

2012

Real Live Girls and Other Stories

Emily Karen Jones
The University of Montana

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Jones, Emily Karen, "Real Live Girls and Other Stories" (2012). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 4229.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/4229>

This Professional Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

REAL LIVE GIRLS AND OTHER STORIES

By

EMILY KAREN JONES

Bachelor's of Arts and Sciences, Washington University in Saint Louis, St. Louis,
Missouri, 2010

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing, Fiction

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2012

Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Associate Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Deirdre McNamer, Chair
English

David Gates
English

Ruth Vanita
Liberal Studies

Jones, Emily, M.F.A., Spring 2012

Creative Writing-Fiction

Real Live Girls and Other Stories

Chairperson: Deirdre McNamer

This is a collection of short stories.

REAL
LIVE
GIRLS

and other stories

Emily K. Jones

Contents

REAL LIVE GIRLS.....	6
WHEN I LIVE IN THAT HOUSE.....	27
TENDERNESS.....	40
HEART MURMURS.....	60
ANIMALS.....	74
OTHER PEOPLE COME AND GO.....	86
BRAVING VAST DISTANCES.....	101
PROTECTION.....	121
HOUSE ON THE ROCK.....	143
EVERYONE IN THE WORLD WORKS AT OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE.....	153
LOCK IN.....	170

REAL LIVE GIRLS

There was already snow on the ground that Halloween. My mother had forgotten to buy candy, so she spent the night handing out cans of Diet Coke and plastic containers of ranch dressing. She was wearing an old gray bathrobe with big purple elephants on it. A few kids asked her if she was supposed to be something.

The snow had caught us all by surprise, and it wasn't going to last long. They hadn't salted our cul-de-sac, and Corey and I watched the little witches and superheroes and goblins slip and fall on the same spot, over and over. We were upstairs, smoking a joint and feeling superior. The world seemed softer and sadder. Corey kept laughing at everything I said.

"Hey," I said, "stop laughing," and she did. Corey had been my best friend since the beginning and now she was my only friend left. My dad used to say that she and I were the twins, instead of me and Daniel. Sometimes when we were kids we would dress up like twins, even though we didn't look anything alike. Next year she was going to run cross-country for Illinois State. I wasn't going anywhere.

"Let's get out of here," I said. I hated being at my house. I had only agreed to it because there was a bunch of weed in a shoebox under my bed.

"Are you hungry?" Corey asked me.

“No.”

“Do you want to see a movie?” she said.

“No.”

“Do you want to go to the hospital?”

I looked at her. “No. God. Why would you say that?”

“You’re really edgy,” Corey said, sitting up from where she’d been lying on the floor.

I sighed. “I just want to be literally anywhere but here.”

Corey and I went to her house, which was better than nothing. Her older brother Jay was hanging out in the basement. Corey and I watched him play video games for a half hour or so, and then we all watched some Japanese action movie. I had never been so bored.

“Do you want a beer?” he asked me and Corey.

“Yeah right,” Corey said. “Where’s Mom?”

“They’re both next door at a Halloween party. Don’t worry about it,” he said. Corey’s parents were two nice people who ate a lot of pot roast and mashed potatoes and always asked you how school was going. Sometimes her dad would fart and blame it on the dog, and her mom would blush a little bit and shake her head. That was all of the conflict that ever seemed to happen in Corey’s family.

“Sure,” I said.

“I’m cool,” Corey said. She smoked a lot of weed but had a sanctimonious attitude about drinking.

Jay opened the bottle and handed it to me. I drank it quickly, letting it burn my throat. It didn’t make me feel much of anything. I was still so angry. I always had this idea that I could do something to take the edge off, but I always just felt more. I was full of hate all the time.

I went upstairs to go to the bathroom, and then when I turned to go back downstairs I realized that I didn't want to. So I went into Corey's room and lay in her bed for a while. I held one of her stuffed animals, a yellow bear missing both of his eyes. I looked at the posters on her walls and the cracks in her ceiling. Corey's long red hair was all over the bed. If I lay here long enough, it was like I *was* Corey. Like maybe I didn't exist at all.

"Morgan?" Corey called. I could hear her coming up the stairs. I thought about pretending I was asleep, but I didn't. Corey walked past her room and saw me in her bed.

"Oh," she said. She turned out the light and lay down in the bed next to me. Her body was a presence that disrupted everything that had been happening in the room before she got there. I could hear her heartbeat and smell the chemical smell of shampoo.

"Are you okay?" she asked me. I didn't answer her. She stroked my hair, like someone's mom. Corey thought she could fix things. She thought things were simple. I turned to her and she put her forehead on my forehead. I grabbed her wrist and I could feel her pulse. And then she put our mouths together and kissed me.

This had happened before, in the coat room at Tanya Krueger's Memorial Day bash and last New Year's Eve, in her parent's basement, when we were so drunk we could barely stand. And then recently it had started happening more and more, weird moments where we would touch each other a little too much or start kissing each other on the forehead and then kissing on the mouth. We hadn't ever talked about it. I didn't know how to make sense of it. I wasn't a lesbian or anything. But somehow it seemed to make some kind of sense with Corey. We were so close. We did everything together.

That night it was different. Things just kept happening. Our bodies seemed to know what they were doing, what they wanted to be doing, and once it started, it couldn't just stop. I didn't know if I wanted it to be happening or not. I just kept thinking, "something's

happening,” over and over. Corey was sweating and panting and pulling and it was freaking me out but I didn’t want to stop.

“Well,” Corey said when it was all over.

I didn’t say anything and we fell asleep on opposite sides of the bed, careful not to touch.

The next morning all of the snow had already melted.

“Do you know what the truly tragic thing about my life is?” my brother asked me.

I didn’t say anything.

“I mean,” he said, “besides the obvious.”

I had left Corey’s room early in the morning. She slept like the dead. I had gone home and taken a shower and headed over to the hospital. It was like, if I didn’t talk to anyone, then nothing had happened. I was supposed to be at school but I couldn’t deal with it.

The chairs in Daniel’s room were pretty unpleasant. We were watching some college football game that Daniel had wanted to see, but now he kept closing his eyes. This was the room he had been moved to when things had gotten worse.

“What?” I asked.

He sighed and took a moment before answering. “I’ve never seen a naked woman before.”

I stared at him.

“No, I mean, like, live. In person. I’ve never even seen a pair of tits in person.”

“I thought you and Amanda Teller…”

“No, no, no,” Daniel said. “Total prude.”

I was silent for a moment. What were you supposed to say to that kind of revelation, from your own brother?

“Well,” I said finally, “I’m not showing you my tits.”

“Jesus Christ, Morgan! That’s disgusting.”

“All right,” I said. We kept watching TV.

As I left the hospital, I felt my phone vibrate in my bag and I knew without even looking that it was Corey. I hit ignore. I didn’t want to go home but there was really nowhere else to go.

I found my mother as I always did that fall, sitting in the recliner. She was still wearing her robe, and she was smoking and reading a mystery novel. She was unrecognizable.

“Hi baby,” my mother said. “Come sit with me for a minute.”

I sat down on the armrest of the recliner. Something smelled weird, either the chair or more likely my mother. She stroked my arm absentmindedly. It felt nicer than I expected.

“How is he?” she said.

“Good. We watched a football game.”

“I think I’m going to drop by tomorrow afternoon, bring him some clean clothes and some books,” my mother said. She told me these things conspicuously; we couldn’t handle going to the hospital at the same time.

“Okay,” I said.

“Corey called.”

“Okay.”

“And the school called,” my mother said. “They said you’re not going to your English class.”

This was generous. I wasn’t really going to a lot of my classes, most of the time. I waited for my mother to say something, for some kind of lecture, but she said, “Maybe they’ll give you some extra credit.”

“Maybe.”

“I can’t believe it’s November,” my mother said. It surprised me that she even knew that.

She went on. “That means it’s your birthday soon. Eighteen.”

We were thinking the same thing, I think: how my birthday really meant our birthday, mine and my brother’s. But this would probably be the last time. And for the rest of my life, it would just be mine. I hadn’t thought about that, about how I would get older and he would stay the same.

“What do you want?” my mother said. “For your birthday?”

“I have to go,” I said and my voice sounded underwater. I grabbed my keys and practically ran out the door.

I drove. After I had calmed down a little bit, I opened my glove compartment and took out a rainy-day joint. I felt a little bit better. The heat in my van didn’t work well but somehow it felt good. Clarifying. I didn’t want to see Corey and I certainly didn’t want to go home, so I didn’t know what to do with myself.

I was always driving and never going anywhere. I would always wake up intending to go to Mrs. Butler’s civics class and instead I would just keep driving, rolling and sputtering through St. Agnes until it looked unreal to me, like a backdrop in a movie. There were two stoplights and three churches and a paper mill where everyone who couldn’t get into college worked after high school. There was nothing for anyone here. Everyone was real sorry about my poor brother.

I took a right out of town and onto the highway, passing used car lot after used car lot until I passed the only strip club in town. It was called Louie’s Club for Gentlemen, and the

boys at my high school went there on their eighteenth birthdays. Tyler Michaels had gotten so drunk last year he'd puked in the cleavage of one of the strippers. I drove past, and then turned around, and then drove past it again, and then came back around and finally parked in the parking lot. The building was small and gray and square. A neon sign advertised Miller Lite and Real Live Girls. There were a few scattered cars in the parking lot, none of them next to each other. I parked in front of the building and watched a black-haired girl who was wearing a long red coat and smoking cigarettes until I felt ready to go inside.

When I stepped out of the car, the black-haired girl called out to me. "Morgan," she said, and I practically jumped out of my skin.

"Hi?" I said.

"It's me," she said. "Jessica Antonelli. Jessie."

The name registered somewhere in the back of my brain, and then her face changed until her features were recognizable to me. We had gone to middle school together. I hadn't known her that well, but Daniel and I had always sat by her in home room—Andersen and Andersen and Antonelli. She used to paint her fingernails with Wite-Out and carve things into her skin with a compass.

"Oh, wow," I said.

Jessie took a drag of her cigarette and smirked. Her eyes were caked in dark makeup. I could see the outlines of her body underneath her coat, white and thin.

"How's it going?" I said, which was stupid.

"Okay," she said. "Are you still in school or whatever?"

"Yeah," I said, although it was only sort of true.

"Wow, sounds fun," she sneered. "You must be like, the total Prom Queen."

"No," I said defensively.

“Well, this has been a real blast, catching up,” she said. “But I got to go back in there. Are you, like, a lesbian now?”

“No,” I said. “God. No.”

She shrugged and walked inside.

“I’m here for my brother,” I said as she walked inside, but that didn’t sound much better and she didn’t seem to hear me anyway. I took a deep breath and I walked inside.

It was dark on the inside and smelled like raccoon urine. Reggae music was playing. There were a bunch of pervy old men sitting by themselves, letting beefsteak from the buffet drip into their beards. We were all looking in the same place, at the girl onstage, who was writhing around in a lime-green bra and panties. Her body was never at rest, and I couldn’t help it. I didn’t want to look, but I looked. It was ugly but there was something beautiful about it, something about the way that she was up on that stage, alone, where none of this could touch her.

Other girls walked around, serving drinks and offering lap dances, Jessie Antonelli included. There were a lot more strippers than men, and so the competition was fierce. I saw every kind of tit on display, a virtual catalog of breasts bound in tight clothing: pointy, saggy, round, flat, white, black, brown. The women looked at me as I looked at them, and there was nothing friendly in their eyes.

Jessie Antonelli walked up to me. She was too skinny but she did have perfect breasts, round and perky and well-proportioned, or at least they looked that way, packed in some lacy black thing.

“Seriously,” she said to me, “what are you doing here? We’re not hiring.”

“Oh, wow, God, no,” I said. “That’s not. I’m not. Not that, I mean, I don’t judge people. But no.”

“Okay, well are you going to spend some money or something?”

“Possibly,” I said. “I need...I don’t know, it’s hard to explain. I need a stripper. Like, a stripper who can come to someone who maybe can’t come to them?”

Jessie looked around. “Can you meet me in the back in like ten minutes?” she said.

It was more like fifteen, maybe even twenty minutes before she finally came out.

“It’s freezing,” I said.

“Sorry,” she said. “We’re not really allowed to do outside shows. Technically. Mikey doesn’t like it. But I could use a little extra cash.”

“Okay,” I said. “When’s the soonest we could do this? I’m kind of on a limited-time schedule.”

“I mean, I could do it today. I get off in like a half an hour if you want to hang around.”

“I’ll stay in my car,” I said, even though it was freezing. I didn’t want to go back in there. While I waited Corey called me three times. Each time I pressed ignore, I felt like a little lump in my throat. Everything on the radio seemed way too loud. The only CD I had was one that Daniel had made me last year, which was full of the terrible pop-punk music that he loved. I couldn’t listen to that.

Jessie finally came out, wearing the same red coat I’d seen her in earlier. She had washed most of her makeup off of her face and almost looked pretty. She got into my car and lit up a cigarette without asking.

“Jesus,” she said. “Is your heat even on?”

“It’s the best I can do,” I said.

“You know, you have a pretty good body. You could work a few days a week at Louie’s and make enough money to buy a decent car in about six months.”

“Thanks, but I think I’m going to pass,” I said.

“Suit yourself,” she said. “I think you should give me some cash upfront before we do this.”

“How much,” I said. I had twenty-six dollars in my wallet.

“How long do you want this to go on?” she said.

“I don’t know, a half-hour,” I said. “Fifteen minutes?”

“Fifteen minutes of a private show is a hundred dollars. For a half-hour I can cut the price down to just 175.”

“A hundred dollars?” I said.

“Yeah,” she shrugged.

“What about like, ten minutes?” I said. “Is that doable? Just show some tits, wiggle them around or something, and you’re out?”

“Ten minutes,” she said. “I don’t know, how about seventy?”

“Fine,” I said. “Fine. We need to stop at my house first.”

I had some cash stashed away from a check my dad had sent me. He was living with some Cantonese woman in Saskatchewan and sent crazy emails at three in the morning that I deleted. I hoped it would be enough to cover the fee. I really didn’t want to go back into that house, but I felt like I had put something in motion the minute I stepped into that strip club that couldn’t be stopped.

I said a silent prayer that my mother wouldn’t be home. As we pulled up to my house, her car wasn’t in the driveway. Someone had cut me a break. I got out of the car and Jessie stepped out too.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“Getting out,” she said.

“No,” I said. “Why don’t you just stay in the car.”

“Because your car is an icebox?” Jessie said.

“This is my house,” I said.

“I’m not a terrorist,” she said. “Let’s go inside.”

That hadn’t been exactly what I meant, but I had offended her and now I had to let her in. I left her downstairs and walked up to my room, where I counted out three twenties from a shoebox underneath my bed. I had enough to cover the fee and leave a tip.

