In My Former Life

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Several years ago, I fell in love with my pharmacist. He slipped me extras. I found samples of ibuprofen and Neosporin, little packets of vitamins and energy boosters, and twice, I found 40 pills in my 30-day supplies. The most fetching thing, though, was the way he leaned over the counter when he explained the instructions on those little amber bottles. He would look at the labels, and then at me, and in that low voice of his would say things like, “Twice a day. With food.”

His name was Troy Donahue, although he didn't look much like a 1950s movie star. He had acne marks on his cheeks and forehead, and a scar that ran from his right temple to the corner of his mouth. He looked a little like a thin Wayne Newton, with stringy black hair that he tucked behind his rather large ears, and an Adam's apple that ran up and down his skinny neck like a mouse in a maze. This was fine by me. I was no prize.

He was quite a few years older than me – I had just turned 22 that winter – but I always knew I needed someone older, at least that's what Mom told me once in my junior year of high school. The day I was supposed to go back, she found me huddled in my room. I can't go, I told her. Look at me, I said, and I held out my arms. I wasn't what you'd call a svelte teenager. My breasts were big, my bras ill-fitting, the straps always slipping down. I learned early to carry folders, and that day I wore a baggy long-sleeved T-shirt that covered my arms and wrists and hung over my wide hips. Mom set down a basket of laundry and patted my hand. You'll be fine, she told me. And one day, you'll find an older man. Older men don't get hung up on looks, she said.

Troy wasn't from that town, my hometown, where things came in ones: one shopping center, one movie theater, one high school, one nice restaurant – Shane's, with a nautical-Western theme – and one river, a lazy, curling thing that smelled like fish and trees, where the cottonwoods grew thick, setting loose their fluffy-white seeds in the spring and summer. The town had started to change some, with chain eateries cropping up like crab grass, along with a Wal-Mart and a Walgreens, where Troy worked. In
many ways, though, it was still the same. That January, I had watched the president say we were going to war in Iraq, but aside from the gas prices and some yellow ribbons, people went about their business as usual.

The general consensus in that town was that I was mildly retarded, or possibly autistic, or, well, just not quite right, on account of my folks had me late in life. When people think you’re stupid, they’ll say all manner of things in front of you. But I was none of those things. My folks were old, yes, which was the main reason that I had stuck around town so long. What most people didn’t seem to understand was that I won an art scholarship to the state university, and I would have gone too, if Mom hadn’t gotten sick the summer I was supposed to leave. I did get what you might call distracted sometimes, a lot actually, which I suppose didn’t help my reputation. Something would catch my eye and I would stop and stare into space, watching the colors and the shapes. It happened at gas stations, the grocery store, parking lots, and before, in the school hallways and the classroom. It was a little like when you see a flash of light from something, the face of a watch, maybe, or a car hood, a hubcap at the bottom of a river. You look until you find the source, right? In my case, it was just that nobody else could see it.

The best I can recall, three things happened to me that winter. The first was that I changed my name. I did it the day I met Troy Donahue, which was in February, about a month after Mom had her second breast removed. The air was dry and cold, and I had this recurring, nagging cough aggravated by allergies. I was sitting in an orange plastic chair at Walgreens waiting for my amoxicillin, thumbing through an outdated style magazine, when I flipped to an article about a Matisse retrospective that was on exhibit in Paris, France. I was remembering words from my high school French class — gourmand, printemps, rue, mer — and I was looking at a picture of that lovely Blue Nude when I heard my name on the loud speaker. “Evelyn Rae Prentiss, your prescription is ready.” I looked up then and got a load of Troy Donahue for the first time. He was behind the glass partition at the long Formica counter, bent over the mike, hair brushing the collar of that white smock. He said my name again, and I looked down at
the glossy magazine, at my red sweatpants, at my torn T-shirt with the coffee dribble. I ran a hand over my unwashed brown hair, my thick hips and round belly, and I thought about all of the names I had been called throughout my life — Tard, Prentiss Dementis, Evelyn Gay, Stupid, Weirdo, Nut Job, Space Case — and I looked up at Troy again. I thought, He knows none of that. I thought, I could be anyone. The name popped into my head right there among the aisles of Q-tips and hemorrhoid treatment.

