Fall 2011

Rough Like Wool

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It was an inauspicious beginning, one that made Nell, who thought beginnings especially important, wont to call the whole thing off, but her best friend Mandy argued that she shouldn’t let a good thing go so easily—and besides, it was a thing that tons of people were doing nowadays; Hillary Rodham Clinton even met Bill on an internet dating site, if she could believe that.

"Is that right." Nell peered at her friend.

Mandy sighed. "No. Sorry. I couldn’t think of anyone famous who met her husband online, but I’m sure there’s someone. Just not Hillary. Too bad, though, because she’d be a really good advocate.” While she was speaking, she turned a pale orangey-pink, the color of a cooked shrimp. Mandy was plump, fifteen or twenty pounds overweight, and prone to frequent blushing, but she was a good person, level-headed and kind and with an innate sense of how to match a pair of throw pillows to a couch, and because she had few other options, Nell generally trusted her advice. Besides, Mandy had been married for eighteen months, to a fat and pleasant man that she’d met on a singles cruise. And so Nell decided to keep dating Peter, scanty beginnings and all.

Nell had signed up with the internet dating site because she was frustrated, and a little confused: though she was only twenty-six, she felt herself caught in a weird kind of limbo: the women she knew were either married already and planning for babies or they had no intentions of getting married for many more years and went out to bars or dance clubs with loud music that hurt her ears, and when she wanted to go home after two drinks looked at her like she was crazy, they had just requested Beyonce’s new single and was she sure she didn’t want to stick around? And so she had done the thing, vowing to herself that she’d cancel it after the two-week free trial was up, like Netflix.

At first she worried that someone she knew would see her profile, but then reminded herself that that would mean that he, too, had signed up with the same site. Maybe, even, she would be matched with somebody she already knew, Tony from work or Chad who had been in her spinning class in the spring, and they would laugh about the whole thing and wouldn’t even have to tell people that they’d signed up with an internet dating service, but that they’d met at work or in spinning class, whichever was the case.
But she wasn't matched with Tony or Chad but with Peter, who was much older than she was—twenty-five years older, to be exact, nearly twice her age—and he took her to Blue Fin, the nicest sushi restaurant in the coastal Florida town where they lived. He'd been divorced for fifteen years and retired for six months; he'd been a medical researcher at the local university and was currently a weekly contributor to the health blog on the website of a regional publication.

"It doesn't pay a whole lot—not nearly as much as my old job," he said. "But then, I'm not really doing it for the money."

"My job doesn't pay a whole lot either," Nell said, finagling a tuna roll with her chopsticks. She had never learned how to properly handle chopsticks, and used them like little swords, stabbing at her sushi prey. "Unfortunately I am doing it for the money."

She was a cashier at a beachfront store called The Pelican's Progress, a name that sounded vaguely familiar to her but whose origins she had never bothered to pursue. Among other things, The Pelican's Progress sold beach towels and T-shirts and shot glasses with the word FLORIDA! emblazoned on them. It was a longtime fixture in a town that was known largely for its research university but which also drew a small, steady trickle of tourists who didn't want to go to Daytona and for whom the Keys were too far away, who were looking for an honest little beach town where they could drink Coronas and eat fried shrimp in little beachside restaurants, shoes optional. The town had honesty by the bucketful: the hotels were still the pale pinks and greens of the seventies, with peeling paint and clay-colored roof tiles. The Pelican's Progress itself was charmingly shabby: the painted-white wood of its window trim had begun to rot, and its sign, a giant pelican that had been wood replaced by tin replaced by a stainless steel mechanism meant to open and close the pelican's mouth, had been damaged years ago in a tropical storm and never repaired, so that the pelican's bill was always askew, gaping, as if hoping to catch a fish. Next door was a store that sold vacuum cleaners, with a marquee displaying messages that alternated between humorous and inspirational. The week that Nell met Peter, it read: TIME WOUNDS ALL HEELS.

She and Peter went out on a series of dates, to the art museum and the performance theater and to a lot of expensive ethnic restaurants. He revealed that he had a lot of money—he'd lived simply and invested wisely, and now that he was fifty-one and at risk for heart disease felt that it made sense for him to retire; he'd been working for thirty years, and he hadn't been to the beach in three, hadn't read the books he wanted to read, hadn't relaxed in years.

He bought her things: new, beautiful hardcover books, a set of wine glasses, the Le Creuset enamel Dutch oven she'd been eyeing for months. He paid for her to get her hair colored at an expensive salon after she botched an at-home highlighting kit and came out looking like a demented tiger.
“I think I like him a lot,” she told Mandy over frozen yogurts, their weekly ritual. “And he’s kind of good-looking, in a Gene Hackman sort of way.”

“Oh, Nell,” Mandy said, waving her hands in little back-and-forth motions in the air, as if shaking out a washcloth, and blushed deeply, so that the skin on her neck became a mottled scarlet purple. “Oh, I’m so happy for you two.”