When I came downstairs Jessie Antonelli was sitting on my couch, smoking a cigarette. With a stranger here I could see how dirty our house was. Shit was piled everywhere, not just clutter but dirty plates and garbage. It smelled rancid.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said, and she nodded.

We got into my car. I put the key in the ignition, but it just sputtered and gasped. I kept trying, but it just wouldn’t happen.

“Fuck,” I said. “Fuck. Fuuuuuuck.” I started hitting the steering wheel with my hands, like that would make it better.

“Calm down,” Jessie said. “Jesus Christ.”

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” I kept shouting, beating my hands as hard as I could.

“Chill the fuck out!” Jessie shouted. “Take a deep fucking breath!”

I got out of the car and paced around. My heart was ringing in my ears; my blood was hot. I didn’t want to cry, but the more I tried not to, the more I felt like crying. I listened to Jessie’s advice and took a deep breath. I got back in the car, taking ragged, shaky breaths.

“Jesus,” Jessie said. “You’re really freaking me out.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“It’s just car trouble,” Jessie said. “I’m sure there’s someone you can call.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You’ve turned into, like, a really angry person,” she said, with a trace of admiration. I got out my phone and dialed Corey’s number.

“Dude, I’m in Study Hall,” she said. “That’s actually where you’re supposed to be right now, you know?”

I didn’t say anything, just took a deep breath.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

“I need a favor,” I said. “Can you come to my house?”

“When?”

“Right now,” I said. “It needs to be right now.”

“Seriously?” Corey said. “You’ve totally dropped off the planet and then you call me in the middle of Study Hall to—”

“I know, I know,” I screamed. I was crying now. “I’m a horrible person. I *know* that. Just...never mind.”

“No,” she said. “I’ll be there. Give me ten minutes.”

“So,” Corey said as we got onto the highway. “Do you think maybe you could tell me why I’m driving you and a girl who once tried to sell me meth to the hospital?”

I looked out the window and didn’t say anything.

“Morgan,” Corey said.

“Do you think,” I said, and then sighed. “I know this is ridiculous, but do you think you could just not ask me any questions?”

“Did you say hospital?” Jessie said in the backseat. We ignored her.

“You’re such an asshole,” Corey said. “You’re aware of that, right? That you’re a huge asshole?”

“I’m not going into any hospital,” Jessie said.

“Shut up!” I shouted, and it wasn’t clear who I was talking to. “Just, how about everyone just shuts up until this is over and then we never have to speak to each other again, okay?”

Corey gave me a look. She was wearing her letter jacket and this horribly ugly pastel-blue knitted beanie that she’d had since the fifth grade. Something about that hat really choked me up. Her mom had probably gotten it in a Wal-Mart bargain bin or something. It looked awful against her red hair. Corey was actually a really beautiful person, which many people didn’t realize because she tried to hide it.

No one spoke for a while, and then as Corey pulled into the hospital parking lot, Jessie Antonelli said, “I’m really not kidding, you know. There’s no way I’m going into a hospital.”

“Well, I’m paying you,” I said. “And that’s where I need you to go.”

“Um, these aren’t slave times,” Jessie said. “You didn’t tell me we were going to a hospital.”

“I have a twenty,” Corey said. “How much do you need to go in there?”

“I don’t think you understand,” Jessie said. “I’m not going into the hospital. I don’t do hospitals.”

“How nice for you!” I shouted. “I spend so much time at the hospital because I just love them so much. It’s not because my brother is *dying* or anything.”

No one said anything. The word hospital was starting to no longer seem like a real word.

“I still don’t know what’s going on,” Corey said.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” I said. “I wanted to do something nice for my brother, but it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“She was paying me to show her brother my tits,” Jessie said. “I’m a stripper.”

“Oh,” Corey said. We sat there silently for a while. The hospital loomed over us. I could see the eighth floor, where I imagined my brother. In truth I could understand the aversion that Jessie felt. Sometimes I would dream about visiting it and it would turn into a labyrinth, a death chamber, a place with no windows and doors and no way out for anyone. But it was just a hospital, a good and necessary place, a place where lots of sick people got better. None of this was the hospital’s fault.

“What if,” Corey said.

“What,” I said. “What.”

“I’ll do it,” she said.

“Come on,” I said.

“Just boobs, right? A quick flash?” Corey said.

“You should pinch your own nipples,” Jessie said. “Guys like that.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said. “I mean, come on. It’s really weird.”

“Yeah,” Corey said. “Yeah, it is.” And then she unbuckled her seatbelt and opened her car door. “It’s room 814, right?” she said as she walked out.

“Corey,” I said.

“Never mind, I’ll just ask someone,” she said, and left me and Jessie alone in the car. We were silent for a long time.

Jessie lit up a cigarette.

“Can you roll the window down or something?” I said. I could see her roll her eyes in the rear view mirror, but she cranked the window down.

“So,” I said. Jessie didn’t say anything.

“Why are you so freaked about hospitals?” I said.

Jessie took a long drag. “What, like I’m going to tell you some sob story, and then we’re going to become the best of friends?”

“God. Never mind. You don’t have to be such a bitch all the time,” I said.

“It’s just kind of like, my thing,” she said. “Don’t take it so personally.”

We were silent for a minute.

“Okay, so my mom died in there,” Jessie said.

“In St. John’s?” I said. She nodded.

“She just drank too much one time,” she said.

“Oh,” I said.

“Whatever,” she said. “Bad things happen to everyone. It was her own fault.”

I didn’t say anything. I tried to picture what was happening in Daniel’s hospital room right now, but it was too incomprehensible.

“You’re really different,” Jessie said. “You used to be, like, one of those shiny pretty girls that I hated.”

“Thanks,” I said. I hadn’t felt shiny or pretty for a long time.

She cleared her throat and said, “So your brother. He’s really really sick, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said softly. “He’s really really sick.”

We didn’t say anything else until Corey ran back into the car. She was panting and her cheeks were pink.

“Well, I got kicked out by a nurse, but mission accomplished,” she said. “I think Daniel was pretty freaked out, but I think I saw the slightest hint of a little boner.”

“Oh my God,” I said. “Don’t tell me anything more, please.”

Corey started laughing and then Jessie coughed and started laughing a little bit too. I cracked a smile.

“Okay, let’s go home and never talk about this again,” I said.

We dropped Jessie Antonelli off at a townhouse complex on the crappy side of town.

“Okay, bye,” she said. “Have a good life.” I felt like I should say something to her, but I didn’t know what so I just watched her go.

“You know,” Corey said, “that’s what’s going to happen to you, if you flunk out of high school. You’re going to become an angry stripper.”

“Shut up,” I said.

“Everyone’s always like, asking me where you are. There are all these rumors.”

“Okay,” I said. “Is there something you want me to say?”

“No,” she said.

We didn’t talk the rest of the drive until she pulled up to my house.

“Well, thanks,” I said. “Thanks for the ride and thank you for flashing my brother. I know it’s perverted but I’m sure it meant a lot to him.”

Corey didn’t say anything for a minute, and I turned to go. And then as I put my hand on the door she said, “I didn’t do it for him.”

“Oh.”

“I...what happened yesterday, was,” she started.

“You don’t have to,” I said. “We don’t have to, um.”

“It meant a lot to me,” she said. “You mean a lot to me.” She started leaning in toward me. I leaned back and jerked the car door handle with my hand. The door opened and I nearly flew out.

“Morgan,” she said.

“I have to go,” I said. I stood up and go out of the car. Corey rolled the window down.

“Morgan,” she said, and she looked up at me. I forced myself to look at her blue hat, to think about how ugly it was. Both of our voices sounded weird, like maybe we were trying not to cry.

“We shouldn’t,” I said. “Not anymore.”

“Why not?” Corey said. “Why not?”

And I hated her in that moment because she didn’t understand why she couldn’t have what she wanted, because she was going to go home and everything was going to be fine for her. My life was like a third-world country she was visiting on vacation.

“What,” I said, “we’re going to hold hands and go to prom together? Corey, I’m not, like, a *lesbian*.”

She just looked at me.

“Fuck you,” she said.

“You can’t be mad at me,” I said.

“Just because your brother is sick doesn’t mean you can just act like nothing matters.”

“It was just like...physical, you know?” I said, and I didn’t look at her face.

“Fuck you,” she said again. “I don’t want to know you.” And then she drove away.

The next day I went to visit my brother. My car still wasn’t working, so I took the bus. Even after only twenty-four hours I missed him. I was always missing him. When I walked in the room, a nurse was putting an IV back in. I stood in a corner and watched until she left.

“So,” my brother said. “Corey came here yesterday.”

“Oh, really?” I said. “How interesting.”

“You’re so strange,” he said. “Do you know that?”

“I just...I didn’t want you to miss out on anything, you know?”

“It was sort of anticlimactic,” he said. “I never thought it would happen like *that*.”

I climbed out of the chair I was sitting in and lay down in the bed beside him. He scooted over to accommodate me, and I could feel how little his body was. I bet he weighed twenty-five pounds less than me. My brother had been popular, and good-looking, and a basketball player. Dying a virgin wasn't supposed to happen to him, of all people.

“Can I talk to you about something?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said.

“It's sort of weird.”

“Okay.”

I looked up at the ceiling. “I think...I had sex with someone.”

“You think?”

“No, I mean,” I said. “I did. I had sex. With someone.”

“Oh,” my brother said. “Oh.”

We didn't say anything for a little while. I felt guilty. When you're a twin it's always a big deal, who does what first. I didn't want him to think I was already moving beyond him.

“I don't know what to do,” I said.

“Um...” he said. I had stupidly expected him to be equipped with the wisdom of the dying, but as I lay there I remembered that he was just my brother.

“It's okay,” I said. “You don't have to say anything. It's okay.”

“Do you...I mean, is it someone you like?” he said.

“It's...I don't know. It's complicated,” I said. “It's someone I really care about.”

“Does he care about you?” my brother said. I didn't say anything for a long time. I kept hearing the word *he* over and over again in my head.

“The person...who it is...yeah, the person cares about me. A lot. Like, really a lot,” I said. “Like maybe too much.”

“Well,” my brother said. “I think...I think you should be happy.”

I started crying a little bit.

“Don’t cry, Morgan,” my brother said. “Everything will be okay.”

“Just...pretend I’m not crying, okay?” I said.

“Okay,” my brother said, and he turned on the TV, which was just what I was hoping he would do. We watched some show about unsolved mysteries. I was too distracted to pay much attention.

“What if that’s not possible?” I said. “To be happy? What if that is just not a possibility?”

“Well, I don’t know about this kind of stuff,” Daniel said softly, his voice full of sleep. “I’m a virgin who lives in a bed. Maybe you should just talk to the guy you had sex with. Or talk to Corey.”

I opened my mouth to say something, I don’t know what, maybe the truth. But when I looked at my brother he had his eyes closed. I kissed him on the forehead and took the bus back home.

When I got home from the hospital Corey was sitting on my doorstep with a shoebox.

“Um, hi,” I said. She stood up and handed me the shoebox.

“Here,” she said.

“What is this?” I said. I opened the box and saw a bunch of random crap: a chapstick, some DVDs, a headband.

“It’s your stuff,” she said. “I just felt like...I don’t know, I couldn’t have it in my house anymore.”

I looked at the box. “Are you serious?” I asked. “Is this like something you saw in a movie once?”

“God,” she said.

“This doesn’t have to be some big dramatic thing,” I said. “It’s not like this was some really long and complicated involvement.”

“Yes it was,” she said softly. And she looked up at me with tears in her eyes, and I stared back at her, and things started to make more sense.

“Corey,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, bye,” she said and started walking away.

“Corey,” I said, and she didn’t turn around. I followed her to her car.

“Hey,” I said. “Hey, stop.”

“Why?” Corey said, turning around.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Because you’re my best friend. Because I don’t have anyone else.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I’m really a very fucked-up person,” I said. “I know that I am. And I’m sorry.”

She sighed and I touched her wrist, just lightly.

“It doesn’t have to make sense,” she said softly. “It doesn’t have to make sense to anybody besides us.”

And we crawled into the back of Corey’s car, sober and in the light of day. I didn’t know if it was the right or wrong thing to do, but my body felt pretty strongly that it was right.

The sun beat down on us through Corey's backseat window. Go be happy, that was what Daniel had told me. Everyone was always talking about being Happy, like it was a proper capitalized thing.

Afterward Corey told me to stay in the car.

"For a while," she said. "It's cold outside."

I did not feel happy, and I knew that I wasn't going to be happy, possibly ever, and I knew that I would eventually get out of this car and my brother would be another half-hour beyond me. But I could wait a while before I got out of the car, so I did.

She was right. It was cold outside and every day getting colder. From now on we would have to make our own heat.

WHEN I LIVE IN THAT HOUSE

Neil and I are flat broke and it's destroying our spirits. Poverty is much more degrading than we ever imagined. One night we eat our dinner of Taco Special #6 and a can of peaches and Neil starts laughing and I start laughing too but Neil is laughing so hard. I have to look over at him and say, "Neil? Are you laughing or are you crying?" He doesn't stop.

I think our luck has turned around when Neil's brother Terry calls and asks if I want to take care of his four-year-old kid and new baby. Nannies make bank, and I could watch all the TV I wanted. Neil wants me to say no. He hates his brother, and he thinks this offer reeks of charity.

"This is very suspicious," he says. "He's up to something. Who would ask you to take care of a couple of kids?"

"Shut up, kids like me," I say. "I know how to play 'Puff the Magic Dragon' on the guitar."

"I thought Stacey was quitting her job to be a stay-at-home mom," Neil says.

"No, she has that disease where moms hate their babies. Terry is scared she's gonna drown it in the tub."

“Well,” he says, “I don’t like it. I don’t think you should reduce yourself to working as hired help in my brother’s house.”

“Reduce myself from *what?*” I shout.

It took me longer to figure this out than most people, but work is the only way to get money. And there might be some other value to it as well; even thieves and prostitutes have something to do during the day. Neil and I lie around on the couch like there’s a carbon monoxide leak, playing the same three CDs over and over and fucking in every different way we can think of until we’re sore all over and crying and don’t even want to look at each other. And then we wake up in the morning and it’s all hugs and kisses.

I call and accept the offer. I know that Neil thinks I am a traitor, not just because he hates Terry so much, but also just for getting a job. Neil likes money, but he isn’t fond of the whole idea of work. He’s done everything and he says welfare is just better, easier, more dignified.

“You know who said there was dignity in work?” Neil always says. “The Nazis.”

His philosophy doesn’t go a whole lot further than that. When I met him he mowed lawns at the community college. He had somehow talked his way into a lawn crew with a tight-knit family of Mexicans. I used to watch them from my Spanish class. Everyone else was ambling along but Neil mowed the lawn with a manic intensity and pace, sweat pouring down his body, sculpting the mowed grass into perfect quadrilaterals. I failed Spanish, but Neil learned it in five or six weeks on that lawn crew. He was a genius. He could do anything he wanted. He told me he was going to start his own business, but he hadn’t decided what it would be yet.