I went to the counter, and Troy smiled at me. He handed me a bag and said, "There you go, Evelyn Rae."

"I don't go by that name," I said. I tried to stifle a wheezy cough and nearly choked on my throat lozenge.

"Oh?" he said. His hair was starting to recede in half-circles above his temples and he had a piece of fuzz in his eyebrow. I clutched my paper sack.

I said, "It's Elysée now. Elysée Prentiss. I'm an artist."

I don't know why I added that last part. I hadn't drawn anything since I graduated high school. I rubbed at the fading callous on my right middle finger. The lines of the Matisse flashed in my eye and I blinked.

Troy rubbed his jaw, and he smiled a little. "As in the Champs-Elysees?" he said.

I swallowed, the lozenge residue thick in my throat, and looked at my Keds. "Yeah."

"The Fields of Bliss," he said. "I took French in college."

"Me too," I said. I shifted my feet and tried to think of something else. "So have you been to Paris?"

"I went on my honeymoon."

"Oh," I said. "You're married."

"No, that was a long time ago." He cleared his throat.

"So, have you been to Paris?"

"Yes."

This wasn't a complete lie. What I meant was that I had read about it and planned to go. Someday. For the past year, I had been socking away cash in a shoebox under my bed, next to my old art supplies, books, and a stack of drawings. I was up to
$2,000. I kept it in the box with my passport until I could figure out, exactly, what it was that I wanted to do.

“Well, bonjour, Elysée,” he said.

I smiled at the sound of my new name in his mouth.

And that’s where it all started. All I knew was, the whole time we were talking, Troy looked me straight in the eye, and that was more than I could say for most people. They looked past me like a memory, or whispered to each other when they saw me coming, their eyes fever-bright with malice or pity. My own parents never really noticed when I, their “whoops,” their “surprise,” was in a room. But not Troy. He saw me.

I worked at the Lazy Daisy Hotel, where I also lived. Mom and Dad had bought the hotel cheap some 10 years back as an investment with the idea that Mom would run it until Dad retired from the cement plant, but I had been pretty much running it since Mom got sick the first time. Dad still worked part-time at the plant, even though he was almost 70, for the benefits. About a year earlier, I had moved out of Mom and Dad’s place and into Room 11, with its king-sized bed, kitchenette, pink-and-turquoise Southwestern art and thick gold curtains with a layer of dust on top. It was the first place I’d had all to myself, but it wasn’t exactly the life that I had dreamed of as a teenager. In those dreams, I got on a Greyhound bus, twenty pounds lighter after a summer of drinking only banana yogurt shakes, and I left that little Arizona town with its cottonwood trees and scrub oaks, dust and cat claws, its slow green river, my old parents in a triple-wide. In my dreams, I sketched drawings and wrote essays and ate lunch on The Quad. I lived in a 15-story dorm with a roommate named Traci, or Renee, or Laurel, a city girl who taught me to put on eyeliner and loaned me her best jeans. I drank beer from kegs and lost my virginity with a boy named Peter, or Alex, or Ryan, a smart boy, an older boy, a philosophy major probably, who knew nothing about me at all. On summer vacation, I backpacked through Europe and smoked Gauloises and drank black coffee, all of the things I had read in books from one library and seen on my parents’ one television and in movies at one theater. Back then, my dreams were as real to me as the river that ran through town, as sure as the square charcoal between my fingers,
the grainy paper under my palm. The summer I graduated, when Mom was being poked by needles and Dad was sleeping at the hospital, those dreams slipped away bit by bit, like air from a leaky tire, until they were gone. Eventually, I stopped drawing altogether. The plain-jane reality was, I ran a saggy hotel. I was a 22-year-old virgin who wasn’t going to college, and I had no place else to go.

