 'Oh yeah? Where do you work?' And I was thinking how was I going to explain 'Work' and 'work,' when he stuck out his hand and said, 'I'm God, by the way. . . . '" He forces a handshake on Tim and Tim awkwardly shakes back, surprised. Simon laughs and throws up his hands, the umbrella waving. "What could I say to that?" he asks.

"What did you say?" asks Eliza. Simon bangs the bench with the tip of his umbrella, and grabs Sara suddenly and pulls her down onto his lap. He kisses her dramatically, bending her backwards, and her skirt wraps around her knees.
Tim looks away shyly, smiling, and sees Eliza staring at the kiss. She pushes a strand of hair behind her ear. But then Simon jumps up suddenly, as if he were sitting on an invisible God, or a relic, and not just a stone bench. He sets Sara down lightly, and she laughs, and covers her mouth with her hand.

"I said, 'Very nice to meet you. I didn't think I'd be making your acquaintance again so soon, since I don't do that Stuff anymore. Then God came down to the studio and I showed him around.' Sara laughs, and bows her head, smiling at him. "Bah!" blurts Tim, elbowing Eliza. She touches her brother-in-law's shoulder and says, "What? I believe him. I believe you, Simon." Simon chuckles and pokes the umbrella into the mud at his feet.

Simon and Sara were married in September, and they moved to Oregon just three days later. Tim remembers their wedding, on Sara's 21st birthday, and how Eliza looked in her bluish bridesmaid's dress, how after dinner they took their wineglasses and went out to the parking lot that bordered a forest preserve behind the restaurant, so Eliza could sit on the hood of his car and smoke a cigarette. He kept his hands wrapped around her waist as she inhaled. She still didn't want her parents to catch her smoking, even though their youngest daughter, had just become someone's wife, was now Sara Dudley, and was leaving home for good. Seeing Eliza with a cigarette might just make her parents think that the world they had known together really was forever changed, that they would not ever get the old times back: when Eliza was sweet, Sara homely and shy, sitting under the kitchen table and stirring pudding in a yellow Tupperware bowl.

Through the lighted arches of the restaurant windows he and Eliza could see the friends of her parents, people who had known Eliza and Sara all their lives, through birthday parties and graduations. They were dancing, swinging each other around. They looked so nice. For some reason this made her sad, she told Tim, the fact that these people knew so much about her and she didn't know them at all, really. She, too, was an
adult now, and yet she still thought of herself as a child in front of them, nodding bashfully and avoiding the sloppy intimacy of hugs. After she had finished her cigarette, she threw the red stub of it into the woods behind her, and Tim pushed the fluttersy layers of her dress up, and pressed her against the windshield in a long, impatient kiss.

This is the first time they have seen Simon and Sara since their wedding, months before, and Tim and Eliza are the only guests from home they have had to show off the first city and first apartment of their marriage. Their apartment is sparsely furnished but has beautiful, pale wood floors, and Sara has framed and hung Simon’s best photographs on the one large, speckled wall that isn’t interrupted by small windows.

In their bedroom, over the bed, is a large black and white of nude Sara. In the picture she’s lying on the bare floor of the new living room, her arms thrown open and fingers spread wide. She’s smiling a huge smile, Eliza’s smile, and her eyes are closed, sunlight striping her body through the blinds. When Sara was giving them the tour of the new rooms, Tim shrieked playfully when he saw it, shocked, but Eliza just looked back at him, unsmiling, and stared at the photo for long time.

The quilt on the Dudleys’ bed is one Sara made out of intricately cut patches of Simon’s old clothes, pieces that Simon’s mother gave to her, carefully folded and packed in marked boxes, before they moved. Driving across several states in the U-Haul van, they hadn’t broken a single thing, and they’ve displayed their wedding presents, the new china with its glaze a scant film of pearl, and the thin glasses on open shelves in the kitchen, and have hung their unscratched and perfectly seasoned pots, a few colanders for different types of pasta, from shiny brass pegs above the sink. Seeing them, Tim thought about the dishes in his and Eliza’s apartment, how they were mismatched and dull, and their own dented pots culled from various thrift stores. Their silly glasses were things Tim had used in college, souvenirs from Tahoe and Vegas with gaudy attractions decaled on their sides. Or he saved the jelly jars. Eliza could never get her hand inside
them to wash. Then she would complain about all their stuff. At Sara’s, Eliza touched the pots and they swung, lightly, over the sink. “When are you guys gonna get married?” Sara said.

Simon swings the umbrella around on one finger. “This cemetery is really, really old,” he says, “kind of a weird short-cut, huh? I know everybody uses it, this path, and yet it’s so quiet in here, you never see anyone.” He’s silent for a minute and everyone stops and looks around. “Besides God, of course,” Tim says.

All of the headstones are pitted and mossy. There are small wildflowers just barely blossoming all over the grounds, and the soggy grass is sprinkled with tiny drops of lavender and blue. The caretaker’s house sits in the middle, under a grove of fir trees. His old black no-speed bicycle is chained to a tree trunk with a rusted link chain. Tim points to it and says, “Who would want to live here!” He shivers with exaggeration. “I don’t know,” says Sara. She runs her fingers over her dark braid, comforting herself, “I can’t even imagine,” she says nicely, looking at Tim.