“I have to figure out that elusive thing that everyone wants,” he would say, but I guess he never really found it.

I was only nineteen when I moved in with him. I had this idea that I was going to be a painter. I was taking some classes at the community college, and I thought that I eventually would go to a real school where the English classes made you read actual books instead of just watching *The Shawshank Redemption* and writing a two-page paper about whether you liked it or not. But painters don't need college, Neil said, and I agreed. That was essentially the end of my painting career.

He is mad on Monday morning, the day when I am supposed to start. I know this because he wakes up early and takes out the trash and washes the dishes and clears a pile of papers off of the kitchen table. Why his anger manifests itself in this way, I'll never know, but it is nice to get some shit done around the house. He kisses me in a pained way before I leave.

Terry and Stacey are both lawyers, although they always say their jobs could *not* be more different, and then laugh like they've made an actual joke instead of a pretty lame observation. I don't know what makes their jobs different, but it's not the paychecks. They live in this neighborhood that my mom used to make me and my sister drive through when we were little girls. We would look around and play a game called, "when I live in that house." The game is just, what would you do if you were so disgustingly rich? When I live in that house, I will eat chocolate cake every day for breakfast. I will build a stage and have a Michael Jackson concert right in my backyard. I will make Antonio Banderas marry me. I will matter.

"I will help the poor," my sister would sometimes say in a sickly-sweet voice, and I would pull her braid until I saw her eye glimmer with a tear.

Terry answers the door in a towel. I've never told Neil, but I've always had this suspicion that Terry wants to bone me, and the towel is not really helping matters.

"Hey," he says, "You're early."

I'm not. His eyes are sleepy and red-rimmed. They are like a faded photograph version of Neil's.

"Would you like to become more comfortable with Whitman while I go upstairs and get ready?" he says.

He goes upstairs. I don't know Terry's kids really. They have horrible names. Whitman is the boy, who is four, and the baby is named Beatrice or Bernice or something like that. Only truly disgusting amounts of wealth can delude you into thinking that your child would be well-served by a name like Whitman. The poor kid is sitting on the carpet, Indian-style, playing with a toy truck. He has curly blond hair. Kids that look like little angels freak me out.

"Cool truck," I say.

He doesn't look up.

"Hi Whitman," I say. "My name is Caroline."

Nothing.

"I'm your uncle Neil's girlfriend. I'm going to stay with you during the day."

Whitman looks up and says, "My grandpa gave me three dollars."

This kid lives in a mansion with a pool, but I say, "Wow. What are you going to do with all of that money?"

"I don't know," says Whitman, with real anxiety. "I don't know what to do with it."

"It's okay," I say. "It's okay if you don't know. You can just hold onto it until you find something really special."

Whitman nods. He wants to believe me, but he doesn't yet.

"Can I touch your hair?" he says.

"Um. Okay," I say. I sit down next to him.

He takes my hair out of my ponytail and sing-says, “beauty shop, beauty shop, beauty shop.” Then he starts digging his little fingers into my scalp and throwing my hair all over my head.

“Sorry,” I can hear Terry say, “he loves touching girls’ hair. I don’t know why. Do you want to come see the baby? I can tell you about some of the rules of the house.”

There are a lot of rules of the house. Don’t feed them any sugar or dairy or processed foods, don’t let them watch more than an hour of TV. Don’t let Whitman play with the hose. Don’t let Whitman try to murder the baby. Don’t let Neil come over. Keep a record of the baby’s bowel movements.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Oh,” Terry says, “ha ha. Whitman isn’t really going to murder the baby, that was a little joke. He’s a little jealous, but you know it’s perfectly natural. We took him to a child psychologist and she said there was really nothing out of the ordinary going on there.”

“No, I meant—”

“Oh, right. I know it’s strange. Keeping a record of the baby’s little number twos. But our pediatrician was a little concerned about Bea’s digestion and told us to do it.”

“No, I meant about Neil,” I say.

“Oh,” Terry says and turns to look at me. “Oh. I mean.”

“Oh no,” I say. “It’s not that...I just. I don’t know.”

“Well, I mean,” Terry said. “I didn’t mean anything by it. It’s just that usually when we have babysitters, you know, the rules are no boys. But you know. We love Neil and everything.”

“It’s not like I was planning on having him come over,” I say.

“Of course not,” he says. “I’m sorry about the state that the house is in. You know how these things can get. If you have a moment and feel like it, the dishes would be a big help.”

I nod. I fucking hate doing dishes. I don’t even do my own dishes. The baby’s name is Beatrix and she is younger than I thought she was. She doesn’t look like a human person yet, just a big messy red lump with eyes.

“Beautiful,” I say. Above her head are pale pink puffy letters that say BEA.

“She’s so good,” Terry says. “So good. Whitman at that age was a holy terror.”

I want to ask, where’s your wife? But I don’t ask.

“There are three or four bottles on the fridge and directions on the microwave about heating them up. Whitman goes down for a nap at four. Please put him down for a nap at exactly four or he’ll be a nightmare to get to bed later. If he says he can’t sleep, you can let him listen to some of his classical music tapes. If you take them outside, please use at least SPF 45.”

I’m sort of listening, and then I realize that he is walking out the door. I am in charge now. I start to panic.

We stare at each other for a while and then Whitman asks me if I want to play a game called Famous where we pretend that Whitman is really really super famous—“like a rock star or a movie star or the president”—and I pretend to be a member of the paparazzi and I have to chase him all around the house until I catch him and then I can ask him one question and he has to tell the truth no matter what.

“How about we play outside?” I say. “Your sister is sleeping.”

Whitman rolls his eyes.

“I have a little sister too,” I say. “Very annoying.”

“Fine. Outside,” Whitman says. As we’re walking out he says, “Don’t forget the baby monitor!” And then when we’re standing outside he says, “Aren’t you going to put sunscreen on me?”

“Sure,” I say. “I sure am.”

“You better put some on too. Do you want cancer?”

We squeeze it out in long white lines onto our arms and legs that we coax into our unwilling flesh. Whitman still has white streaks under his eyes like a football player when he takes off running as fast as he can. I chase him around the freshly-trimmed hedges, around the pool, around the trampoline. He is fast but he gets dizzy easily. I catch him and ask:

“What is your favorite color?”

“You have to take pictures of me too. Green, but not like bright green. Like, dark green.”

Then he keeps on running and I chase him again, pretending to snap pictures.

“What is your favorite food?”

“Balsamic vinegar. Do you want to be the Celebrity now?”

We keep on running. After all these months of lying around with Neil, I am pretty out of shape and he catches me easily.

“Do you and Uncle Neil have sex?”

“Whitman!” I say.

“You have to answer.”

“I’m not going to answer that. Come on.”

“Okay. Okay. How about, does Neil support you emotionally?”

“Um. What?”

“Does Neil support you emotionally?” He stretches out the word: e-mo-tion-ally.

I feel like I've really tossed him a lot of softballs. "What does that even mean?"

"You know. You know what it means."

I rub in the sunscreen on his cheeks, which is gummy and caked. "You don't even know what it means," I say. "You just heard it somewhere."

"Yes, I do," Whitman says. "It's something good."

"Sure," I say. "Neil supports me, sure."

The baby monitor cackles. We hear the baby take a deep long breath before exploding in wails.

"Oh, oh no," I say, "we better go inside. Your sister is crying."

"Why?" Whitman asks. "Who cares? Do you like her better than me?"

"No, Whitman, it's just. She's just a little baby, you know. You're a big kid. I need to take care of her more because you're so much older."

"GOD," Whitman screams loudly. "GOD." His face gets red and he starts stomping his skinny legs on the pavement. The baby keeps wailing. I open the screen door and we go back inside.

"I'll be down in a minute," I say. Each time the baby wails it is as startling as an electric shock. By the time I am holding her she is a red screaming mess. Why is she crying? The problem with babies is that they do not speak English. I rock her gently and think about making a bottle, but then I smell the source of the problem.

"Stinky," I say to her softly. "You stink. Stinky stinky stinky."

I change her diaper and remember that I am supposed to write this down in the log beside the bed. On it someone, probably Terry, has written "DIARY-A." I guess Terry is funny sometimes. I write, "11:00, Monday, brown and smells really bad."

The baby goes back to sleep and I go downstairs where Whitman is pouting on the couch.

“She’s back asleep,” I say. Whitman stands there with his arms crossed.

“I know it’s hard having a new sister, Whitman, but your parents pay me to take care of both of you. She’s just a little baby. She would, like, die without me to take care of her.”

“It’s okay,” Whitman says, getting off the couch and playing with his car again.

“Everything will be okay soon because my mom will come home.”

“Yeah!” I say brightly, glad for something to latch onto.

“She’s going to come home on my birthday and make me a chocolate cake.”

“Did she tell you that?” I say. I really want to know what on Earth is going on in this mansion of despair. “Did she call you on the phone?”

“She’s coming home on my birthday,” Whitman says again, and I notice how he keeps closing his eyes.

“Of course she is,” I say. “When’s your birthday?”

“June 5.”

“How old are you going to be?”

He holds up five fingers.

“That means it’s your golden birthday,” I say. “Do you know what a golden birthday is?”

He rolls his eyes. “Of course.”

We spend the next few hours playing Go Fish. When Neil shows up we are so deeply entrenched in our game that we don’t notice him. I’m saying that I don’t have any threes when I hear Neil say, “hey there,” and I look up and he is standing in the kitchen leaning against a cabinet and drinking one of Terry and Stacey’s foreign import beers out of a green glass bottle.

“Oh,” I say, which is like saying nothing at all.

“Hey squirt,” Neil says to Whitman. “You remember me? I’m Neil. I’m your uncle.”

Whitman doesn’t say anything.

“Is it time for the kid to take a nap or something?” Neil says.

“Uh, no. It’s not time for him to take a nap.”

“Well, maybe, could it be the time for him to take a nap, or read a book, or whatever?”

“He’s too little to read,” I say.

“I can read,” Whitman says. “I can read at a second grade level.”

“See, great,” Neil says. “That’s great, kid. Reading is fundamental. I didn’t read enough books when I was in school.”

“Is that why you do drugs?” Whitman asks.

“Oh geez,” I say.

“Your old man told you that about me, huh. What a brother. Listen, Whitman, I have some advice for you when you grow up--” he begins, but I put my hand up.

“Neil, enough,” I say. “Seriously. Why are you even here?”

Neil scoops Whitman up and shouts, “It’s time for the rocket ship! Destination naptime!” Whitman screams and laughs as Neil rushes him up the stairs.

“Don’t be so loud, please,” I call weakly up the stairs. “The baby.”

I wait a few minutes and Neil still hasn’t come downstairs and I get nervous so I go up. I can hear Neil talking quietly and it’s only when I’m right outside the door that I realize that he’s reading, lying side by side with Whitman and reading a book about a lost dog trying to get home. His voice rises and falls with the drama of the story. I didn’t expect him to be such a good narrator.

“That’s not what it says,” I hear Whitman sleepily say at a certain point. I stand at the door just listening until Neil emerges.

“He’s asleep,” he says.

“It’s not his naptime,” I say.

“Oh come on Caroline,” he says. “He’s a little kid. Any time can be naptime, that’s the fun part.”

“You’re not really even supposed to be here,” I say in a small voice. “I’m working.”

“I feel like you’ve made your point.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know.”

“No, tell me. I don’t know what you think my point is.”

“Look,” Neil sighs. “Just tell Terry that you tried this out and it wasn’t for you.”

“What?”

“Or you can tell him to go screw, I don’t really care. That’s probably a better idea. This is just exactly like my brother, to throw around his money just to piss me off.”

“I’m not quitting this job just because you don’t like Terry, okay. I like it.”

“How can you like it? You’ve been doing it for like five minutes.”

“I’m not going to apologize for having a job so that maybe we can, like, eat next week. I’m not even asking you to get off of your ass.”

“Oh, yeah, look at you. The martyr,” Neil smirks. “Nobody’s forcing you to be with me, baby. You chose this shit, don’t pretend it’s any different.”

“Fuck you,” I say, and my voice is wobbling like I’m going to cry. I always lose my credibility in arguments because I’m so quick to cry.

“Are you, like, interested in Terry or something? Now that Stacey’s gone?”

“It’s just a fucking nanny job, have you ever heard of it?”

“But I ask again, who the fuck would ask you to be a fucking nanny?”

Then the baby starts crying, and I realize just how loud we are. I’m behind on her feeding schedule.

“Shit,” I say, and I run downstairs to grab a bottle of formula and run back up. Neil is standing like an idiot in front of Whitman’s door. I give the baby her bottle. I am thinking such awful things about Neil, but as I watch her sweetly drink, I feel calmer. I coo and mumble silly words of love into her soft downy baby hair. When I put her back in the crib Neil is standing in the doorway just watching me.

“Baby,” he says. “Baby, I’m sorry.”

“She’s sleeping,” I say. “Go downstairs if you have to talk.”

“I just missed you,” he says. He sticks out a hand. Neil has perfect white soft strong smooth hands that are always cool without being too cold. I noticed his hands right away when I met him and it seemed like he was marked for something, for some kind of greatness. Just a guy mowing the college lawn.

“Baby,” he says, and I take his hand, and he pulls me up the stairs, into the master bedroom, onto his brother’s bed.

“Your brother’s bed Neil,” I say, and “we shouldn’t” and “the babies” but I say these things without conviction and soon it is too late. He gets into my veins and it’s like it’s not even me making the decision. When Neil and I make love things seem all right. The world gets lighter. I think about how easy my life could be, if I could just always be doing this.

“Look,” Neil says, rifling through the set of drawers next to the bed. “Terry and Stacey have handcuffs.”

“Gross,” I say. We are in the sleepy glow of after. Neil and I hold each other as if there is something we are united against. Sometimes I think that there is something traumatic about orgasm, about being so out of control.

“I love you,” he says, but in a way that I know he means something by it.

“I’ll quit the job,” I say softly.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Neil says.

“Yeah,” I say. “Yeah.”

“I have a lot of ideas. We’ll figure something out. Just...not this, okay?”

I am nodding when Whitman bursts in.

“Whitman!” I shout.

“Are you guys naked?” he shrieks. “Are you guys NAKED?”

“Be quiet,” I say. “The—”

“Yeah the baby,” Whitman says, rolling his eyes. Then he screams at the top of his lungs and takes off his green dinosaur T-shirt and his jean shorts and then his little boy brief underwear and he jumps into bed between the two of us.

“Whitman!” I say.

“What the fuck,” Neil says.

“Neil,” I say.