The hotel was near Old Town, only a few blocks from the river, where the houses were older, the trees thicker, and the tourists more plentiful. I did pretty good business, usually clearing about $300 week after all was said and done, with people on their way to Tuzigoot Monument or Jerome up on the hill, and the folks who wanted to see Sedona 18 miles away but couldn’t afford to stay there. It was a small U-shaped place – 10 rooms plus mine – painted white with turquoise trim, with the parking lot in the center. My days rarely varied. In the mornings, I set up a continental breakfast – donuts, coffee and orange juice. I answered phones, took reservations, balanced the books. Afternoons, I cleaned.

Nights, I visited my folks, cooked, washed dishes, and watched TV with them. My folks weren’t what you’d call conversationalists. Dad talked about the cement plant and gas prices, how it was breaking him to fill the truck these days. Mom talked about what was on sale at Bashas’ and how tired she was, and she absently rested her hands where her breasts used to be. She didn’t have chemo that time, but she said she was more tired than when she did. I had given up trying to join their conversations long ago, but I listened. They loved me, I’m sure — my given name is, after all, a combination of theirs, Evelyn and Ray — and I loved them, but I often felt like background noise. Sometimes they looked at me like I was an alien, or a singing llama or something. They talked about me in the third person a lot. Like that last time Mom was in the hospital. Dad and I were sitting next to her bed after she woke up from surgery. Dad hovered over her, ran his head on her forehead, held her pale fingers. Next door, there was a ruckus, and some nurses rushed past, a swirl of blue scrubs and foot slippers. He’s going to code, he’s going to code, they said, and I started coughing and scratching at my wrists. Mom
looked at me and frowned, then turned to Dad. This isn’t good for Evelyn Rae, she said. Take her home, Ray.

When Mom and Dad fell asleep in their matching recliners, I let myself out and locked them in. Usually I went back to the hotel, crawled into bed, and watched TV, but lately all that was on was footage from the Gulf, which tied me up in knots. Instead I had been driving around town. I drove up and down the one main road, back and forth, past the single-story shops closed for the night, past the high schoolers gathered in the Circle K parking lot. They leaned up against car hoods, snuck sips of wine coolers, blonde, red, brunette, Tracis, Renees, Laurels, Alexes, Peters, Ryans, gleaming like oil under the fluorescent lights. Back at the hotel, sometimes I bundled up in a blanket and climbed up on to the roof of my room, staring at Jerome’s tiny blanket of lights, at the Milky Way, at the illuminated smoke billowing from the cement plant. Sometimes I touched myself, my hands on my two good breasts and inside my pants, until my eyes rolled back and the sky washed over me. Then I crawled into my bed alone, my own scent on my hands, thinking about the shoebox underneath of me, shivering in the haze of loneliness that swelled large and gaping in the dark.

The second thing that happened that winter was that I began to hurt myself. The first time was not on purpose. It was a few days after I met Troy, and maybe I was a little moony. I was carrying an arm full of bedding when I got distracted by the sky, where the clouds made shadows on Mingus Mountain. I stepped on the edge of a sheet and, boom, down I went onto the pavement.

I hobbled into my room and sat on the edge of my bed, staring at the blood trickling down my knee. The colors began to shift, as they always did. In the middle of all the red, bright and lovely, I saw my father’s gray hair and my mother’s blue-green eyes. I remembered that when I was eight years old, I broke my arm after I fell from a sycamore tree. I had been looking at the way the sun filtered through the tree, casting shadows and prisms on the river like a million jumping silver fish, and I lost hold of the branch. Dad carried me the quarter-mile from the river back to the house. He was in his 50s then, and his arms were shaking
by the time he set me in the back of the car. It was one of the few times I had been that close to him. Usually, when he came home from work, he stepped over me as I sat in the middle of the floor, intent on the kitchen, my mother, a cold beer. When he carried me that day, I buried my face into his shirt, smelling dried sweat and fabric softener. Mom sat with me on the way to the hospital. My head was in her lap, and she smoothed my hair, her hands cool and soft, smelling of rose water. The sun glinted silver off her glasses.

In the hotel room, I stared at my leg, at all of the color and pain, and soon enough, Troy Donahue’s black hair appeared among the red and gray and blue-green, and I sucked in my breath. I thought, Oh.