“I think it’s nice,” says Eliza, “I think I’d like to be buried here. I think I’d like to be right there,” and she drops Sara’s arm and runs across the path to a white marble angel, which droops under the pine trees in the clear air. The angel sits in a marble chair, her head bent over her shoulder and her legs crossed at the ankles like a little girl’s, washed in her marble skirts. The angel’s arms are folded lightly around a marble baby, and in the space between them some other walker has placed a bouquet of daisies. Tim notices, for the first time, wild daisies growing in a giant patch at the far edge of the cemetery. The rain has let up.

Last night, he and Eliza went to the supermarket to buy groceries to make a fancy “thank-you” dinner for Simon and Sara before they left. They had planned for it back at home, and brought their cookbook, and spent a fun part of the drive to Oregon
reading the recipes out loud, deciding on the perfect menu. Eliza had on flimsy slacks and her ankles arched out of them to rest on the dashboard while he drove. She was wearing a black-ribboned straw hat that he bought for her, her travel hat, and as she read and turned to look at his reaction to the various dishes she thought Simon and Sara would like, the ribbons flopped over her shoulders in a way that he thought was charming and old-fashioned. "Quiche Lorraine," she read, "and Spinach Crepes." She recited the ingredients to him. "Bacon!" he said, excitedly, "and chocolate, for dessert." "Bacon and chocolate for dessert!" she said and then she laughed, and shook her head at him.

At the grocery store, Eliza carried the list of ingredients while he pushed the cart, and in the unfamiliar store they kept having to go back to aisles they'd passed, not knowing where to find things. Cheese, she needed, and eggs. Bacon he threw in the cart, and some chocolate truffles offered in a special display. He fooled around, pretending to almost smash the cart into the seafood tank, proclaiming, "Be free!" to the lobsters trapped in their cube of blue. Eliza giggled and went behind him, reaching her arms around him, and put her hands on top of his hands, to steer him back to the center aisle.

In the check-out lane, she rested her cheek against his back. There was a display of fresh flowers near the registers, and she went over and picked out a bouquet of creamy daisies for the dinner table. They waited in line for several minutes and when it was their turn, they helped take the groceries out of the cart for the check-out girl. Eliza took out her credit card, and when the check-out girl saw it she shook her head, "We don't accept charge." Eliza froze. "You don't?" Neither she nor Tim had any more money. They had no money back at home, either, only credit cards until the 15th. Numbers started adding up crazily in Tim's head again, and he got nervous. "Sorry," said the check-out girl, and started putting the items back in the cart, about to get on the PA and call someone to return the perishables. Eliza held the flowers to her chest for a
minute. Then she handed them over to the cashier.

Outside in front of the store it had started to rain. Although when they had gone in earlier, it had still been light, now the night was dark and shiny. She started to cry, and put her face against Tim's chest. "I'm so angry," she said, "I'm so sick of this." He cradled her and touched her hair lightly with his lips and tried to think of what to do. "We have to make dinner," she said. There was a pay-phone, and they looked in the yellow pages for a grocery that would accept cards, and after finding none, she sniffed and Tim said don't worry, it wouldn't always be this way, and went in and wrote a bad check.

Everyone has gotten ahead of him on the cemetery path. Sara has gone over to Eliza and they are now bent over the angel's gravestone, their two sleek, dark heads bobbing, their hands pushing away dead leaves from the tender stalks of some tulips planted around the base of the stone. Tim steps off the path and walks to the far edge of the pine grove, and the daisy patch.

He walks carefully around tombstones and where he thinks there might be graves underneath the unmarked grass. He has on the wrong shoes for a walk, he realizes, flip-flops, and the pine needles get caught under his toes and the straps of his sandals. He looks back at Simon's boots as Simon stands away from the women and holds his fingers up in a mock frame, looking at Sara and Eliza through one eye. Simon's studio, when they get there, will be filled with big pictures of Sara, even more than are at the apartment.

He wishes that he knew how to take pictures, that he knew how to take pictures and had thought of taking a picture of Eliza, naked but wearing her hat, and lying on her stomach in the backyard, or in a field of daisies, her dark hair twisted over her round shoulder. A picture he could keep forever, and give to their kids and grandkids, that
expression on her face as if she’d just finished stretching, or taking a bath, glad. He starts picking daisies and settling them carefully in his left hand. He strips the stalks of leaves so he can hold more. A bunch. Bigger and nicer than the one at the store.

When he has enough, he goes back to where the Dudleys and Eliza are bent over the words on the angel’s grave, brushing dirt away from the letters. There are leaves engraved and tiny flowers, tiny letters. It’s a baby, with just the date of one year: 1907. “Hyacinth Ann,” says Eliza, “A Baby Angel. Oh, my God, that is so sad.” She looks like she might cry again. “That is so sad I can’t believe it,” she says, and Tim has the sudden, ridiculous wish that Hyacinth Ann had never died. Or never been born. Eliza pushes away more dirt from the stone and then stands up, looking at the sky. Simon rests his ten fingertips across Sara’s belly, as if feeling for something.

It has started to drizzle again, and they can hear the sound of the raindrops hitting the little leaves all over the cemetery like a whisper. When Tim pads over to Eliza, holding his bouquet, he is so quiet he could be rain. He gives the flowers to her and she dips her face into them. He holds her thin hand tightly, then brings his other hand across to hold her one with both of his. He loves her so much he doesn’t think he can let it go.