“What the hay,” he says.

“Let’s just all lay here,” Whitman says, and there’s really not much left to say after that. So we all lay there, and the baby monitor is silent, and the room is warm, and I know that shit will really hit the fan later but for a moment there is peace. I shut my eyes.

TENDERNESS

I.

Sometimes Rae would look at herself naked. It began by accident. Out of habit she would hang her towel on the bathroom doorknob, forgetting that this left her defenseless against the full-length mirror that she still had to pass before getting into the shower. And then she would see herself. She hated to look at her naked body, she hated to even be naked, because she was short and thick and pale and flat-chested. But sometimes a part of her also wanted to look. To see if anything was different.

But of course nothing ever was. It seemed impossible that this was her, that this was what people saw when they saw her. She felt so misrepresented by the body in the mirror.

Rae was waiting for something to happen. She knew she wasn't pretty, but she couldn't give up hope. She believed that there was probably a certain age when things became irreversible. Her mother had told her that her older sister used to be a gawky kid, although Rae didn't remember that. And look at Kendall now. She had been in a local print ad last February for a jewelry store and there was talk of a commercial next spring.

Her mom was still considered hot and her dad was good-looking too. This couldn't be how it ended for her, with frizzy brown hair and one thick eyebrow and a body shaped like a

sausage and acne on her back. That was just too unfair. Sometimes she thought maybe she was switched at birth. Somewhere there was another family raising a little mini-Kendall, a little golden goddess, self-important and bossy and beautiful. She called this family the Hendersons. They were dark-haired and ugly and overly sensitive. They could never think of any good jokes, and their invitations to parties often got lost in the mail. She hated them.

Outside the world of the bathroom was the rest of her father's cabin. It felt oppressive. All of this togetherness with her dad was driving her a little bit crazy. She wanted just a little time away from his smell of cigarettes, his constant loaded invitations to go fishing or camping. She knew she could say yes and make him happy. But then this year would be just like last year and all the years before it, and she needed it to be different. She didn't know what but something needed to happen.

II.

"She's really not coming?" Doug asked Marge. His ex-wife shrugged her shoulders and took a cool sip of her coffee. They were at an IHOP, a neutral location where Marge and Doug could prove to their daughters that they could get through a meal together. It was inconvenient for Doug to drive all the way down there for a shitty breakfast, but the thought of Marge setting foot in his cabin was horrifying. Rae ordered chocolate chip pancakes, Doug the corned beef hash omelet. Marge ordered nothing but coffee and sipped it slowly. She had taken divorce and remarriage very seriously, like it was a competition. She had started running marathons. What her body looked like these days, Doug couldn't even imagine. He thought about it more than he would like to admit.

“Well, she got a job at the pool,” Marge said. Rae looked at him. She was the same as when Doug had seen her last, a very serious-looking girl with dark eyes and a downturned mouth.

“That’s not the deal. I’m supposed to spend the summer with both of them.”

“I told you she wasn’t going to come today,” Marge said.

“I thought you meant, she wasn’t coming today, we’d pick her up next week. Not that I wouldn’t be seeing my daughter at all.”

“Doug, she’s a fifteen-year-old girl. She has a whole life. She has a boyfriend. You can’t honestly expect her to spend her whole summer in the woods doing nothing.”

“Yes, I can, actually,” he said, “because that was the deal.” But he knew at this point it was futile.

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” Marge said. “It wasn’t my decision, it was hers, and she’s old enough to make it. You and Rae will have a nice time. She’s the outdoorsy one anyway.”

She had a point. Kendall was fussy and controlling like her mother and vetoed many of the plans that Doug and Rae had made for hikes or fishing trips. But he still resented this decision, and he had a feeling that Marge had encouraged it. He sort of shrugged and smiled at Rae, who did not smile back. They walked out into the parking lot and she hugged her mother blankly and climbed into Doug’s truck.

“Wave goodbye to your mother,” he said, and Rae did.

“Do you want to control the radio?” he asked her.

“The radio stinks out here,” Rae said. “All country and Christian.”

He wondered if this was a line someone else had told her. The next time he looked over at her, she was sound asleep. Doug looked to his right from time to time and felt a great surge

of love for her, his little girl, warm with a belly full of pancakes. She had been such a beautiful baby, full of sweetness and affection, with those dark eyes. She would put her chubby fists around his neck and refuse to let go.

They had been such beautiful girls, Kendall and Rae, and he was so proud of his family back then, his beautiful wife and his two beautiful daughters. He would take them to restaurants and movie theaters and to church. He would look down the pew at his family and feel proud of himself. People admired him. They were impressed by how he had managed his lot in life.

He had missed Rae, and he had worried about her. She wasn't self-possessed in the way that Kendall was. She always seemed so intense and anxious. She lived in the funeral home with that yahoo Marge had married and Marge herself, who could be very uncharitable with her affections. Why had they named her Rae, he wondered. He honestly couldn't remember. One of Marge's ideas probably. At this age it seemed unkind. He wondered if "outdoorsy" wasn't one of those code words for "burgeoning lesbian." Not that Rae couldn't be a lesbian. Rae could be anything she wanted. He wondered, was going to his cabin a punishment, like Marge implied? He had always thought of it as an adventure, like camp.

Doug always felt achy and excited as he pulled into his driveway and even earlier, as he saw the river that surrounded his home. This place was strong and stable and full of beauty. He could see his simple little cabin and his faithful boat in the dock. His therapist said he was recklessly attracted to beautiful things, that he believed things were good just because they were beautiful. But who didn't, he wondered. Who could feel otherwise.

There was still a lot of day left. He looked at the water with fresh longing.

"Do you want to go for a boat ride, honey?" he asked his daughter as she got out of the car. "Or we could go for a hike up in the woods."

Rae shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Doug asked. He walked to the front door of his cabin while Rae lagged behind at the car. He had left the door unlocked. Rae followed behind him. Even her posture was reluctant.

"Whatever," she said. "We could do that."

"Well, which is it? What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I'm kinda tired," she said.

"You just took a nap," Doug said. "It's such a beautiful day."

"I don't know, Dad."

Doug stared at her and threw his arms up.

"Well, I mean, I can't tell you what to do," he said. "I just thought it might be nice to do some fun things this summer, things you can't usually do."

They stared at one another. It seemed like something bigger was happening here, but Doug didn't know what it was.

"Okay, well," Doug said. "You gonna be okay here by yourself? Because I'm gonna go."

"I'm not a little kid," Rae said, "I can take care of myself."

She went inside the house. Doug had no idea what to make of the exchange. He didn't go out on his boat after all, but sat in the living room and listened to music.

Rae didn't come down from her bedroom until dinner, and she was quiet as they ate their spaghetti and meatballs. In the middle of the meal, Doug's phone rang. It was Jeannie.

"Hi," he said. "Sorry, we're in the middle of dinner."

"They're there?" Jeannie said, and she sounded thrilled.

“Um,” Doug lowered his voice, hoping that Rae couldn’t hear him, “it’s just my younger daughter. Kendall couldn’t come.”

“So it’s just you and Rae,” she said. She loved the fact that Doug was a dad.

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “It’s just the two of us.”

“The three of us should get dinner tomorrow!” she said.

“Yeah, maybe. Maybe later this week? I think the two of us are going to try to spend some quality time, you know.”

“Okay, sure,” she said. “But I definitely can’t wait to meet her.”

“That’s sweet,” Doug said. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

They’d been dating for eight months. This was practically no time to Doug, but he could feel Jeannie getting antsy, wanting things to move faster. He wasn’t so sure. He wasn’t sure at all. He liked Jeannie. He liked her a lot. She was pretty and genuinely kind. She thought the world of him. She had a good head on her shoulders. It should have been simpler.

And her mom was dying, which shouldn’t have mattered so much except that it really, really did. Jeannie was a realtor in town. He had met her when he’d bought the place, and then they kept seeing each other in different bars and one night he could feel it happening as they talked. He hadn’t picked up a woman in years. Under the glow of barlight and seven beers she seemed like a goddess, like the answer to all his loneliness and longing.

He had just wanted a warm body. Something simple. He wanted to take someone home who was nice and pretty and smelled like vanilla. It always turned into some huge fucking mess. She told him her mother was dying after the third time that he spent the night. Stomach cancer, it was this long excruciating process. Her finances were fucked and she was practically raising her twelve-year-old stepbrother. She didn’t have any idea what she was supposed to do. She was alone and depressed and she felt like he was the first good thing to happen to her in

years. That was what she said. What was he supposed to say to that?

“That was my girlfriend,” Doug said to Rae. “She really wants to meet you.”

“I didn’t know you had a girlfriend,” Rae said.

“She’s really nice,” he said. “You’ll like her.”

Rae nodded and went back to her dinner.

Rae sat in her room and watched a fly on her ceiling move in lazy circles. She was surprised to find that she wished Kendall were here. It was just so much easier to fly under everyone’s radar with Kendall around. Rae had done it her whole life. In the summer they were stuck with each other and would have to make their own fun. They played cards and rode bikes and went swimming. It was dorky but Rae liked it.

But no, Kendall just had to spend the summer with Nathan. Rae wondered if they had done it yet. Rae was a devoted reader of Kendall’s diary, which was written in purple ink and riddled with spelling mistakes. Kendall had been agonizing over this decision for months. Rae couldn’t imagine letting someone crawl inside your body with their penis, like a parasite. It wasn’t just the nakedness but the closeness of it all, the prolonged physical contact. All of the things that you would have to do and be expected to know how to do. Every part of it seemed impossible. What was Kendall thinking? Sometimes Rae hoped she got pregnant.

There were only fifteen movies at the video store in town, and she had already watched them all last summer. They were all “family classics”—the video store refused to sell anything rated harder than PG. They were mostly about boys and their dogs. The dogs always died. Her dad was out on the boat. It was getting darker; he would be coming in soon. Every time she told him she didn’t want to go and watched him go without her she felt like her heart was being punched. She wanted to go, she didn’t want to go. She couldn’t go.

Her best friend Tanya Tucker had sent her an email from Tokyo, saying that there was this other American boy in her dad's apartment building and she thought he had tried to kiss her the other night. Rae was bewildered by this. How does someone try to kiss you? How could it just happen, without any kind of planning?

Rae lay down on her bed and closed her eyes. She thought about the dad in the last movie that she saw. He had green eyes and brown hair. The family was very poor for most of the movie, but in the end the dog discovered oil right on their ranch. In the final scene he was wearing a suit and standing in a hotel bar when he sees his estranged wife. She was wearing a green dress and very beautiful. She was in the arms of another man and looked very unhappy. She saw him in his suit and they ran to one another and kissed like they meant it, with tongue.

Rae burrowed her face into her pillow and kissed it, sticking her tongue into the pillow like it was someone's throat. She kept seeing his face. She pretended she was touching it and pulling on his hair. She put her hand on her breast and pretended it was someone else's hand. She started thrusting her hips up and down on her bed.

The door opened and when she turned her head, it was her dad standing there.

"Oh, um, sorry," he said. His face was red and he wouldn't look at her. Rae could feel her own face heating up, and she knew if she started talking she would start crying.

"Sorry," her dad said again. "I just wanted to see if you were, you know, hungry. I'll just go."

She put her head back on her bed and lay there, her heart beating too fast.

That night they met Jeannie at the restaurant. Doug hadn't spoken to his daughter since the incident the night before, and he felt a sense of doom as they got into the car. In the

parking lot things started badly. Rae stared at the bracelet Jeannie gave her like it was some kind of trick.

“That’s pretty, isn’t it,” Doug said. “Wasn’t it nice of Jeannie to get you that?”

“Thank you,” Rae said quietly.

“Why don’t you put it on?” he said.

Rae snapped the bracelet on, but it was obviously too small for her wrist and bulged around the edges.

“Oh, gosh,” Jeannie said. “If you don’t like it, we can take it right back and buy something that you’d like. I had so much fun shopping for it. It was practically a present for me.”

Rae didn’t say anything. Doug smiled at her encouragingly. It had all happened really quickly. Maybe she hadn’t been humping a pillow. Maybe he was supposed to say something to her, but he didn’t know what. It was probably normal. She was getting older. It made his heart ache.

They went into the restaurant. It was one of those dark smoky supper clubs with heads of game on the walls. The waitresses were cute and surly. Doug’s prime rib was expensive and mediocre, and he downed five or six gin martinis while some painful conversation was had.

In the middle of the meal, Jeannie’s stepbrother, Bruce, got dropped off, still wearing his karate uniform. Bruce was an unnerving kid. It was wrong to dislike a twelve-year-old boy, especially one whose mother was dying, so Doug didn’t dislike Bruce. But he was weird. He was one of those kids who was into medieval weapons and never washed his hair. He had gotten kicked out of normal public school for some behavioral problem and now he went to some ultra-expensive private school.

Rae and Bruce sat across from one another, silently chewing on plain hamburgers.

Jeannie did her best to make all three of them talk.

“Do you like going on the internet to talk to your friends, Rae? Bruce sure likes doing that.”

Rae didn't say anything.

“Hey,” Doug said. “Jeannie asked you a question.”

“Well, you don't have the internet,” Rae said.

“Your dad doesn't even have the internet?” Bruce moaned. “How is that even possible. How can you live like that.”

“I do have it. It's just slow,” Doug said. “You're not exactly living on a schedule anyway.”

“It barely works,” Rae said. “But sometimes I email my friends.”

“Is it weird, being away from them?” Jeannie asked.

Rae shrugged. “It's okay, I guess. My best friend Tanya is in Tokyo for the summer anyway.”

“I can count to ten in Japanese,” Bruce said. No one took him up on it. The bill came, mercifully. Jeannie didn't even glance at her wallet. He slapped his credit card down on the table.

“You know what would be fun?” Jeannie said. “We should all get some ice cream! My treat.”

“Okay,” Bruce said.

“I'm lactose-intolerant,” Rae said.

“Since when?” Doug scoffed.

“Dairy’s not good for you,” Rae said. “Do you know what they do to cows before they milk them?”

“You just ate a hamburger, genius,” Doug said. “Who taught you this stuff, the undertaker?”

“Michael knows a lot. He eats a paleo diet,” Rae said.

“Yeah, well. He pumps dead bodies full of chemicals all day and then comes home to your mother,” Doug said. He had a point in there somewhere, but he lost it. Alcohol was ringing in his ears. Rae looked exasperated. Jeannie looked appalled.

“You’re not being very polite,” he said. “Jeannie offered to buy you some ice cream, and I think that’s pretty nice.”

“Fine,” Rae said. “Let’s all load into the car with someone who’s had five drinks at the wheel and stuff our faces with ice cream.”

“It’s okay, Doug,” Jeannie said. “We don’t need to go get ice cream.”

“We’re getting some fucking ice cream!” Doug shouted. People in the restaurant looked over at them. Bruce smirked.