So I slapped a paper towel on my leg, put a ‘Back in 10 minutes’ sign on the office door, and headed to Walgreens for antiseptic and gauze bandages. I was shaky but kind of elated too, like I’d just slammed on the car brakes to avoid a cat, then watched it scurry off into the bushes. When I got to the counter, I was a little out of breath, but I didn’t see Troy Donahue. Unfortunately, I did see the cashier, Tammy Gibbons. She had been a sophomore when I was a senior. She rang me up, and then put her hand on her hip, cracking her gum.

“Hurt yourself, did you, Evelyn Rae?”
“My name is Elysée now,” I said.
“What?” She had a rather large forehead, and her thick eyebrows almost met in the center.

“Elysée,” I said. “It’s French.”
“OK,” she said.
“It’s a perfectly good name,” I said.
“I’m sure it is,” she said, and turned her back. “How’s your Mom doing, anyhow?”

“She’s better,” I said. Her blonde braid looked orange in that light, her roots as dark as soil. Someone touched my elbow.

“Hi Elysée,” Troy Donahue said, and I jumped. Tammy snorted but I didn’t look at her.

“How’s the cough?” He looked down. “You hurt your leg.” He kneeled and pressed at the paper towel.

“It’s nothing.” I thought, Lord, please don’t let me fall over. I held my bag and looked at Tammy. She had a look in her
too-close-together eyes, like she couldn’t wait to tell him all about Evelyn Gay.

Troy stood up, and I averted my face from the counter. “You see Tammy there?” I said, my voice low. He nodded.

I said, “She’s a little … not right, I guess you’d say. She lies all of the time. Her parents even pulled her out of school once, and she was at a psychiatric ward.” I leaned closer. He smelled like damp wool and Brut. “I’m only telling you ‘cause I feel kinda bad for her. Sometimes people can be cruel.”

Troy nodded. “Yes they can.” He glanced at Tammy. “I had heard something like that,” he said. He put his hand on my shoulder and pointed at my sack. “You got everything you need? Hold on a sec.” He grabbed a box of gauze and more tape. With his back to the counter, he put the items in my bag, and then gave me a little wink. His eyes were deep and dark, like a last warm sip of coffee.

“You’re very nice,” I said.

He stopped smiling and took a step backward. He touched that scar on his cheek. “No, I’m not. But I’m trying.”

“Well, I think you are,” I said.

After that, I made sure I was at the Walgreens every few days or so. Sometimes I really was hurt. One day I slammed my left hand in the door of Room 5, and I hollered so loud that the guests in Room 6 came running out in their robes. Troy touched my hand that day, looked at the bruising along the ring finger and pinkie. He picked out a splint and an ACE bandage, and he showed me how to wrap it, not too tight. I’m pretty sure he rubbed his fingers over my knuckles on purpose. Other times I had to fudge a little. One day, I pretended I had twisted my ankle in a pothole. Another time I used makeup to create a reddish-bruise on my forehead, saying a guest had accidentally hit me with the office door. Ice pack. I picked up things on behalf of Mom and Dad: Ben-Gay, Vitamin B, glucosamine, cortisone for a rash. I told him about Mom, and he told me he was sorry, and he looked sorry, shaking his head slowly and rubbing his jaw. Each time Troy threw in a few extras, or wouldn’t charge me for everything, or rang in coupons that I didn’t have. Each time he looked me in the eye and my heart did a little flip. I also was spending more time up on the roof or in my bed, pretending my hands were
Troy’s. I bought myself a silky lavender nightie at Wal-Mart. When I put it on and stared at myself in the mirror, the lavender became phosphorescent, and I became, well, almost pretty. One day, I sat in the parking lot of Walgreens, dumping out fast-food pepper packets into my hand. I imagined Troy walking out for his break and seeing me there. He would knock on my window, make a “roll-it-down” gesture.