After they had been together for six months he paid off her student loans—she’d been a sociology major in college—and six months after that they were married in a small but exquisite nighttime ceremony, with white lilies and candles and a lot of champagne. Mandy, in a peach-colored dress that matched her flushed skin in all the photos, was her only bridesmaid. Nell’s parents, retired in St. Lucia, sent a card. Peter’s parents, who were dead, did not attend. Nell quickly got used to the idea of her relationship with Peter and the assumptions that came with it: she was a gold-digger, he was a cradle-robber, she only wanted his money, he only wanted her to assure him of his virility, he was having a mid-life (three-quarter-life?) crisis, etc, etc. She was able to admit the facts to herself quite easily: she was an older man’s younger wife. It was an arrangement that she had always found repulsive, generally, until she had experienced it specifically, in which case it was quite nice.

But still, it wasn’t quite the dynamic one expected: he was rich enough, certainly, but she wasn’t quite pretty enough: her hair was grayish-brown and flat and her lips were a trace too large and constantly parted, giving the impression of a confused person, or a fish. She had a lot of bad habits: she didn’t read properly, being too impatient, and when reading the books Peter gave her often skipped whole paragraphs that turned out later to be of paramount importance, coming to a point where she could no longer understand what was going on, and would throw the whole thing down in frustration. Too, she was an impatient cook, with no interest in measuring cups and spoons or instruments that otherwise encouraged consistency, and she soon gave up trying to make dinner for her new husband and instead amassed a great many take-out menus, ordering food from Indian and Greek and Thai restaurants and putting it onto their good plates before they sat down to eat. It wasn’t much, but it was more than nothing.

And at any rate he seemed to love her, emerging from his study in the early evening and kissing her purposefully before sitting down with the paper or a medical journal and a short, heavy glass with an inch of whiskey in the bottom. They had dinner together every night, sitting across from one another at his heavy oak table, a rustic, behemoth thing that sat twelve, and he seemed to derive genuine pleasure from her stories about her old boyfriends, those young, irresponsible boys of her past. Otherwise, they mostly talked about her work.
“Today,” she told him over baba ghanoush and moussaka, “I sold this woman a postcard that said ‘THE WEATHER’S HERE. WISH YOU WERE NICE.’”

He was silent for a moment, then laughed uproariously; he was kind. “More wine?” he asked, holding the bottle over her glass. They drank a lot of wine. In the evenings, after dinner, they watched television together or Nell watched it alone, while he used his laptop at the dining room table.

Although he was semi-retired, he was active in a small group of doctors and researchers studying a disease called Morgellons, a condition, he explained, that wasn't yet recognized by the CDC and thought by many medical professionals to be a manifestation of delusional parasitosis, a condition that made patients feel like their skin was infested with parasites when there was nothing actually physically wrong with them. There was irrefutable proof that this wasn't the case with Morgellons, he told her, his face becoming flushed and vibrant when he spoke of it, and spent his days in his study doing things that Nell understood largely to be related to the publicity of the disease, of trying to get doctors to understand that it was a real and distinct condition. Often he worked out of his study at home; occasionally he made trips whose purpose she understood inexacty, to the lab or to the offices of colleagues.

“What does it matter if people don’t think it’s real?” she asked one night over pork souvlaki. She had a very vague handle on Morgellons, even though Peter had explained it to her several times. The symptoms were weird: the feeling of balls of hair spiraling down into one’s skin, skin lesions, something or other about malicious fibrous strands. Hearing Peter speak of it, she had the impression of being a small child listening in to the conversation of adults. Morgellons, she knew, was a thing in his life that she wasn’t, and never would be, a part of, something that was bigger than her. It had, after all, been there first, had existed in his life for years before she had, and she wished that she had a hobby of her own to counterbalance it, like tennis, or knitting.

“Compassion,” her husband replied. “Treatment. Insurance. We can’t advance our knowledge of this condition if people don’t think it’s real, and the people who have it won’t get a proper diagnosis. And, obviously, insurance companies won’t cover something they don’t think exists.”

Nell nodded. She herself was a bit of a hypochondriac, and recognized this fact about herself, this being paradox that never ceased to puzzle Peter, though it didn't seem such a mystery to Nell; she knew she was being irrational but was powerless to stop it; wasn't it this way with many psychosomatic conditions, like OCD? She opened her mouth to bring this up but then stopped: he'd gotten angry the last time that she'd likened Morgellons to her own hypochondria,
his face becoming puffed out and red in a way she hadn’t seen before, and after that she generally tried to avoid things that would cause this reaction, in the same way that one might avoid giving peanuts to an allergic child.

A few months later, she discovered that she was pregnant. They were happy: he hadn’t had any children with his ex-wife, though he’d wanted them. To celebrate, he took her to eat Polynesian food, and bought her a large stack of books about pregnancy and childbirth. Mandy bought her an ice cream cake and set of fleecy blankets, tearing up as she held forth her gifts.

It was an easy pregnancy, with the first eight weeks passing nearly symptom-free. She hadn’t even thrown up: once, after fish tacos, she’d felt a small rising in her belly, and rushed to the bathroom, Peter trailing her and holding back her hair as she leaned over the toilet, but nothing happened, and eventually they went back downstairs for ice cream sandwiches.

“Consider yourself lucky,” Peter told her when she complained that she didn’t feel pregnant. “It’s a good sign, anyway, having such an easy time of things.”