Maybe Rae was imagining it, but in the car on the way home from Dairy Queen she could feel her diarrhea already beginning. She was sitting in the back seat next to that kid Bruce.

“This is a yellow belt,” he said to her. “I just got it.”

“Oh,” she said. She didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know how to talk to boys. There were girls at school who could do it, laugh with big showy laughs and play along when they threw ice cubes down your back at pool parties. When Bruce had sat down Rae had felt humiliated, unprepared. She didn’t know a *boy* was going to be coming to dinner.

He sat next to her at Dairy Queen. It made her nervous about eating. She couldn't see him but she could feel him there, watching her.

"Boy, I wish I could eat ice cream every day," her dad's girlfriend said. "I just look at it and feel myself gaining ten pounds!"

Rae and her father gave Jeannie identical weak smiles, and then they smiled at each other for doing the same thing. It felt like the first easy moment she'd had with her father in a while.

Rae's dad drove them back to the cabin. Rae had assumed that he would be dropping his girlfriend and her kid back at her place, but he didn't. He said that he and Jeannie needed to have a conversation and that they should go upstairs and play a video game. The video game console that her dad had put in her room had never really worked. She was pretty sure he had gotten it at a garage sale or something. Still she didn't have the heart to tell him that, so she walked up to her room with Bruce trailing behind. Her stomach gurgled and lurched as she climbed up the stairs. Dairy.

Bruce sat down on her bed without asking permission.

"What games do you have?" he said.

"It doesn't really work," she admitted.

"God, doesn't anything work around here? This place sucks," he said.

Rae wanted to say something in her father's defense, but she had to agree with his assessment. She sat down on the bed next to him.

"Yeah," she said. "I hate it here. I'm so bored."

It felt so disloyal, saying that out loud to a stranger. But it felt good to say it too.

“If I ever live here, we better get high-speed internet,” he said. He had long long eyelashes, like a girl. He smelled the way that boys always smelled, a smell that she had sort of forgotten about since encountering it in gym class in May. His eyes had some green in them.

“What? Why would you live here?”

Bruce shrugged. “When my mom dies and Jeannie and your dad get married.”

“Um,” Rae said. “I thought she was your mom.”

“Jeannie?” he said. “No. Jeannie’s not my mom.”

“Um,” Rae said. “Oh.” Now she really didn’t know what to say.

“Do you live with a bunch of dead bodies?” he asked her.

“What?”

“That’s what your dad said.”

“Oh,” Rae said. “Yeah. I live in a funeral home. My mom is married to an undertaker.”

“Sick! Have you seen a dead body before?”

“Yeah,” Rae shrugged. “Like a million times. I used to think it was gross, but now it’s like no big deal. Sometimes I help Michael put on their makeup and stuff. It’s like, I forget that they even used to be alive.”

“That’s so gross,” he said, but he sounded really happy about it. He stood up and looked around her room. She felt protective, nervous.

“Have you ever seen a penis before?” he asked her.

“What?” Rae choked out.

“I bet you probably haven’t.”

“I know what it looks like,” she said.

He smirked. “That’s not what I’m asking.”

Rae didn’t say anything.

“Do you want to see one?” he asked. Rae knew she was supposed to tell him to stop, that he was being gross or something, but she didn’t say anything. He pulled his karate belt off and opened his robe and pulled down his pants. There it was. It was no big deal. She expected him to waggle it in front of her or smile or something, but he looked very serious. He was looking right at her.

“Okay,” she said. “You can put it away.”

He put his clothes back on.

“You just have that thing hanging down there all the time? Wagging around and getting sweaty?”

“Show me yours,” he said.

“No,” she said.

“Show me yours,” he pleaded. Rae could feel her face heating up. She wanted to be dead. If she were a dead body none of this would matter. He reached his hand out to her to touch the valley where her breasts were supposed to be. His hands were sweaty even through her shirt. She closed her eyes. He just kept his hand there for a moment, then Jeannie called Bruce’s name from downstairs. He moved his hand and sighed and walked to the door. She lay down in her bed and listened to them leave and didn’t go downstairs to say goodbye.

Ten minutes later her dad poked his head into her room.

“Hey kiddo?” he said. “I’m sorry for yelling.”

“It’s okay,” she said.

“Are you crying?” he said.

“No,” she said and wiped her face on her shirt.

“Rae, you’re crying.”

“I’m just really tired and I feel weird.”

“Did Bruce say something mean to you? He’s a really weird kid. He’s had a rough life.”

“I’m okay,” she said. “Really.”

“Tomorrow we can do whatever you want.”

“Let’s go out on the boat tomorrow,” she said, knowing that the words would make her dad happy. He grinned at her.

“It’s going to be a beautiful day,” he said. “We can grab a bunch of subs and spend the day swimming.”

“They can come,” she said.

“What?”

“Bruce. And your girlfriend. They can come. They should come.”

“Oh,” he said, and she could tell that he was just a little bit disappointed. “Okay. It’s nice of you to think of them. I’ll call and ask, okay?”

“Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

III.

She dreams that night.

In the water her body is nothing. She is wet and warm and she is nothing more than these things. She has already forgotten the person she used to be. The person on land. She has shed her. She is different. Taller. Older. They are both older.

When she was younger, her sister used to tell her that there were a ton of dead bodies at the bottom of the lake that would grab her by the ankles and pull her down.

She is a strong swimmer. She imagines that he is not. She can see him, far away, doggy paddling. She swims out to him easily, quickly. He kisses her, cold wet mouth on cold wet mouth, and she lets him. No one can see them.

They are underwater. They are kissing. They are not bodies anymore. They do not need things like oxygen. They are not wearing swimsuits. He is touching all the different parts of her. Something is happening to her, something fiery and frightening. She wakes up before it happens.

The day was clear and beautiful, just as Doug predicted. He was itching to get onto the water from the minute he woke up. He called Jeannie the night before and she seemed excited. She had never even been out on his boat before.

Rae came trudging down the stairs, wearing her jean shorts and oversized tie dye T-shirt from a community fundraiser, with her bathing suit sticking out between her neck and shoulders. She'd whisked her hair around her head in all kinds of braids, in one of those magical ways that women have. Even a girl like Rae, who is young and clumsy, can sometimes access this magic.

He fed her scrambled eggs with salsa on a blue plate. She smiled at him beatifically and the sun blazed behind her in the big bay window. She looked like an angel. He wished he could lock her in a tower and just keep her there forever.

At about noon Bruce and Jeannie showed up. Jeannie looked cute, in her sunglasses and with her bikini top peeking out of her shirt. Bruce had on a black T-shirt and black shorts. He looked at Doug and Doug could swear there was murder in this kid's eyes.

"Let's go," Rae said, and she smiled at everyone, and they all smiled back at her.

They cruised out for a while, letting the wind whip around in their faces. They found a sandbar that was unoccupied except for a few young guys tossing a Frisbee around several

yards away. They had a pure white dog that occasionally let out a bark. Otherwise it was peaceful. Rae's dad started smearing sunscreen on the back of her neck.

"I can do it myself," she said, grabbing the tube and squirting it into her hand. She could feel *his* eyes on her at the other end of the boat. She didn't want to look at him.

Jeannie jumped in and screamed.

"It's freezing!" she said. "Doug, get in here."

"No way," her dad said, taking another sip of his beer.

"Rae?" Jeannie asked. Rae climbed down the ladder slowly, still wearing her T-shirt. Bruce jumped in after her, splashing her.

"This is way too cold for me," Jeannie said and climbed back into the boat just as Rae got in. Now it was just the two of them, Rae and Bruce. He wasn't a bad swimmer, like in her dream. He treaded water and muttered things to himself.

"Follow me," he said when the adults were preoccupied, and they swam out to shore.

Jeannie came inside the boat and was drinking a beer with him and reading a book.

"This is nice, isn't it?" she said.

"Yeah," he said.

"It's good for Bruce, to have someone his own age around. I really worry about him."

"He's going through a lot, I imagine," Doug said.

"Yeah," she said. "Poor kid."

"Do you think that's okay, them going off like that?" he said.

Jeannie shrugged. "Oh, they'll be fine. Didn't you go exploring, at their age? Besides, do you really want to swim out there and get them?"

She had a point. They didn't say anything for a minute. They watched the kids swim out to shore and disappear into the woods.

"She's a sweet girl. Rae," Jeannie said. "She's a lot like you."

"You think so? I don't think so, really."

"I think she is. She's a tough egg to crack, but you can tell it's worth it."

"I'm not a tough egg," Doug said. "I don't even know why you would say that."

"Oh, okay," Jeannie said, smiling.

They watched the water.

"It's hard," he said. "I feel like I wait all year just to be a father, and then I am one and I'm so ill-equipped. I can tell how miserable she is, and there's nothing I can do."

"But you're always a father," Jeannie said.

"Well, it doesn't feel that way."

Jeannie nodded. "Because you're still waiting for your real life to start."

"I don't tell you the things that my therapist says so you can throw them back in my face," he said.

"Okay," she said. "But did you ever think you could just be happy now?"

He didn't say anything. He knew he couldn't.

She followed him out into the trees. They trudged through thick sand that was more like dirt. She asked him where they are going but he didn't answer. Her voice echoed back in her head. There were little bugs everywhere, pulling on her skin. She didn't like this.

He stopped and she almost bumped into him. He took her by the shoulder and pulled her down onto the ground. It hurt. He put himself on top of her and started licking her face.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Stop. What are you doing?"

He kissed her more slowly, and she stuck her tongue into his mouth. It was slimy and wet and not at all right, not at all what it was supposed to be. He started licking her face again. And then he rubbed his crotch on her crotch. There was dirty sand all over her arms and hands and face.

He put his hands all over her. And then he grabbed her bikini bottom and started pulling on it. He pulled them down and then she pulled them back up. They struggled.

“Stop,” she said. She pulled them back up.

“Let me see it,” he grunted.

“Stop!” she said again.

“It’s not fair,” he moaned. “It’s not fair.” He pulled her bikini bottoms down again. She pushed him off of her and started to stand up. He pushed her back down again. She pushed him again, hard, and he hit his head on a tree. Now his face was bleeding and he was crying. She got up and she ran.

“There’s Rae,” Jeannie said. They could see her swimming back toward the boat. And then Bruce, who was lagging behind her. Something was making some kind of unholy sound. It was a minute before Doug realized it was coming from his daughter.

“Is she crying?” Jeannie said.

“Rae,” Doug called out, but she just kept swimming towards the boat. They watched her as she got closer and she was crying so hard she could barely breathe. She was covered in dirt and leaves. As Bruce got closer to the boat, they could see that he was crying too, and his nose was bleeding. Jeannie and Doug looked at each other in bewilderment. The children were crying, the children were bleeding.

Rae started climbing the ladder, and Doug took her dirty hands and pulled her up and out. He was acting on pure instinct now, like those mothers that lift cars that are about to hit their babies. He took the big green towel and wrapped it around her and held her close to his chest. She burrowed her face into him. She was crying so hard she couldn't speak. He could hear Jeannie asking questions. He could hear Bruce get into the boat. But they were not a part of this. Her heart was beating so hard and fast. It overpowered his own heart.

How strange it was, to be someone's father. He remembered the birth of this person. It was his job to protect her and he hadn't done it, not at all. Her hair smelled like the dank grimy smell of the river. Into it he muttered things, telling her that she was warm and she was safe and she was loved. He was scared to stop talking, so he didn't. He told her she was his baby, the only thing in the world that he loved, and he would never let her go.

HEART MURMURS

“Will you play Bob Dylan at my funeral?” my mother asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“And I want to wear my cowboy boots. And my white fringe vest,” she said.

This was the outfit that my mother wore when she met the love of her life, Billy Buck, a man who fathered three of my brothers. My father was an unknown quantity, an algebraic x . I didn't point out that my mother's white fringe vest might have fit on one of her calves these days.

“Write this down somewhere,” I said.

“You can remember,” she said. “Do people give you their dying wishes every day?”

“You're not dying,” I said.

“Well, I'm closer than I was yesterday,” she said. And what could I say to that? We both fell asleep watching T.V.

My mother used to tell people that she moved to Montana because she put her finger on a map, determined to drive anywhere it landed. Like most things that sound romantic, it was a

lie; she moved out here because of a man, which seems to be the only reason that anyone moves anywhere. Either to follow a man or avoid a man, or both.

I told people that I moved back in with my mother because she needed my help. This was a lie too. I had been living in Sacramento. I was doing all of the things that normal people do every day: going to work, making healthy meals, sleeping with a man who I loved and who I took his word loved me back. But I was a fraud, and everyone figured it out eventually. He went back to his wife, and the company downsized, and the spinach went bad, curled into rotten brown clumps. I drove back to Missoula in the cover of night, not even stopping to pee. It was morning when I showed up at my mother's apartment complex, and she came outside. She wasn't even surprised to see me. She put out her pillowy and spider-veined arms and pulled me into her chest. She smelled like soap.

I got a job at a Native American craft store that lots of people went inside but no one ever bought anything from. I said things like, "Have a nice day." During the day my mother made guest lists for her funeral, crossing certain names out and then rewriting them. She swore that she was dying, that there was some kind of cancer lurking in one of her internal organs, but there was absolutely no sign of this. I slept on a futon. My mother usually slept on a chair next to me. Most people would have called this rock-bottom failure, but I didn't get too caught up on it. We loved and understood one another.

My father was the one my mother followed out to Montana.

"Tell me about him," I said while we watched 60 Minutes. "My father."

"Oh," my mother scoffed. "What's there to tell? He wasn't so special. He was no Billy Buck."

“But you followed him all the way from Florida to Montana,” I said. “He must have had something.”

“Billy Buck,” my mother sighed. “God, that man. He died of a heart attack right in his prime. He just collapsed in my arms.”

“I know, Mom.”

“He was as healthy as a horse. I’ll never understand it.”

My mother saw her life as two alternate timelines: the life that she was supposed to have, and the strange place where she found herself after Billy Buck died. She was never really the same person. I was there. I was seven years old and angry that my mother was pregnant again. I wonder how the timeline would have changed for me.

“But my father,” I said. “His last name was Johns.”

“Oh, Layla,” my mother said. “He’s not important.”

“But what if I need a kidney?” I said.

“It’s a mistake, to think that you’ll meet him and make some sort of sense of things. Isn’t it better, to keep him as a sort of sweet dream that you don’t need to worry about?” she said.

“Is he still in Montana?” I asked. “I bet he is. I just want to meet him, mom.”

“I would give you my kidney right now,” my mother said. “I would cut it out of my own back and give it to you, if you asked me to.”

“I thought your kidney was ridden with tumors,” I said.

My mother nodded and drifted off to sleep.

A guy with glasses kept coming in to the Native American jewelry store and pacing around nervously and then finally leaving.