He would lean close and say, My name isn’t Troy Donahue. He was my mother’s favorite actor. The truth is, I haven’t been overseas. I got fired from my last job in Phoenix, and my great-aunt lives up here. I got this scar in a fight. So you see, I’m not perfect.

It doesn’t matter, I’d say. What’s your real name?
It doesn’t matter, he’d say.
I would look at him, and then lift up the lock. Come on in, Troy. I’d say, Where should we go?
And he would say, Anywhere. Anywhere you want.
I had a small pile of pepper in my palm, and I licked it and sniffed some, until my nose and eyes burned.
“They’ve been using a new cleaning solution and I think I’m allergic,” I told Troy. He frowned, a thick wrinkle between his brows. He pulled some Triaminicin off the shelf.
“This should help,” he said. I pulled out my wallet but he waved me off. He went back behind the glass partition and started to fill orders. No one was in line, so I stayed at the counter. Tammy was at the other side of the room, talking on the phone.
“Do you have a tissue?”
He slid a box down the counter. He kept filling a bottle, so I stood under the “Pick Up” sign, waiting for him to look up. My mouth was dry and the pepper burned at the back of my throat. He looked up finally, and tilted his head. He moved down the counter until he was standing in front of me. That crease was still between his brows.
I said, “I can’t believe how expensive gas is these days.” I flushed as soon as I said it, and I quickly put my face in a tissue. Troy nodded. “The Gulf,” he said.
I said, “It doesn’t really seem like we’re at war, does it?” I pointed out over the aisles. “I mean, it’s not like we’re rationed.”
“You should see the gas prices in Chicago. My mom is
howling about it.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

“Yeah.”

“The lake is pretty,” I said. “I visited the Art Institute once.”

“That’s right,” he said, and glanced at his watch. “You’re an artist.”

“Yes.”

“I really don’t know much about art,” he said. He pulled a box from under the counter, and then looked back at Tammy. I saw her raise her eyebrows.

“I could show you sometime,” I said.

He peeled tape off the box, and then glanced at his watch again. “Sure,” he said.

I leaned forward, pushing up my breasts with my forearms. “I’ve been thinking about moving away soon. For a different perspective and all that. But with my mom being sick…”

Tammy walked up and handed Troy a slip of paper. She said, “They want to pick this up in 10 minutes.”

Troy looked at the slip, then at me. “Where would you go?”

I thought of that money in a box under my bed, how I’d never been on an airplane, of all the possible places out there in the world.

Tammy interrupted. “I would go to California. That’s where the action is. I’ve always wanted to be an actress.”

Troy frowned at the prescription slip. Tammy leaned in, and they walked to a shelf behind them. I said, “Bye.” Troy lifted his hand, but he didn’t look back.

After I left Walgreens, I went back to the hotel. I checked-out two families, ate a stale donut, washed sheets, paid bills. I added another $220 to the box under my bed, and then counted my savings. I was up to $2,640.

That night at Mom and Dad’s, I reheated some tuna casserole and served it to them on TV trays. They were watching the news, which was showing footage from the Gulf, endless, wind-whipped sand and bombs flaring over the capital.

Dad said, “Goddamn Saddam. Gas was up 3 cents at the Chevron today. $1.47.”
Mom said, “Mmm-hmm.”

I stood at the counter and watched the backs of their heads, which glowed in the light from the TV. On the screen, oil fields were burning.

I said, “I changed my name.” They didn’t say anything. On the TV, a soldier held up a gas mask, and then it flashed to a group of Iraqi soldiers on their knees, arms lifted. I raised my voice. “I said, I changed my name.”

Mom swiveled her recliner to look at me. “What’s that?”

“It’s Elysée now. I changed my name to Elysée. It’s French. And,” I said, gripping the edge of the counter, “I’ve been seeing someone.”

Mom glanced at Dad, who then swiveled his recliner. Their feet were almost touching. They both stared at me.

“His name is Troy Donahue. He’s a pharmacist.”

“Evelyn,” Mom said. “I thought we’d gotten past this.”

“It’s true. He’s from Chicago.”

They looked at each other again. Dad ran a hand over his face.

He said to Mom, “When did this start again?”