She cut back her hours at work, sitting in Peter’s living room and devouring the books on pregnancy, the descriptions of heavy, painful breasts and swollen ankles, of membrane stripping and mucus plugs. Her own breasts stayed small and firm and her ankles slender, like a girl’s. She began visiting a message board called FutureMommies.com, where she read enviously about the various symptoms experienced by the other women, jealousy filled her insides with something syrupy and gelatinous, like a donut.

But Peter was kind: he massaged her back when she claimed that it ached and held her leg, prepared to rub out a cramp when she thought one might be coming on. And one night, feeling particularly charitable as she waited for a charley horse that never materialized, she asked him, again, to tell her about Morgellons, feeling a renewed interest in it, with its weird and grotesque symptoms.

“I mean, you’ve told me what it does,” she said. She was laying in his king-sized bed, propped up against three pillows, her legs in his lap. “But you never told me how you got into studying it.”

“I didn’t?” He stroked her cramp-less leg. “I’d heard about Morgellons patients through the grapevine, I guess. Nobody thought it was real—it didn’t even have a name of its own. It was dubbed Morgellons by a biologist whose daughter had it, after a description of a 17th century disease that sounded like it could have been the same thing.”

“So that’s how you found out about it? On the internet?” She tried not to frown; it was in her best interest not to believe things found on the internet inferior.
He nodded. "I'd heard about it from a couple of doctors, but yeah, my main experience with it was through the message boards I found. There were all these people claiming the same symptoms, but they weren't being diagnosed—and if they were, it was with Lyme disease or delusional parasitosis. But they all claimed that they had found these fibers coming out of their skin—they described them as little ropy strands, almost like lint. And so I posted to the message board and asked these people to send the fibers to me. I thought they'd say, 'Oh, they disappear if I take them off my body,' or 'You can only see them if you have Morgellons.' But three days later I got a package, and they kept rolling in after that. From all over the country: Florida, Nevada, New York, Iowa, everywhere. People were desperate."

"You've never told me any of this before."

He frowned. "I haven't?"

She shook her head, lifting her legs off his lap and getting under the covers. She felt odd, unsettled, like she'd had too much, or too little, to eat. Maybe it was the jealousy, envy of those with manifested symptoms, filling her insides. Or, it was the people sending particles of themselves to her husband. Maybe that was it. "So these women were sending you pieces of themselves? Like toenail clippings and dead skin and stuff?"

"Men, too, but yes, mostly women. Not toenail clippings. Why would they send me toenail clippings, you goose?" he asked. His face had broken from its stature of gravity that it took one when he spoke of Morgellons, and he flicked her nose playfully.

"Did they include little personal notes? Did they say things like, Here's my armpit fiber, enjoy?" She pulled the covers up, so that they came to her chin.

He laughed. Most did have notes, he said, but they were most often about symptoms—or pleas for help. The most important thing was the fibers that they included. One of his colleagues, Dr. Kelsey, had run them at the lab and found out that they weren't like any other material; they didn't have cuts or extrusion marks that would suggest they were manmade, but they also didn't have internal structures, like cell walls, that would mean they were organic. At 1600 degrees Fahrenheit, the fibers did not disintegrate. They were tough, unyielding, rough like wool.

This made Nell think of a cable-knit sweater, or a scarf. "What were they, then?" she asked.

They didn't know, Peter said. No one knew. But he was convinced that Morgellons was some sort of physical pathology—not a mental disorder or any kind of psychosis. A couple of years ago, a woman, Zoë, had found their clinic, even though they tried to keep their location secret—they didn't want to become a ground zero for Morgellons patients, he explained, they just didn't have the resources—and when Kelsey examined her, he found these tangled skeins of dark fibers like the ones that Peter had received in the mail. "Except the weird thing was that they weren't
coming out of lesions or pores," he said. "They were buried in intact skin. They didn't leave any sort of extrusion marks—"

"Nothing?" she interrupted. "Not even a scar, once they were gone?" Peter himself had a scar crossing his upper lip: he'd been elbowed in the mouth playing a game of pick-up basketball years ago. "It gushed quite badly," he recalled when she asked him about it, touching the scar nostalgically. "I had to go to the emergency room—six stitches." To Nell, the scar was beautiful, dazzling in a gristly, jagged way; this remainder of the life you'd lived; something that would be missing with Morgellons, this necessary, earned memento. Already, she was secretly neglecting to use the special lotion that Peter had gotten for her, a brand heralded for its prevention and treatment of stretch marks, and she squeezed white globs of it into the toilet instead of rubbing it on her belly and thighs and breasts. She didn't ever want someone thinking that she hadn't had a baby, didn't want to be deprived of this, this thing like a secret wound inside her, a deep, sticky slash written on her DNA, something which made her different from the women who didn't have children. She didn't want to look like a woman who had never been pregnant. This seemed to her like it would be a terrible, terrible mistake.

"Nope," Peter said. "No scarring. There wasn't anything there to leave a scar."

"Did they hurt?" she asked.

"Hmm?"

"Did they hurt? The fibers?"

"Oh." The solemn and faraway look had returned to his face. "Oh, yes," he said. "That's one of the worst parts of Morgellons. The pain."