“Can I help you?” I said finally, on the fifth day in a row.

“Are you Layla Johns?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“It’s me,” he said. “Gordy Kramer.”

I ran the name through my head, chewed on it, waiting for it to register.

“We went to high school together,” he said. “You were the second trombone, and I was the first.”

“Gordy,” I said. “Hi.” I still had no idea.

“I didn’t know you were back in town,” he said.

“I guess I am,” I said.

He wiped his glasses off on his sleeve.

“I’m helping out my mom,” I added. “Are you particularly interested in Native American jewelry?”

“No,” he said. “Are you?”

An hour later we were having sex in his apartment.

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. I still couldn’t remember him. Afterwards he made me a grilled cheese sandwich with tomatoes. I looked around his apartment, which was very clean. Cleanliness made me nervous. I wondered if Gordy was maybe a serial killer. There was probably no polite way to ask. I wondered how long it would take my mother to realize that I had been murdered. It would be scary to be murdered, but there would also probably be a rush of excitement when he revealed the psychotic way that he killed people. Just to see someone’s true nature so clearly. This was what I liked about sex with strangers. Seeing some aspect of their personality that no one else could see.

“Gordy, do you want to help me find my biological father?” I asked.

“Definitely,” he said.

“Great,” I said. “Thanks a million. Maybe we can talk about it tomorrow? I have to go back to work or I’ll get fired.”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Yes. I’ll take you out to dinner.”

“Okay.”

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in my entire life,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

On Fridays my mother drank beer on our front porch with Gladys Gillespie, her neighbor who she hated with a furious passion. “That peach,” my mother would say about her, pacing around the room, “that absolute princess is coming on over any second.” They would sit and contradict whatever the other one said.

Gordy came by at eight. Gladys and my mother were eating chicken salad out of plastic containers and drinking Kokanee mixed with spicy tomato juice.

“Who’s this pervert,” Gladys Gillespie murmured as I went outside to meet Gordy. I was still wearing what I’d worn to work that day: blue jeans and a checkered men’s shirt that used to belong to one of my brothers. Gordy was wearing khaki pants and a blue sweater. When he saw me he wiped his glasses off on his shirt.

“Hi,” he said to the old bags. “I’m Gordy. Layla and I are going to go grab something to eat.”

“You let your child go out with a man like that?” Gladys said, which made no sense. Gordy was wearing khaki pants for Christ’s sake.

“It’s getting dark,” my mother said. “How can you be going out at this hour? I’m about ready to go to bed.”

“Well,” I said, “there’s a vast difference in our ages.”

“Sass,” Gladys muttered. “Listen to that. I’d smack a child of mine around for such sass.”

Gladys had no children.

“But I don’t understand,” my mother said. “You’re leaving me alone, here. Who is this person? I don’t understand.”

“We’re getting some dinner,” I said.

“We went to high school together,” Gordy added. “We’re old friends.”

“Why are you doing this to me,” my mother muttered.

“I’ve seen you before,” Gladys said.

“I live in Missoula,” Gordy said.

“No, no, no. On America’s Most Wanted!” she said and cackled.

“Am I ever going to see you again,” my mother said.

“Mom,” I said. “Jesus. You’re being crazy. I’m just going out to eat. I’ll be back, I promise you that.”

My mother just shook her head.

“Your daughter is an idiot,” Gladys said. “We’ll probably see her on the TV, chopped up into bits.”

“Oh, what would you know,” my mother said. “You barren old spinster.”

I stepped into Gordy’s American-made car and said, “I’m awfully sorry about that.”

“That’s all right,” he said. “Your poor mother.”

“Yes,” I said. “A tragedy.”

We went to an Asian-fusion restaurant where we drank hot sake and salty pieces of fried eel and seaweed soup in tiny plastic white bowls. I tried to remember how to make polite conversation.

“What do you do for a living,” I said. I practically shouted it, I was so grateful that I had landed on a normal adult question.

“I’m a detective,” he said. “A private investigator.”

“Really?” I said.

He sighed. “No. I just thought you would like that.”

“Wow,” I said. “I did. I’m trying to find my father, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. I work at Shady Pines.”

“The nursing home?”

“Yeah,” he said. “The one on Main.”

I nodded.

“So that’s something we have in common,” he said. “Helping the elderly.”

“Sure,” I said.

I cut my spicy beef into tiny little pieces.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said.

I kept cutting up my beef.

“Can you stop saying that all the time?” I said. “It’s weird.”

“Sorry,” Gordy said. “Sorry. It’s just. I can’t help it.”

“Look,” I said. “I didn’t have sex with you so that you would tell me how beautiful I was all of the time. It makes me feel really uncomfortable. What am I supposed to say?”

“Okay,” he said. “I understand.”

He sipped his sake.

“Do you like Italian food?” he asked.

“Why?” I said.

“I don’t know.”

“Look,” I said. “My mother has cancer inside her body and my last boyfriend died in a tragic sailing accident.”

“Gosh. Okay.”

“He was my husband actually. I watched him die right before my eyes. A young man in his prime. And now the doctors say I may need a kidney.”

“Oh.”

“So, I mean. I just don’t think it’s an appropriate time for you to talk about all of these Italian restaurants that we’re going to go to. There’s kind of a lot going on in my life.”

He wiped his glasses off on his sleeve. He said, “I wasn’t trying to...I understand. I just thought that, yesterday, you know.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, yesterday. I don’t know. I think what I need to focus on right now is finding my father, you know?”

He nodded.

“It’s my kidneys,” I said.

“Both of them?” he said.

“You’re a nice guy,” I said. “You’re a really nice guy.”

He nodded.

“I like most Italian food,” I said, throwing him a bone. “I like a nice lasagna.”

He wiped his glasses on his shirt and ordered another round of hot sake.

After our botched date, things went back to normal at home. Gordy called exactly three times and I let it go to voicemail. A week later the jewelry store began to feel that I was redundant and fired me in favor of some fifteen-year-old bitch who claimed to be an actual Salish indian. This was quite a blow. I couldn't go home and face my mother, so I went to a bar and had four or five shots of whiskey for lunch and called my ex-boyfriend in Sacramento.

"First of all, I would like to say that I'm not in love with you anymore," I said on the first voicemail.

"Pick up your phoooooone," I moaned into the second voicemail. "Baby, pick up your phone."

"You're a wiener," I said to his voicemail on the third call. "You are a real penis."

On the fourth call he picked up.

"Jesus," he said.

"Wrong! It's Layla."

"How drunk are you?"

"I'm not even drunk," I said. "I just want to talk to you."

He sighed.

"What, is your wife around?"

"No," he said. "But I don't have that much time. What did you want to talk about?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know? You call me for hours, leaving voicemails calling me a child rapist and a turdburglar, and now you don't know what to say?"

"No, I—I do want to say something. Everything's fucked up," I said. "I just got fired."

"Sorry," he said. He didn't sound sorry.

“I just don’t...I started having this theory, the other day. I was in the grocery store, you know and...there was this girl I knew, Shelby Mullman, who I went to school with from kindergarten all the way to high school, and she smelled like shit, and nobody would tell her, and she never knew. And I mean she really reeked, like you could smell her clear across the room, and nobody would go to prom with her, and everyone just made fun of her all the time. And I saw her yesterday at the supermarket. And she smelled like shit, still.”

“What are you talking about?” Chris said. “I have to go.”

“No, listen,” I said, “I feel like I’m Shelby Mullman, like there’s something wrong with me and I don’t know what it is but everyone else knows. But it’s much, much deeper than just a bad smell, you know? And I just...I think it’d be better if everyone just told me what it was, you know, instead of just...I can’t believe I got fired again! I mean, I’m living on a futon in my mother’s apartment and how come you get to just go back to your house which probably is *gorgeous* and has comfortable furniture and cable TV and everything? How come?”

“Layla,” he said. The bartender came over and shook his head at me, gave me a glass of water.

“I don’t even think that girl’s a real Indian,” I said, crying now. “I don’t even...she looked like a Mexican. I’m not trying to sound like a Republican or something, but you know, she literally stole my job. I don’t even know if she’s legal.”

“Layla,” he said. “I’m going to hang up the phone. Call a cab. You’re a fucking grown-up. Stop blaming other people for your problems.”

“You don’t know anything about my life,” I said. “It’s really humorous how you think you know so much about my life. I have a new boyfriend and I’m going to meet my father soon and I think I’m really going to figure things out.”

“You know,” Chris said, “a lot of people didn’t have fathers growing up. A lot of really normal and successful people. And a lot of people had fathers who pushed them down stairs and put out cigarettes in their arms.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and your dad was a fucking Little League coach and you have a cocaine problem and you cheat on your wife. I get it, okay?”

“Fuck you,” he said, and he hung up. I threw my phone against the bar but not that hard. The battery didn’t even come out.

“What are you doing here?” Gordy asked me. I had drunkenly stumbled to Main Street. He was rubbing his glasses on his sleeve.

“I lost my job,” I said and started crying. “You weren’t picking up your phone.”

“Layla, jeez. I’m at work. There’s no cell phone reception in this place.”

“Gordy,” I said. “What am I going to do?”

“Can we talk about this later?” he said. “I’m at work.”

“I know you’re at work, it’s the tenth fucking time you’ve said that!” I shouted.

“God!” Gordy shouted. “What is your deal?”

“Can I help you out for the day or something? I just have this fear that if I go home right now, I’m going to sit in a chair next to my mom and start watching soap operas and never get up,” I said in a tiny voice.

He looked at me and sighed.

“I’ll change bedpans,” I said. “I’ll do whatever.”

“I don’t really do that,” he said. “I’m just about to give everyone their dinner. You could, I don’t know. You could read to someone or something.”

“I would like that,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Just don’t let anyone know that you’re drunk, and don’t bring my name into it, okay?”

He told me to go up to Room 412 to visit a man who had no family. I took an elevator up to the fourth floor feeling calm for the first time that day.

“I’m Layla,” I said to the man hunched in the bed. “I’m here to read you a book.”

At that moment I realized that I had nothing to read to him. He stared at me. His eyes were blue and milky; his hair was whitish-green. He opened and closed his mouth and made a few shiny spit bubbles but no words came out.

“What’s your name?” I said. I looked around the room for clues. There was a pile in the corner of a bunch of papers and I sifted through them. They were all meaningless, flyers and unwritten postcards and Chinese food menus. I found a Reader’s Digest from September 1997 addressed to John Delaney.

“Is this you?” I asked him. “John Delaney? Is that your name?”

He didn’t say anything, but I thought maybe there was a small glimmer of recognition in his eyes.

“Well,” I said. “You’re not my father.”

He looked at me and smiled. A little shiny line of spit oozed out of his mouth. I shook my head and smiled back.

“Lucky you,” I said, and then I started reading an article out loud about dogs saving their owner’s lives.

“Corky may not be a Dalmatian, but a house fire was no match for her,” I read. “This nine-year-old terrier picked up the phone and dialed 9-1-1, then dragged her owner outside to safety.”

It was then that Gordy came into the room wiping his glasses on his sleeve and said, “I just got a phone call from the hospital. I think something might really be wrong.”

On the ride to the hospital, I kept saying, “Why didn’t anyone call me?”

“There’s no reception at the nursing home,” Gordy finally said, and when I looked at my phone, sure enough I had eight missed phone calls.

“Oh god,” I said. “Oh god.”

“She’s going to be okay,” Gordy said. “They said she was in stable condition.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m supposed to play Bob Dylan at her funeral.”

“She’s not going to die.”

“There are a lot of Dylan albums, Gordy,” I said and started crying. “How am I supposed to know what to play?”

“Oh Layla,” he said, “don’t cry again. There’s mascara all over your face.”

I took a shaky breath in and sniffled.

“Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door seems like a good choice,” he said, and then I started crying really hard again.

“Shit, sorry,” he said. “I don’t know why I said that.”

We got to the hospital and parked. Everything seemed to be too bright. My hangover was beginning.

“She told me she was sick,” I said. Gordy didn’t say anything. We raced through the doors. I just watched while Gordy asked all the right questions at the front desk and got us in the right place. I was starting to think he was the horse to bet on.

Gladys Gillespie was standing above my mother’s bed.

“Mom,” I said.

“Move, you old twat,” my mother wheezed to Gladys.

“Mom,” I said and stood by her bed. There was an oxygen mask on her face and she looked so little and pitiful. She was hooked up to all these machines. I had cried too much today though. No tears would come.

“How are you doing, Mrs. Johns?” Gordy said.

“Mrs. Buck,” my mother wheezed. “Oh Layla, honey. It’s my ticker.”

“She had a heart murmur,” Gladys Gillespie said. “She still thinks she has cancer but the doctor said no dice. She’ll be fine. She’ll be in here for three days at the most.”

“Oh shut up,” my mother said. Then she turned to me and said, “I’m so happy you’re here, sweetie.”

“Oh Mom,” I said. “I love you. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“What’s all over your face,” Gladys said to me. “You look like a wreck.”

“Do you remember Gordy?” I said to my mom. “He drove me here. He’s a really wonderful person.”

My mother smiled with half of her mouth and nodded.

“Let’s hold hands,” she said, and so the four of us—my mother, Gordy Kramer, Gladys Gillespie, and I—joined hands in a strange sort of circle. The only sound was the creaky rattle of my mother’s breathing and the occasional beeping of the machines that kept her alive.

ANIMALS

This was around the age that I first started to understand that line in the AC/DC song: “she told me to come but I was already there.” We couldn’t believe that something like that had been just under our noses, on the radio this entire time. School was starting soon and my mother was taking me to buy shirts. It had been two months since I’d last seen her. She was in a treatment program, though I can’t remember which one. They thought little field trips like this were a stabilizing thing. I knew that that was all we were supposed to do. Buy the shirts and get out.

Buying back-to-school clothes wasn’t something that made a lot of sense when you went to an all boys’ Catholic school with a uniform, but a woman named Sheila called me and told me that my mother was taking me to buy shirts and so my dad dropped me off at the Clothing Barn in the mall. My dad was on the wagon. He had a nice, normal girlfriend. As he dropped me off, I could tell that he was thinking about going inside. He didn’t, though, and I was glad.

It wasn’t hard to find my mother. The department was full of moms and their reluctant sons, and I saw her standing by a rack on her own, mismatched. Other moms had short haircuts and swathed their bodies in layers of clothing. They didn’t even seem like women,

which is what moms were supposed to be like. My mom had long brown hair and wore turquoise jewelry, and her body was always much too present for my comfort level. It was a hot day, and she was wearing cutoff shorts.

“Will!” she cried when she saw me and held out her arms for a hug. Her face always looked rough when she quit. Alcohol seemed to soften her and make her prettier.