“I’m not making this up,” I said. “I’m not. Why would I?”

Mom shook her head, and said, “I don’t know, why would you?”

“Why aren’t you happy for me? Would that be so hard, really, to say, why Elysée, that’s a pretty name. We’re happy for you. We’re proud of you. We wish you the best.”

“Little girl,” Dad said. He let down the leg rest on the recliner. “Hush now.”


Mom said, “No one asked you to do that, Evelyn. We want you to have your own life.”

“I could have gone,” I said. “I could have.”

Dad said, “Where would you go?”

“Well, I could have gone to art school, for one thing. I had a motherfucking scholarship.”

They stared at me. “You watch your language, girl,” Dad said. He looked at Mom. “What is she talking about?”

Mom shrugged. “She’s always had an imagination.” She
smiled at me. “And her drawings are beautiful. Evelyn, honey, why don’t you stay here tonight?”

“Fine, don’t believe me,” I said. I turned off the oven and grabbed my purse off the floor. “And it’s Elysée. It means bliss,” I said, and I slammed the door.

I drove up and down the one main road, stopping at the two main lights. It was a Tuesday and the streets were empty. I drove to the river and stopped on the bridge, looking out at deep dark water, at the leaves that had piled in clumps on the banks. The stars were bright as tourmaline, and Jerome flashed like a ghost on the mountain. I drove to the edge of town, where a Giant gas station had gone in. The new station, everyone still called it. I pulled up to one of the pumps and shifted into neutral, idling. The gas gauge was almost empty. I looked at the price sign. $1.45. “Two cents cheaper,” I said aloud, and started laughing. “Here’s your two cents’ worth,” I said, and doubled over onto the passenger seat until my stomach clenched up. I wiped my eyes and sat up. My headlights were reflected in windows of the convenience store, and inside I could see the rows and rows of candy, gum, pork rinds, coolers of soda, the lights bright enough to power a small nation. A clerk sat behind a desk, head bent down, maybe reading, maybe sleeping. The reflection of the headlights refracted into prisms on my windshield. I thought about the times that I spent drawing down by the river, my toes buried into the fertile earth, cottonwood seeds in my hair, my hands moving, creating, alive. I thought about Mom’s body disappearing piece by piece, her rose-water hands, and then studied my own hands resting on the steering wheel. They were dry and cracked from cleaning solution, the nails short and ragged. In the deepening lines, I saw Dad’s titanium-white dust and pity, in my knuckles were my college dreams, sun-yellow and fading fast. Embedded in my palms were the names, the whispers, the black corners of my life. My love-line forked at the edge of my hand, and trailed off into the veins and scars, and it was red all right, primary red, deep-rooted and primal. I looked at the windshield and the colors stopped. The reality was, I was going nowhere. I took off my seat belt, shifted into first gear, and gunned it, straight into the plate glass window.
The last thing that happened that winter was that I started to draw again. It happened about a week after the accident, which had left me with a dislocated left shoulder, my arm in a sling, a pretty good bump on my forehead, a smashed-up fender, and a dent in my savings — a $500 deductible for the window, a $500 ER bill after insurance. Mom took over the office duties for the week.

Two days after the accident, I woke up in the middle of the night, cotton-mouthed, unsure of where I was. I flipped on the light and sat hunched against the pillows, looking at the dingy walls and the paintings of cactuses and coyotes. And then, I saw something else. I took down the paintings and then dug out my supplies from under the bed — books, drawings, charcoals, oils, acrylic gels, molding paste, solvents, stiff brushes, stained palettes. I flipped through a book until I found Edward Hopper’s ‘Hotel Room.’ With a piece of black charcoal in my unsteady hand, the book open on the bed behind me, a blank wall in front of me, I began to work.