Nell placed a hand on her pregnant belly. She imagined fibers growing inside of her instead of a child, a slowly-unfurling ball of yarn, soft and prickly, pressing against the edges of her flesh, raw and aching and tender.

In June, the heat hanging heavy in the air, like a hand, she insisted that they move. At first she hadn't minded living in his three-bedroom ranch—it was big, sure, several steps up from her own one-bedroom rental—but it soon happened that she didn't like the idea of living in the home where he'd existed without her, where he'd spent hours in his study before eating dinner alone at his enormous table and where, she suspected, he was happy on his own. The whole place reeked of bachelordom: the pantry filled with liquor bottles, the black leather and chrome living room, the framed vintage movie posters, the heavy plaid curtains. She could too easily picture him in his study, receiving packages from strange women with particles of themselves inside, balls of lint and dead skin sloughed off and God knows what else, parceling them out carefully, like little presents, to be sent to the lab. It was not a pleasant thing to think about.
“I have to be in a place that feels like my home, too,” she pouted, rubbing her belly. “Besides, we need a place that has a room for the baby.”

He didn’t want to move—the market was down; people weren’t looking to buy a place like this at a time like this, but she was his new wife and she was pregnant and this made him subject to her whims. He agreed, reluctantly, to list the house, and to their surprise it sold quickly, to another male divorcée in his fifties.

They bought a new place on the other side of town, a luxury townhouse with new construction and a recreation area complete with a pool and outdoor grills, where they often saw their new neighbors cooking their steaks and burgers in swim trunks. He agreed to allow her to decorate, with Mandy’s recommendations. Nell felt this was a necessarily charitable thing to allow Mandy, now that she—Nell—was, for all intents and purposes, rich, and her oldest friend wasn’t.

“Let’s start with the living room,” Nell said. They stood amidst a mass of recent purchases from several popular home décor stores with names that made it sound like they sold hardware for old ships. Mandy had decided on a tropical motif, and there was a sea of blues and greens in Nell’s new living room, a wreckage of chartreuse pillows and seafoam throw blankets. The new furniture had been delivered and set up earlier in the afternoon: there was a sand-colored sectional and a coffee table that looked like a trunk, plus a chandelier in the shape of a birdcage.

“Ohhh, the birdcage chandelier,” Mandy said, fingering the wood as if it were gold. She was very charmed by it all, Nell could see. They had the whole weekend to set things up: Peter was away at a conference in Seattle, where he and Dr. Kelsey were giving a paper on Morgellons.

“It’s a huge step every time we can present something to the medical community. I’ll bring you something back,” he’d said, patting her belly. “Goodbye, Nell. Goodbye, Baby.” He hadn’t invited her along.

She helped Mandy center an art print of the shoreline over the fireplace, against the cerulean accent wall that they’d convinced Peter to paint before he left; after all, pregnant women weren’t supposed to paint.

“You’re not pregnant,” he said, looking pointedly at Mandy, before apologizing profusely and agreeing to let them buy the wicker bench for the front porch that he’d been holding out on.

Nell pulled a pillow out of a bag. It had a giant, embroidered conch on the front. “Are you sure about this?” she said, holding it up.

“I’m sure,” Mandy said. She was hammering the frame into the wall with gusto. She was a sturdy woman, and the nail sunk with just a few whacks. She turned to face Nell. “At least I think I am.” Her cheeks flushed. “Let’s put it all together and see how it goes.” She returned the hammer, gently, to Peter’s tool chest.
“Do you think it’s odd that Peter’s so interested in Morgellons?” Nell said after a moment. She was holding a glass vase filled with seashells, banded tulips and wentletraps and lady’s slippers, in her arms, cradling it in the nook of her armpit.

“What do you mean?” Mandy said. “It’s his job, right?” Her husband, Ted, was a claims adjustor for Progressive.

“Yeah,” Nell said, setting the vase on an end table. “Yeah, it is. You’re right.”

Later, after Mandy had gone home for dinner, Nell stood in her new kitchen, eating crackers by the sink. She’d liked the idea of being pregnant, liked knowing that she could shout into Peter’s ear in the middle of the night that she wanted cinnamon toast or black olives and that he’d have to do it, and kept hoping to have untimely and whimsical cravings, ones that they could laugh about once the baby arrived. But she didn’t: she had no urges, didn’t crave much to eat except crackers and plain white bread, which she snuck downstairs and ate at night, standing up in the kitchen by herself.

She swallowed her prenatal vitamin with a glass of water and sat down on her new couch with her laptop. She devoured the posts with descriptions of symptoms, getting lost in the swirl of pregnancy rhetoric: *my dr wants me to keep track of my TEMP to see if I am O’ing because of the PCOS!* 😃 – Tammy and how long were you off the BCP before you were TTC? – DallasGal She herself had never posted, feeling unworthy of doing so, with no symptoms to share, no complaints of negligent husbands or nosy mothers-in-law. But she wanted to try, wanted to enter this community of women who were uniquely like her during these nine months. She typed: *I’ve been preggo for three months but haven’t had many symptoms* but then deleted it that sounded like bragging—and tried again: *my husband is 52 and this is his first child, I hope no one at kindergarten thinks he’s the grandpa LOL*—but erased that, too, and went to make herself a cup of hot chocolate.