I hugged her back, although I was conscious of the boys around me. I didn’t think any of my classmates would come to this mall. I was a scholarship student, and they mostly lived on a different side of town. Still, hugging your mother in the middle of Clothing Barn would make anyone blush a little bit. I was mostly ashamed that I liked it. The truth was I had missed her.

“You’re getting so handsome,” my mother said, and then I could definitely hear boys in the department snickering so I backed away from her. I could tell she wanted to hug me again but stopped herself and smiled, like we had a secret.

“We should get you a nice blue shirt,” she said. “You’ve got that nice blue in your eyes.”

“Mom,” I said. “Geez.”

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s just so nice to see you. Do you like this?”

She held up a plain black T-shirt. I shrugged.

“How are things going, Mom?” I said, and she looked at me like I was crazy.

“Everything’s fine,” she said. “I’ll just grab it so that you can try it on, okay?” I knew that that was the end of that. There were a lot of things that we just didn’t talk about. She started walking through the store, pulling shirts off the rack frantically, holding them up and either putting them in the pile in her arms or throwing them onto the ground.

“I hear your father’s seeing someone,” she said as I followed her. “I don’t know why that should surprise me, I guess.”

I didn't know what to say. Suddenly she stopped and thrust the pile of shirts into my hands and reached into her purse. After digging around for a few minutes she pulled out a pack of cigarettes and her lighter, which was a camel-colored Bic. It was a rare color, and years later when she lost it she was never able to find a new one. Her hands were shaking.

A saleswoman came over to my mother and told her that she couldn't smoke in here. My mother sighed and put the pack and the lighter back into her purse.

"I'm gonna go outside and have a smoke," my mom said.

"I'll come with you," I said.

"Will," my mother said. "I'm just gonna be right outside, okay? You can go in the dressing room and start trying some of these on."

"I'll come with you. We can keep talking," I said. I didn't want her to make me plead.

"You know what," my mother said. "I'll be okay. Let's just keep shopping and then I'll have a smoke to reward myself when we're done, okay?"

She grabbed the shirts back from me and kept walking. I followed.

"Tell me about her," my mother said.

"Who?" I said.

"That woman your father's seeing."

"Oh," I said. "Jill? She's nice."

"Nice," my mother said softly to herself. "What is nice? What does that mean?"

"I mean, I don't know. She smiles a lot and stuff. She gave me ten bucks to go see a movie once."

"Is she interesting? Is she funny? Is she pretty? Is she smart?"

“I don’t know, she’s...I don’t know,” I said. I liked Jill fine, but I had a feeling she’d be a casualty of whatever was between my parents. They always found their way back, no matter how much scorched earth they left behind.

“She’s got a kid. A little girl,” I said. “She’s religious, I guess. She goes to church.”

“And he’s not drinking?” my mother asked.

I shook my head.

“Well,” my mom said. “That’s good. That’s really good to hear. Do you like this shirt?”

I shrugged and my mother put it into the pile.

“Well, how about you?” she said.

“Me?” I said.

“How’s your summer going? How are your friends?”

“Everything’s fine,” I said. “Everything’s just fine.”

And then out of nowhere she said, “Remember when you were a little boy and I would take you to the zoo when things got bad? We would feed the giraffes?”

I remembered that, although I hadn’t known that it was a sign of things being bad. I remembered the giraffes’ black tongues taking peanuts out of my hands, rough as sandpaper. We weren’t allowed to feed the giraffes but we did it anyway.

“And you were so scared of the tigers,” she said. “You would squeeze my hand so hard and ask me to protect you. You thought I could protect you against a tiger.”

“I remember,” I said, and my mother turned to me and smiled sadly, and I saw that there were tears in her eyes.

“God, look at me,” she said.

I looked away from her while she wiped her face. Boys milled around their mothers with their hands in their pockets. Sometimes I just wanted to be one of them, any one of them. When I next looked at my mother, she was staring at something in the distance.

“Oh Will,” she said. “Look at that coat.”

It was a brown leather bomber jacket. It was cool, the kind of cool that one doesn’t usually find in Clothing Barn. It looked soft and warm, and it felt like the kind of coat that a kid like me with parents like mine wouldn’t wear. But somehow it also felt like it was already mine.

We walked over to it, and I looked at the price tag.

“It’s 79.99, Mom,” I said.

“You need a new fall coat,” my mother said. “You can’t keep wearing that jean jacket forever.”

She took a Medium off the hanger and handed it to me.

“Put it on,” she said.

I put it on. My mother smiled and told me to look into one of the wall mirrors. I looked at myself, and I looked cool. I looked like the kind of guy I wanted to be in high school. I don’t know exactly who that was—some mixture of Holden Caulfield, Ralph Macchio’s character in *The Outsiders*, and this neighborhood guy Neil Johnston who had a lot of girlfriends and could get anybody beer.

“We can’t afford this coat, Mom,” I said.

“You deserve it,” my mom said. “You deserve it.” Then she grabbed my hand and put it in her purse. She put my hand over something cold and hard.

“What are you—”

“You’re going to take this and stick it in the bottom of that pile of shirts,” my mother said. “You take the shirts and the coat into the dressing room and you wear the coat out.”

For a second I thought she had put a gun into my hands, and I was terrified. I tried to put it back into her hands, back into her purse, put it away and make it start all over. But it was too small to be a gun, I realized. It didn’t really calm me down.

“Trust me,” she said, and for some reason I did.

I didn’t know exactly what was happening, but I knew that it was wrong, knew that my father would disapprove, knew that it was dangerous and stupid and could get us both into so much trouble. But I did as she said. My heart was actually hurting my body, it was beating so hard. The guy at the dressing room was going to ask me how many, but when he saw how much clothing I had he just shrugged and let me by. I locked myself in the dressing room and then I realized that my mom had given me one of those things that took the plastic tags off of clothes. It was white and sort of looked like a bottle opener. My mother was like a sparrow who collected shiny things, and her purse had always seemed a little bit magical to me. There was always something in there that you didn’t even know you needed.

There was no going back. I grabbed the plastic tag and I clipped it off with shaking hands. I waited for five, ten minutes during which I thought I was going to have a heart attack. And then I put the coat on like I owned it, put the security tag remover in the pocket, and walked out of the dressing room.

I walked to the entrance and saw my mother standing in front of the cashier’s aisles. She saw me and she winked. She took her Bic and her cigarettes and started smoking. It took almost no time before a bunch of store employees ran over to tell her she couldn’t smoke. She started shouting and swearing at them. Everyone in the store had stopped to stare at her. No

one even glanced at me. As I was walking out, I caught her eye and she smiled at me and I couldn't help it. I started laughing.

All of the blood flowed out of my head and then quickly back in. I felt like I could run a marathon, or eat three helpings at the Chinese Pizza buffet down the road. The world outside of Clothing Barn was bright and loud and fast, the sun beating down and the cars whizzing by. I felt no guilt or panic. I felt holy.

I guessed I should wait for my mother. There was a single bench outside, but somebody was already sitting there, a red-haired girl squeezing a big paper bag between her knees. I looked at her again and realized that I knew her. She was Tony Capelli's sister.

She was a year or two older than me. There were a ton of Capelli siblings. They lived on the same block that my dad and I had just moved onto, in a big yellow house that always seemed to be leaking Italian kids. They went to public school and were all a little bit scrappy and tough. Tony and I played basketball together sometimes. Our new neighborhood was our chance to start over, that was what my dad always said. These people were brand-new. They knew nothing about us, and so they gave us hope.

"Hi," she said to me. She was wearing a strappy purple tank top and jean shorts. I was standing above her and I could see down her shirt easily. There was a lot to look at. But I only took a glance. I didn't want her to think I was a pervert.

"Hey," I said. I was sweating through my new jacket, but I didn't want to take it off. I couldn't remember her name. There were so many of those damn Capellis.

"Why are you wearing that jacket? It's a million degrees out here," she said, standing up. She was a couple of inches taller than me. Her tank top rose up with her, showing the tiniest sliver of her stomach. It was white as white could be, completely untouched by the sun.

It was at that moment that I remembered her name—*Denise*—and for the first time I saw that she was beautiful.

Denise Capelli! It's been so many years, and still sometimes I get her name stuck in my throat. She got pregnant young. I didn't hear much about her after that. I have never loved anything as purely as her in that moment. I'm sorry, Denise Capelli. I wish we had run away together. I wish we had saved each other.

"What's in the bag?" I said, and she crumpled up the top so I couldn't see.

"I asked you first," she said. "Why are you wearing your jacket?"

"All right," I said. "Come closer and I'll tell you."

And she put her ear right up close to my mouth, and I could smell the faintest smell of her body odor, spicy and salty.

"I stole it," I said. It felt great to say. I felt like a hero. And here was the girl at the end of the story.

She backed away a little bit. "That's a lie," she said.

"I swear," I said.

"Oh please," she said. "I bet your mom bought you that. I bet your mom is in there right now, picking out your underwear."

It jarred me, her mentioning my mom like that. Now I started to wonder where my mother was, why she hadn't come outside yet.

"My mom's not in there," I said. "Now show me your bag."

She pulled it open. "It's just a bunch of hard rolls," she said, and that's what it was. There were maybe thirty of them.

"My brother took another shift at the restaurant so now I got to wait for Antonia to give me a ride home," she said. "She works at Clothing Barn. He was like, no I can't give you a

ride but can you take home this bag of rolls? What a pig. God, are you bored? Let's go inside."

"I can't," I said. "I can't go back in there. I stole this."

"Shut up," she said. "Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"Well, I need to go inside. It's too hot out here."

She shrugged and walked inside. I waited on the bench for a torturous minute and then I searched for a place to stow the jacket. I had to settle for rolling it into a ball and stuffing it behind a potted plant outside Payless shoes.

With her red hair it wasn't hard to find her. I knew I shouldn't have gone back in there, but I followed her because I didn't feel like I could do anything else. She was standing by the sneakers, still holding her large paper bag.

"Steal these for me," she said, pointing at a pair of white high-tops.

"What?" I said.

"You're a shoplifter, right? Show me how. Steal them for me."

"I can't," I said. "I can't. I really can't."

"Come on," she said. "Please. I'll owe you."

I wanted her to owe me. I wanted to steal for her, badly. But it was a tag-team act, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to pull it off again. I felt like all of the employees were staring at me, like they were possibly going to arrest me at any second. And where was my mother, I wondered. Where was my mother?

"Oh, whatever," she said and walked away. I followed her.

"Denise," I said, and she turned.

"Fuck off," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I would if I could. But it's too risky now."

"I want to go home," she said. "Everything is just terrible."

"I know," I said. "I know."

She looked at me for a second and then softened. "I didn't really even want those shoes anyway," she said.

"Let's go back outside," I said, but she was looking past me.

"I've got an idea," she said. We were standing pretty close to one of those rotating racks of earrings. In front of us were the lines of people waiting to buy their low-quality, low-priced clothing. Denise reached into her bag and pulled out a hard roll and threw it into the crowd. Someone looked back and we both ducked. She handed me a roll to throw. I got it into some old lady's shoebox. Denise grabbed one of those sheer socks that people wear to try on shoes, stuffed a roll in it, and started whipping it around like a lasso until she launched it into the air. We were laughing so hard we couldn't breathe.

"God, look at that nutcase," Denise said, pointing at a woman standing in front of the line and screaming at the checkout lady. That woman was my mother.

"Ma'am, these have been expired for two years," the saleswoman said. My mother was holding a thick pile of coupons in her hands. There must have been hundreds.

"That can't be," my mother said. "I got that out of a magazine last week."

"Look at the dates, ma'am," the saleslady said.

"It must be a different coupon," my mom said and started frantically searching through her pile. "I'll find it."

"You're holding up the line, ma'am," the saleslady said.

"I'm a paying customer," my mother shouted. "You can't treat me like this!"

I saw her as other people saw her—unstable and inelegant, a woman to avoid eye contact with. I waited for the light to change, for her to turn back into my mother again, but it didn't.

My mother kept searching through her coupons, and it was then that Denise Capelli launched a dinner roll straight at my mother's head. It hit her right above the ear. She looked around, startled, and dropped all of her coupons.

There were a lot of things I didn't understand that day. I believed that my mother would get well. I couldn't see that she would relapse and relapse and relapse until that word didn't even feel like a good way to describe it. But when the roll hit my mother in the face and she dropped all of her coupons on the ground and stooped to pick them up while everyone in line and several salespeople yelled at her to leave, I felt like I understood something about my mother's life that I hadn't before. She was always going to be picking those coupons up off of the ground. One way or another she would be doing it forever.

Years later I was living in Miami with Alicia, and it was decided between us that I needed to try Alcoholics Anonymous. She said it wasn't so unexpected with the way I'd grown up. She was pregnant and she wanted to keep it. She wanted us to be a family. She had just washed her face, so her hair was pulled back. I know it sounds stupid, but she kind of looked like an angel. She was so lovely, so honest and kind and stable. I wanted to want that. I wanted to be the kind of person who could love her.

So I went to a meeting and sat in the corner. In the middle of the meeting the door opened, and for one strange second, I don't know why but I thought it was her, Denise Capelli,

and it filled me with a longing that I hadn't felt in a long time. It was just some guy in the wrong place.

I was hardly the only guy whose parents were drunks. I sat around and listened and it seemed like a bunch of people feeling sorry for themselves, blaming their parents for every crappy decision they'd ever made. I didn't feel that way. All I could think about was how superior I used to feel towards my mother, not just that day but all the time. It kind of made me sick, to tell the truth.

I came home and told Alicia the story about that day, my mom and the stolen coat and Denise Capelli and the bread rolls.

"It's not your fault," she said. "You didn't throw anything at her."

Which I guess was the right thing to say. But she didn't understand the story, and I knew that I couldn't explain it to her. When I think about that day, I am the boy standing by watching. But I am also the saleslady, I am the people in line, I am Denise Capelli throwing the dinner roll with contempt. But most of all, I am her, being hit in the head and dropping all of the coupons. I am my mother more than anyone else.

OTHER PEOPLE COME AND GO

Before Colin and I broke up, I was a girl who lived with her boyfriend, trying to make ends meet. We would go for long drives and play an old country-western compilation tape we'd gotten at a gas station. There were all these characters on that tape: men who drank themselves under the table before breakfast, and women who made sassy comments when their husbands came at them with guns, and men who sold their trucks to buy gas, and prostitutes with hearts of gold and children to feed, and there was something noble about all of them. I felt like we were characters in one of those songs, broke and aimless but with the shine of greatness, people you would like, people you could really root for. Now I was just a girl who worked at Sandwich Hut. I had worked there before but now it seemed somehow different. Like it was for real. Shitty had become the new normal. I smoked a cigarette in my car. There was an art to making your cigarette last until just before you got docked fifteen minutes. As I smoked I stared at the orange balloon letters that spelled out the name of my place of employment. The whimsy of the font pissed me off.