I sketched until morning. I opened up the gold curtains for better light, and then tore them down, rod and all. I opened a window, the air fresh and painful, like the river in spring. Then, I began to paint — standing on a chair, down on my knees, my one good arm aching, the injured one throbbing. It was late afternoon by the time I sat on the bed and looked at what I had done. The basics of the picture were there — woman alone on a bed, suitcase, hat on a dresser — but mine was more angular, the colors sharper, lusher, reds and violets and golds. Instead of looking at her book, the woman looked out the window, which was a deep burning orange. Her knees were slightly farther apart. She was rounder, with full breasts and thick hips. It was the best thing I had ever done.

I ran to the car before realizing I was still in my nightgown, so I threw on a pair of shorts and tied the nightgown around my waist. With my arm slung up, I had a hard time shifting, so I stayed in first gear. The busted fender rattled all the way to Walgreens.

Both Troy and Tammy were at the counter when I
came in.

"What's with the get-up?" Tammy asked.

I looked up at the security mirror and saw myself for the first time in days. My hair was knotted up and held in place with a paintbrush, and the bump on my forehead was almost purple. The neckline of my nightgown scooped low and my nipples stood out against the thin fabric. Veins and patches of red stood out on my skin, and myriad paint colors streaked my arms, legs, even my feet in their flip-flops. On top of it all was the dirty sling.

"I've been working. Drawing, painting."

"We can see that," Tammy said.

"You look cold," Troy said.

I shrugged. I looked at Troy. "I wanted to show you."

"Oh," he said, looking down.

"I think Evelyn Rae has a crush," Tammy said.

Troy said, "Knock it off, Tammy."

"What," she said. "I'm not being mean. I think it's sweet."

I turned to Tammy. "It's Elysée," I said.

"Right, I forgot," she said. She raised her eyebrows.

I leaned forward on the counter on my good elbow until she looked me in the face.

"Fucking bitch," I said.

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Fucking bitch," I said, louder.

"Hey," Troy said. "Hey."

"You're crazy," Tammy said.

I leaned forward until I was on my tip-toes, inches from her face. "It's what you are and you know it. Everyone knows it. Just look at you. Even I, a crazy retard, know it."

Without warning, Tammy Gibbons started to cry. Her face turned red and blotchy, and she ran into the back room.

Troy said, "Jesus."

"She earned that," I said, pointing after her. "I am not crazy."

"OK," he said.

"I'm not. I'm not crazy. I'm just—" My voice shook and I stopped talking.

"I believe you. But I think it's best if you leave."
"I'm going," I said. I hiked up my nightgown strap. "In fact, I'm leaving town today," I told him. He didn't say anything, so I said, "This'll be the last time you see me."

I hoped for a second that he would say, No, wait, or, I'll come with you, but I saw it in his eyes then, the pity. I don't know how I'd missed it in the first place, as clear and dark and shining as it was.

My nose started to run, and I wiped it on the back of my hand. I flicked his name tag. "Is that even your real name?"

He didn't say anything, just looked at the counter. I pointed at his scar. "You're right. You're not nice."

"Just go on now, Evelyn Rae," he said. "Go on."

I know I told you that there were three things that happened that winter, but the truth is, there was a fourth. And it was this: I did leave town that day. It was as much of a surprise to me as anyone. I sat shivering in my dented car in the Walgreens parking lot for I don't know how long, but long enough to watch the sunset. When the sun hit the edge of the sky and erupted, I sat straight up and stared at the colors. They were X-rated, delusional, and they hovered and bled and shifted until I thought that maybe they were real. I whispered to no one, The sky's on fire, and I counted backward from 100, and then, I knew. Where else but this old city with the river at its heart, the artist in its soul?

So I went back to the hotel for the last time. I got my shoebox, packed some clothes, wrote a few notes. I tried not to think of how Mom and Dad would manage, or how I would manage for that matter, as I began this new foreign life. For some reason, I just kept thinking, Spring is coming. Printemps vient. Before I locked up for good, I grabbed a paintbrush and I signed that luminous thing on the wall. Elysee Prentiss. Even now, I wonder what people—my parents, locals, strangers passing through—think when they see it. Maybe they tell stories about me, truth, lies, something in between. Maybe they've just painted over it. But maybe a few people lie on the bed and look at the gleaming colors, and wonder what that woman saw out there in the burning sky.