When she returned, settling onto the new couch and folding her legs, laptop across her thighs, she entered the Ill While Pregnant Forum. Most of the posts were about morning sickness or gestational diabetes, but there were a few on endometriosis, by women who had posted their stories about trying to get pregnant:

Finally I found a doc who agreed to do a lap. He found 5 spots of endo on my right ovary, some in the cul de sac and my bowl was attached to something else. A few months after the surgery the pain came back and he recommended Lupron. Tested pos. three weeks ago! 😃 But still worried about m/c.

– JustineinMississippi

Nell clicked to reply:

*I can understand what you’re going through, Justine—I suffer from Morgellons. I’m 3 mos. along.* – SeaShellNell
She hit ENTER and then shut the laptop quickly, pushing it away from her as if it had become something dangerous. A rush went through her, the cool heat of adrenaline sweeping her limbs, and she shivered a bit.

She finished her hot chocolate, spooning the dark brown granules from where they stuck, like soot, to the bottom of the cup, and then washed out the cup in the sink, admiring her new living room from her vantage point in the kitchen, her birdcage chandelier and her trunk-as-coffee-table and her cerulean wall. She’d have to remember to thank Peter for that: he’d done an excellent job, being quite meticulous with the painters’ tape, the color extending with precision to where they met the ceiling or the white wood trim of the windows and never any further. He hadn’t made any mistakes; he was good in that way, very good.

When she logged back onto FutureMommies.com, there was a little blinking pink baby, indicating that her post had been responded to. She felt a little pitch of adrenaline go through her, a shot of nerves that zipped up and down her arms and legs, and she clicked on her post. Justine had replied:

What is Morgellons? Will it affect the baby?

Nell’s hand froze over the mouse, and she felt a real surge of fear for the baby, touching her belly lightly, before she remembered that she didn’t actually have Morgellons.

It’s a condition that not a lot of people know about, she typed. The doctors are hoping that it won’t have any bad effects on the baby, but they aren’t sure. The best we can do right now is hope. She paused to read what she’d written, and then continued. *Pls cross your fingers for me!*

July passed in a blaze of white heat, hotter than June, and Nell cut back her hours at The Pelican’s Progress even further. She was sleeping a lot, the only visible symptom of her pregnancy besides her belly, which had poked out only enough to make her look like she’d swallowed a large mushroom cap. She was spending a lot of time out on their backyard deck, where she’d let herself sun for fifteen or twenty minutes before getting under the huge umbrella that Peter had set up so she could sit outside without getting too hot. She was out on the deck, leaned back on her elbows, looking at the gentle swell of her belly, rising and falling like a small hill, when Peter burst forth from his study with the news that a national magazine—Modern Woman—wanted to do an article on Morgellons.

“One of the doctors who heard my speech in Seattle had a contact, and they want to fly me out for an interview in mid-September. I’ll have to go to New York, but I’ll only be gone for a couple of days. Will you be okay?”

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She struggled to pull herself up onto her elbows, and removed her sunglasses. “This September? As in three weeks from now?”

He frowned. “Well, yeah. But you’ll be okay, won’t you? I mean, you’re not even four months along, and you can call Mandy if you need anything.”

“Why can’t they just do the interview over the phone?” She looked away at one of their neighbors, Zeke, who was trimming his hedges into neat, perfect rectangles.

Peter shrugged. “Zoë is going to be there. They want the two of us together, to make a more dynamic interview.”

“Zoë? As in one of the woman who has been sending particles of herself to you in the mail? Who came from—from wherever she lives, all the way to Florida, to see you?”

He looked puzzled. “Nell, this is a good thing,” he said gently.

“What did you bring me from Seattle?”

He looked confused. “What?”

“What did you bring me? You said you were going to bring me something from Seattle. Where is it?”

“I gave you the saltwater taffy. Remember?”

“That was from the airport. It could have been from anywhere.”

He sighed. “Nell, I’m sorry—it was raining both days, I didn’t have a lot of chances to get out of the hotel, I—”

She interrupted him. “So there’s nothing?”

“Nell, I—”

She put her sunglasses back on and returned to her position on the towel, lying prone on her back, so that Peter was out of her field of vision. “Forget it,” she told the sky. “There was nothing I wanted from there, anyway.”

Her moodiness continued into September, where it settled alongside Saturday afternoons of college football and long walks at dusk. At once it seemed to her that everything Peter did was meant to anger her: he sang songs to her belly at night, quietly, after he thought she was asleep, waking her; he forgot that she liked strawberry jam instead of jelly on her peanut butter sandwiches; he suggested painting the baby’s room olive green. She became angry at him for the fact that he was, in all probability, going to die sooner than her, and angry at herself that she hadn’t given this fact more serious consideration.

“You’ll be sixty-nine when the baby graduates from high school,” she shouted one night over take-out lasagna. She was gripping a breadstick so hard that when she put it down the imprint of her fist remained on it, little sunken, grease-pooled finger marks.
"I know," Peter said. This was not the first time she had pointed out this fact. "I'm sorry. Please don't harm innocent breadsticks." He put his hand over hers; it was pleasantly warm and dry; the temperature of his body seemed always to be perfectly regulated. There was little that disturbed his equilibrium.

She was visiting FutureMommies.com regularly, lamenting the Morgellons symptoms that Peter described to her, the painful fibers, the cognitive haze, the doctors' lack of knowledge about the condition. Her online friends were wholeheartedly sympathetic: Nell, what a struggle you've gone through! Pls. continue to update w/ baby news. *Hugs!*

"But you don't have Morgellons," Mandy said when she showed her the message board, turning pink with the accusation, but Nell ignored her; she didn't get it at all.

When the article came out in Modern Woman three months later, Nell refused to read it. She could see that this hurt Peter, but she couldn't bring herself to open its pages in front of him, to read the words on the page as he loomed over her, grinning stupidly, proud of himself and of Morgellons.

"I'm writing an email to my mom," she said when he approached her with a copy; a big bundle of courtesy copies had arrived in the mail, but she'd left the package on the doorstep for Peter, knowing that he couldn't fault her for failing to pick up a heavy parcel; he'd seen them there and lugged them inside when he returned from the lab that afternoon. "There's some baby stuff I wanted to get her opinion on." She gestured at her laptop. Her belly had "popped"—one of the women at her Lamaze class had told her this was the correct term, that she had passed through the chubby ambiguity of the first and second trimesters—and it stuck out like a basketball cut in half. The space in her lap upon which to set her computer was becoming increasingly smaller, but she'd solved this by sitting with her legs extended, feet on the coffee table.

"I thought we could look at this together."

"Why don't you go ahead—I'll read it later, okay? I promise."

But she finished her email and still couldn't bring herself to look at the magazine. She felt that Peter sensed this but was powerless to take action, and she stayed put on the couch, computer in her lap, and didn't get up to pee, even though the baby was pressing into her bladder, feeling that if she moved it would give him the power to broach the subject again, to put a copy in her hands as she passed by.

It was hours later, when he went out to pick up burritos for dinner, that she picked up the copy of Modern Woman that he'd left on the counter, handling it gingerly, feeling that if she only touched it lightly it was as if she had never touched it at all. The article was a feature, a handsome
three-page spread appearing near the end of the issue. At his own request, Peter hadn’t been photographed, but there were four Morgellons women on the first page, Zoë one of them, and a lot of quotes. *It’s weird going in for an appointment and knowing more than your doctor and Some of my family members still don’t believe that I really have Morgellons.*

She sat down on the couch and logged onto FutureMommies.com, but found she didn’t have the stomach for reading the new posts, the mawkish confession of them, weepy like jellied milk. Instead she opened an email that had been flashing, unread, in her inbox for weeks, an invitation from the online dating service to share her experience for chance to win a $25 gift certificate at Olive Garden. She clicked on the link and began typing into the text box: *When I was matched up with Peter I felt like I was meeting someone I had already known my whole life but held down the delete key, erasing it, and wrote instead: My husband is twenty-five years older than me and he’s in love with a disease that I don’t have.*

When Peter came back with the burritos, she ate hers hungrily, and then she wept, because the food went down easily, without heartburn.

A few days later, he took her out to a fancy dinner and told her that he had news: there was another conference coming up, a half-week in Denver, but this time it was different. It wasn’t regional, like Seattle: this was national—the CDC’s annual conference. It was the big one, the conference of all conferences. “Morgellons has never been presented at the CDC,” he said. “It’s a huge step.”

“A huge step,” she repeated, this a phrase that had always annoyed her, the idea of a person taking one big, solitary step and then standing in place, like an idiot, until the next thing came along. “But what if I don’t feel well? I’m pregnant, after all, in case you don’t remember.”

The restaurant was new to the area, and the concept was quite puzzling to Nell: traditional Southern food translated into fine dining, entrees like chicken-fried steak in a balsamic reduction and gumbo made with quail meat. She ordered baby back ribs basted in fig sauce, the most normal thing on the menu.

Peter took his hands in hers. “Please, Nell,” he said. “How about this—how about I fly into Denver the day I give my paper, and back as soon as I’m done? It’ll be less than twenty-four hours that I’m gone.”

“You can’t keep leaving me to go to these conferences.”

“The timing is bad, I know. But I’ll be quick. I won’t even go to any of the other panels. I’ll be in and out. You won’t even know I’m gone.”
"I definitely will know you're gone." She could feel herself getting angry, the blood rising to her cheeks in a hot flush, and this made Nell even more resentful, jealous of sharing Peter with Morgellons, with this thing, and then getting mad that she was mad, that she was envious of her husband's work—it was such a damn cliché, and anyway he was supposed to be retired.

"I'm sorry, love. I know the timing is bad, but there's no guarantee that we'll get into next year's conference, and what this could do in terms of legitimizing Morgellons—"

"Let's not talk about it anymore," she said. Their appetizer had arrived: endives with cornbread stuffing. She picked one up and stuffed the whole thing in her mouth, letting the bitterness of the endive dissolve on her tongue. Peter looked like he was trying to decide whether or not she was being unreasonable, watching her eat, smoothing his napkin over his lap several times before picking up his fork.

"I'll bring you something from Denver," he said.

She began spending the greater part of each day in bed, propped up against pillows, her laptop settled on her thighs. She was becoming increasingly creative in her posts to FutureMommies.com: The drs are worried that my Morgellons may cause premature labor. Pls keep us in your thoughts. Baby dust to all, SeaShellNell. She took to eating dinner in bed, from a tray, and often ordered from two or three different restaurants, claiming that she didn't know what she wanted until it arrived, a habit that she knew exasperated Peter but which he did not forbid, opening the doors to these delivery men and handing them money in exchange for food. He stopped ordering food for himself, waiting until she was finished and then picking from her leftovers.

"Wait!" she would say as he picked up a cheese wonton. "I was going to eat that."

"I thought you were finished."

She shook her head vigorously. "No!"

Her entire life seemed to be composed of an endless cycle of eating and sleeping. And crying, too—her eyes were in a perpetual state of weepiness; it seemed that any little thing set her off, reruns instead of new episodes on her favorite night of TV, beef instead of chicken in her lo mein, Peter's buying the wrong brand of pink lemonade at the store. Maybe, she thought, her body was preparing her to give birth, returning to this infantile stage so that she might better understand and care for her child.

She began taking too-hot baths, soaking in the tub for hours with her belly, slippery with soap, sticking out of the water. The hot water dried out her skin, making it scaly and rough, like a dragon, but she didn't bother with lotion and instead scratched and scratched.

Haynes
“Honey,” Peter said one night after she’d turned her arm red and raw, “Maybe you shouldn’t make the water quite so hot for your baths.”

“It’s not the baths,” she said. “I think I might have a carbuncle. I saw it on the news last night. Maybe I should go to the doctor.”

“Love, I think it is the baths.”

He encouraged her to go out during the day; she’d stopped working altogether, claiming that she was too tired and too uncomfortable to be on her feet for the entirety of a shift, and so she set up dates with Mandy to get bagels or tea, always choosing cafes or restaurants with Wi-Fi, where she could get on the internet and read the postings on FutureMommies.com. Mandy suggested, timidly, that they might have more interesting conversations if Nell didn’t always bring her laptop along, but she was too nervous and too polite to press the point, and finally gave up and started bringing her computer, too, where she went on celebrity gossip sites and read write-ups of the awards shows, opinion columns on how Julianna Margulies or Toni Collette looked on the red carpet.

If there was one thing saving her—saving them—it was reality television. She and Peter had gotten in the habit of sitting in front of the TV late at night, when Nell couldn’t sleep because she’d been napping all day. Their favorite shows were the competitive cooking programs, which they watched with bowls of ice cream or a plate of cookies. Nell had the feeling that Peter was indulging her a bit, that he would never have spent an evening this way if she weren’t there, and she felt grateful for this, for his efforts toward a common shared thing.

“Mmmm,” Peter said, sitting with his arm slung around her shoulders, his slippered feet propped up on the coffee table. “Look at that bread pudding. I bet that bread pudding is really good.”

“I bet it’s really moist,” Nell said. “I bet it’s all cinnamon-y and delicious.”

“You think cinnamon?” Peter said. “I was thinking more…vanilla.”


“Maple. That’s interesting.” He kissed the crown of her head and then wrapped both of his arms around her, and she was feeling warm and happy and sleepy when she felt the words bubble forth from her mouth: “I did something bad.”

He brushed a strand of hair from her forehead, still playful. “Yeah? What did you do?”

She picked at a bit of crud that had hardened underneath one of her fingernails. “I, uh.” She cleared her throat. “I went on a message board and pretended to have Morgellons.”

She felt his arm around her stiffen, and he removed his feet from the coffee table. “What do you mean? You got on a Morgellons message board?”
She shook her head. “No, a pregnancy message board. All the women on there were discussing their symptoms, and how they had morning sickness or—or endometriosis, or whatever, and I felt left out, I mean, I—”

“You did this, what, once?” he interrupted.

“A few times.” And then: “A lot of times. Peter, I don’t know why I did it.”

“You wished you had morning sickness, so you pretended to have Morgellons?” He spoke slowly, with a pretense of a person attempting to understand something that could not be understood.

She nodded, still watching the television, where contestants on the show were now racing to extricate crab meat from shell as quickly as possible, and for the first time it occurred to her that really, this was a bad thing she had done—this was a thing that he had a right to get mad at her over, that she’d taken the thing most dear to him and, selfish, had used it for herself. She wondered, briefly, if this meant she was a bad person.

He stood up. “You know,” he said, “People who have Morgellons would probably give a hell of a lot to trade it in for morning sickness.”

There was a moment of silence, and then he sighed. When he spoke, he sounded tired. “I’ve got a couple of things to do before I meet with Kelsey tomorrow—do you need anything?”

She shook her head.

“Good.” He went into the hallway, and she heard the door to his study shut. It was odd, this dynamic, him being angry with her, and a couple of times she began to rise from where she sat, to go to him. Eventually, she settled back onto the couch, waiting for him to come back. Surely he would come back. But he stayed in his office, through three more shows, and eventually she went upstairs with a box of graham crackers and got in bed.

When the morning came, a week later, for Peter to leave for Denver, Nell refused to get out of bed. The day after her confession, she’d tiptoed around her husband, feeling guilty, thinking to herself that from then on she would attempt to maintain some semblance of a good and sane person, but when Peter came in from his study that evening, whistling, and asked if she’d ordered dinner yet, her resolves of sanity and goodness began to dissolve. After her momentarily relief over his lack of anger at went away, she felt herself slipping closer to a small and unimportant sort of hysteria; an anxious and clinging fear that had become the pattern of their relationship. He was going to let her do this; he was going to let her be this way. She wept daily. Peter comforted her, rubbing her back or bringing her cantaloupe slices or chocolate, never asking why she was crying.
The morning he was supposed to leave, she was wearing a Grateful Dead T-shirt that had been either Peter's or her father's, she wasn't sure, and this made her weep, the case of the T-shirt of unknown origins, and she turned on her side and put her face in the pillow. She was having a particularly bad morning. She'd already made several accusations of her husband, crying out that he was probably glad to get away from her, that he liked Morgellons better than he liked her, preferred its sickly mystery to his own wife.

Peter was in the bathroom, packing his toiletries. "Love," he said. "You know that's not true." She had a cramp in her belly, a prickly little pain, and as she cried she tried to massage it out, kneading her fingers over her abdomen like dough.

"You're glad to get away from me," she said weepily. "You're probably not even going to Denver. You're probably going to have sex with that Morgellons woman, Zoë. And my belly is hurting and you don't care, you just want to go to Denver, or wherever you're really going, and get away from me, from your wife and your baby." She turned away from him with a purposeful flourish, so that she was facing the wall, thinking to herself that her behavior wasn't right, it was selfish and unfair and she shouldn't act this way before he left for his trip, but these thoughts went through her head insincerely, without taking root. She heard the sounds of Peter's rustling around in the bathroom stop, and he came out and kneeled beside the bed.

"Your belly hurts?" he said. "For how long? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know," she said, and then began to cry great heaving sobs, and put her face into her pillow. The crying, all of it, had worn her out, and if she wasn't so exhausted, it would have saddened her to think that things had come to this, that she was the kind of person who could be truly, emphatically unhappy that the person she loved was going somewhere to do something important.

"Okay," he said instead. "I'm not going to Denver. I'm taking you to the hospital."

"Oh!" She wiped her nose. "No, Peter. I'm okay, really. Dr. Garey says it's just, um, gas."

He shook his head. "I'm taking you to the hospital," he said.

"But you'll miss your flight. The CBC thing." Her face felt worn, crumpled, like a handkerchief that someone had blown his nose in and then washed. Her anger, which had risen up so swiftly in her, fell away.

"CDC. It doesn't matter." He pulled her up from where she was lying on the bed, putting his hands on her shoulders, holding her there, so that she was facing him. "Nell, I'm worried about you," he said. And then: "We're going to the hospital." He put his hands on either side of her face and kissed her nose. "Okay?"
“We’re going to the hospital,” she repeated slowly. And then: “yes. Okay.” This, she
understood, would be their agreement: he would not go to Denver; he would choose her over
Morgellons. It was an act of kindness, one she had not expected, and she began, again, to cry.

He helped her into the car and then drove, faster than usual, and Nell felt keenly the
irregularities in the road as they went, the little lumps and bulges and dips that came from being
driven on for many years, but didn’t mind them, feeling that they made the road more lovely
for its experiences. She looked out the window as they bumped pleasantly along. Peter didn’t
speak, and at that moment she felt that this was the greatest gift one could give another person.
The pain in her belly was gone, had slipped easily and quickly away, but she didn’t tell Peter this,
understanding that this was a necessary thing that he was doing, an offering of sorts—he was
doing this for her, he was missing his flight for her. And she thought to herself, dully, that his
acceptance of her confirmed what she’d begun to believe, that this was how she would be,
what she would be, that her unreasonable and perhaps even deplorable behavior had turned into
something irreversible, something hardened and congealed and permanent, that she was like this
and she would always be like this and that he would accommodate her, forever. She closed her
eyes.

And as she closed her eyes she felt a sensation of rising up, of watching their car travel on
the highway from higher and higher in the air, until it was nothing but a speck, a small moving
thing carrying two bodies, a man and his young wife, and if you went up even higher you’d see
the landscape that surrounded this speck, the palmettos lining the highway and the flat, even
grass of coastal Florida, and then at once the peninsula would be nothing compared to the ocean
that surrounded it, slow-moving, white-capped waves making their way toward land, breaking
onto the shore. Inside the car, splayed open on the floor on the passenger’s side, was a copy of
a magazine; inside of it was an article on Morgellons, with a picture of Zoë and of three other
women, sitting in something that looked like a doctor’s waiting room, their surroundings artfully
blurred but their faces perfectly in focus, and these were faces of anger, of disappointment, of
pain. Nell reached down to pick up the magazine, and she opened it and looked at them. She
looked at their faces and wondered what it would be like, to produce these things that hurt you
but which left no evidence of this hurt.