Maurice rapped on my window to indicate that he had weed, which meant that I was going to be docked fifteen minutes. It seemed worth it.

“You’re late,” Jasmine said when we came in. She was painting her nails blood red above the lettuce bin, and she wrinkled her nose to indicate that she knew what we’d been doing.

“Hey, Jasmine finally learned how to tell time,” Maurice said. I giggled involuntarily and she narrowed her eyes. Jasmine had a boyfriend in prison, and she lined her lips black. I tried to stay out of her way.

A glob of nail polish fell off of her brush and into the lettuce. We all stared at it.

“I’m out of here,” Jasmine said.

The first person who came in was our boss, Steve, dressed in his running shorts and swirling around a protein shake. I was in the process of washing out the lettuce bin and filling it with fresh lettuce.

“You’re a real go-getter this morning,” Steve said.

“It seemed a little grungy,” I said.

“Maybe someday you’ll have my job,” Steve said and laughed for far too long. I was pretty baked but it didn’t seem too funny to me.

“Hey Tracie,” Steve said, “feel my bicep.”

“I’m washing the lettuce bin,” I said. “Have Maurice feel your bicep.”

I could be sort of rude to Steve because he’d once propositioned me in a Chili’s, just outside the ladies’ restroom. I felt like that gave me some job security.

“I’d crush it,” Maurice said. Maurice weighed about 300 pounds and had a big scraggly beard and tattoos all over his arms and played in a scream-core band. I always said I’d try to make it to his gigs, but I never did.

“I doubt that,” Steve said. “It’s hard as a rock. What are you doing tonight, Tracie? You got a hot date with your boyfriend?”

“Do you want a sandwich?” I said.

“From here? You must be joking,” Steve said.

“They broke up,” Maurice said. He was unwrapping cheese slices from their plastic containers.

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Why’d you break up? Because you’re madly in love with me?”

“He slept with somebody else. A cocktail waitress from Lenny’s Lodge,” Maurice said.

“Jesus!” I said.

“The redheaded one?” Steve said and put his hands out to indicate big breasts.

Maurice nodded.

Steve laughed. “Who could blame him? Trace, you know, guys make mistakes.”

“Don’t call me Trace,” I said. “And stop talking about my personal life.”

“Listen, Tracie, if you need anything, you just let me know,” Steve said. “I’ll take you out and get you drunk.”

I smiled without teeth and said, “How’s your wife?”

“I’d better get going,” Steve said. “Remember we’re not serving seafood salad.”

We stared at him blankly. “Don’t you guys read the bulletin board?” Steve said. “It’s a national Sandwich Hut recall. Some disease.”

We nodded.

“Oh and Tracie,” Steve said, “Kenny can’t come in. I need you to stay with Maurice all day.”

“I’m only supposed to be here until 2.”

“Well,” Steve said, “I need you to stay until we close. It’s non-negotiable.”

“I can’t do that,” I said. “You make me pull these double shifts for Kenny all the time so he can rearrange the schedule around his stupid job at Radioshack. Maybe I have a life too.”

“Nice try,” Steve said. “I’m sure you’d love to sit around and eat ice cream and cry about your boyfriend, but I need you to do your job.”

I wanted to articulate something, but all I could say was, “This place is such bullshit!”

“Are you quitting?” he said. “If you’re quitting, just say the word.”

I crossed my arms. My body felt hot and tight all over.

“Okay, then,” Steve said. “Go throw away that seafood salad.”

As he walked out, the bell on the door dinged. I uncrossed my arms and breathed out.

“Oh my GOD,” I shouted. “I’m going to commit serious violence.”

“Such a dick,” Maurice agreed.

“You’re no help,” I said. “I don’t care if everyone gets poisoned and dies.” But I took the seafood salad to the dumpster anyway. It was gelatinous and slimy and I often pretended that I was scooping people’s brains out when I put it into a sandwich. I wasn’t surprised that it was infested with disease. Everything else was around here.

No one came in for the next hour and a half. There had been some rumors that this location might close soon. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. I sliced bread and imagined slicing Steve’s Achilles tendons. Maurice made little “ham-people” with olives for eyes and staged elaborate telenovela-type plays. They were held together by toothpicks and often crumbled into each other when he posed them for sex scenes.

The bell dinged and Ears came in. It wasn’t the greatest nickname but it fit. He had huge ears on a tiny little head and a shrimpy body and he always wore an ugly gold

windbreaker and he was just sort of *off* in a way that always made us laugh. But I wasn't in the mood for Ears today.

"Hey, man," Maurice said. We didn't know Ears's real name.

"A small seafood salad, please," he said. "With green olives."

"Sure," Maurice said. "Oh wait. Hey. We don't have that anymore. They made us get rid of it because of some health code thing."

Ears pinched the bridge of his nose. "But that's the one I want."

"How about turkey, buddy?" Maurice said. "We have this new avocado spread. People seem to like it."

"You don't understand," Ears said. He was looking straight at me. "You don't understand what kind of day I've had."

"Sorry," I muttered. "Don't take it out on us. We threw it in the dumpster."

"I'll take the risk," Ears said. "Please go get it."

"Umm," Maurice said.

"Are you crazy?" I said. "We can't do that."

"You don't understand," Ears said. "All day long I've been thinking about this sandwich. I need it."

"Sorry, man," Maurice said, but Ears was still staring at me.

"I'm not going to crawl around on my hands and knees in the trash just so you can get sick and sue us. If you've really been thinking about a sandwich all day, I think that's really fucking sad," I said.

"Tracie," Maurice said.

Ears put his face in his hands and took a few deep breaths, and then he stared at me, and then the door dinged as he left.

“You probably shouldn’t talk to customers like that,” Maurice said. “Even if it is Ears.”

“Or what,” I said. “I won’t make Employee of the Month?”

“He’s one of our regular customers. And you know, this location isn’t doing so well.”

“What is with you?” I said. “Sucking up to Steve and stuff. Since when do you care about any of that?”

Maurice looked down at the green peppers. I noticed that he’d combed his beard today.

“Lila’s having a baby, I guess,” he said. He looked stricken.

“Congratulations?” I said.

“She’s thrilled and her family is thrilled and no one wants to talk about all of the stuff that seems really obvious to me,” he said. “So yeah, I guess I am trying to do a little bit better at this job. Because if this location closes, or if Steve fires me, I’m completely fucked.”

“Oh,” I said. “Why did you let me talk so much about Colin?”

Maurice shrugged. “It’s like a babbling brook or something. I sort of get into the rhythm and find it soothing.”

“Shut up,” I said.

“No, I just didn’t want to say anything. Every time I talk about it I start to sweat all over. Do you know how many things can kill a baby?”

I started wiping down the already-clean counter.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad,” I said. “You’re…responsible.”

“She says she can’t afford an abortion, but that if we have a baby then her parents will let us move in. Have you ever heard something so stupid in your whole life? I mean, am I going to spend my entire life living in her parents’ attic and working in the Sandwich Hut?”

“Um,” I said. “Maybe the baby will be really cute, and you’ll love it.”

“It’s possible,” he conceded.

Several hours passed. We listened to the rap station really loud. A few people came in and we made their tunas and turkey BLTs. I noticed that my buzz was over when Colin walked in. The bell dinged.

“Hey,” he said. He didn’t approach the counter but stood in the doorway with his hands in his pockets. He was wearing his Phillies jersey and his hair was greasy.

“What do you want?” I said. I felt exhausted looking at him.

He looked at the ground.

“This is a business,” I said. “You need to order something.”

“Jesus,” Colin said, walking up to the counter. “Can we talk or something?”

“I’m at work,” I said.

“So? You guys never have any customers,” Colin said.

“Hey man,” Maurice said, “frozen yogurt is just a fad.” Colin worked at the self-serve frozen yogurt place in the mall, where he was paid to do nothing except get hit on by giggling middle school girls.

“I really don’t care to hear what you have to say,” I said.

Colin crossed his arms. “Okay, can I get a roast beef sandwich?”

“You always say the sandwiches here taste like hot garbage,” I said.

“I’m kind of hungry,” he said and then squinted at the menu behind me. “And I like the spicy horseradish sauce.”

“Fine, fine, that’s fucking fine,” I said and put on gloves to start slicing ciabatta bread. I’d thought my life was degrading before that moment, but I was just wrong. Maurice stood against the wall and took deep breaths. He hated conflict of any kind.

“I wanted wheat bread,” Colin said. “And pepperjack.”

“That’s too bad,” I said. “I guess you’re just going to get whatever I make.”

Colin thought being sensitive was just looking someone in the eye and talking in a quiet voice.

“I made a mistake,” he said. “And I don’t know how many times I can apologize for that. But you got your little revenge. You slept with that guy from the Golden Roost.”

I started. “How do you even know about that?” I said. It was true that I had taken up residence with a bartender, that I had woken up in the apartment he shared with six other bartenders and stared at the big Bob Marley poster on his wall as I got ready. But I was homeless and had run out of pride.

He shrugged.

“I’ve started coming to some new conclusions,” Colin said. “There’s a really fascinating book I could loan you. Monogamy doesn’t work. It’s just not in our blood. But we had a really good thing, you and I. I think we’re the same.”

“We’re not the same,” I said quietly, but I didn’t quite believe it. There was something comforting about Colin, the way that he had an explanation for everything. Sometimes I needed that.

“We could start over, and have the kind of adult relationship where we understand that sometimes these kinds of things happen, and other people come and go,” he said.

The buzzer went off on the sandwich oven and the sound snapped me out of it. I reached in and grabbed the sandwich, piping-hot, from the metal contraption, and threw it at his head. He ducked and it landed on the floor beside him, making a satisfying splattering sound.

“Holy shit!” Maurice said.

“You are a FUCKING LUNATIC,” Colin shouted.

“Me?” I said. “Me? I dropped out of college because of you—”

“Junior college,” Colin muttered.

“And I moved to this hellhole town because of you and I gave you money to start your gourmet popcorn business and you come to my job and try to use EVOLUTION to explain the fact that you are an ASSHOLE and somehow I’m a LUNATIC just because I DON’T WANT YOU TO FUCK OTHER PEOPLE?”

Colin put his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath.

“I love you,” Colin said.

“That’s meaningless,” I said.

“You’re fucking crazy. You wanted to do all of that stuff,” he said. “Nobody forced you.”

“You just keep taking and taking shit from me, and I don’t have anything left to give you,” I said softly. I closed my eyes until I heard the bell ding to signal that he’d left.

“Holy-” Maurice started to say.

“Please don’t say anything,” I said. “Please don’t say anything at all.”

An hour passed. I stirred the cheese sauce, which had started to curdle.

“You look like one of those ladies from the Dust Bowl,” Maurice said.

“Huh?” I said. I stuck a finger in the cheese sauce and licked it and then immediately regretted it. It tasted like hot powder.

“Didn’t you pass the eighth grade? The Dust Bowl was like, all these poor people got covered in dust...”

“Yeah, I know what the Dust Bowl is. I just don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. You know, if Kenny was coming in I’d be going home right about now.”

“You look sad,” Maurice said finally. He was eating the banana peppers.

I looked up at him. “Yeah,” I said.

“Do you want to talk about it? About how you tried to murder someone with a sandwich?”

“Not really,” I said.

“Okay,” Maurice said. “Well, I’ve always thought that guy was an asshole.”

“Maybe we’re all assholes,” I said. I kept hearing his words over and over in my head: *I think we’re the same*. He hadn’t even meant it to hurt my feelings.

Another hour passed reluctantly. Time felt thick and curdled.

“Oh my God,” I said. “They’ve played that song three times in the last hour. I feel like I’m becoming less and less intelligent every day I spend at this job. How has it gotten to the point where I actually want customers to come in? That’s sick. That’s how badly I want something to happen.”

“Did you have a good dad?” Maurice said.

I looked at him. He was drinking a pop and staring out the window. “What?” I said. It took me a minute to figure out what he’d said.

“I don’t know. Do I seem like someone who had a good dad?”

“Oh,” he said.

“It’s not some big sob story,” I said. “He just was around for a while, and then one day he just wasn’t around. I think maybe he did us all a favor.”

“Oh.”

“Just because I didn’t have a good dad, doesn’t mean you’re not going to be a good dad.”

“Do you want to smoke the rest of that weed and throw cheese slices at the ceiling to see if they’ll stick?”

“Yes,” I said. “Very much so.”

The best cheese for sticking was American, and we didn’t want to know why that was. When Ears came back, we barely noticed him. I had reached a kind of high where nothing made any sense and yet everything made a certain kind of sense. If God and all His Angels had come into the Sandwich Hut on a big white cloud bathed in celestial light and asked for a dozen ham and cheese sandwiches with salt-and-vinegar chips, I wouldn’t have batted an eye.

“Hello,” Ears said, and then he pulled out the gun.

Maurice said something quietly that sounded like “cock” but might have been “fuck,” and when I turned to look at him he’d peed his pants. It was a lot of pee and it was dripping onto the floor. My brain couldn’t make anything make sense. I just kept thinking about how people never really say “hello,” but Ears had just said that, and I knew I wasn’t supposed to be focusing on that. I was supposed to be focusing on the gun. I felt like I’d missed something, some casual link that would tell me why this was happening.

“Don’t look at him,” Ears said.

Maurice put his hands up. I slowly turned away from him.

“Okay now,” Ears said. “Now you’re looking at me. Now you’re listening to me.”

I could hear the muffled static of the radio; the station came and went, but right now it felt like a fairly ominous sound. The stench of urine was filling the room. Ears pointed the gun at me. All I could think was: I’m not even supposed to be here.

“Tracie,” Ears said.

I reminded myself that I was wearing a nametag, that he didn't really know my name. He didn't really know anything about me. Maurice took a step backwards and I could hear the squishing of his shoes in pee.

"I come in here every day," he said. "I pay good money. I expect to be treated a certain way. And you're always laughing at your stupid jokes and you're never even looking at me. But now you have to. You have to look at me."

"Why are you doing this," I said quietly, and my voice cracked. Maurice looked at me. It was the first time one of us had spoken.

"Cash," Maurice said. "The cash register."

"No," Ears said. "That's not what I want."

"Oh God," Maurice said. "Oh God."

"I'm sorry, okay!" I said to Ears. "I'm fucking sorry."

He didn't move. I thought about our security camera, which I knew had probably been broken for years. My cellphone was in the back. I couldn't think.

"You want me to make you a sandwich?" I said. "Is that what you want?"

Ears just stared at me. I felt more powerful as long as I kept talking. He seemed to think about it.

"This place is a Zionist conspiracy," he said. "You think I don't know that?"

"Seafood salad, right? I'll get it out of the trash?" I said.

"No," he said. "No, you can't go anywhere. Because you'll just run away."

"Please," I said. "It's me you're mad at. Right? It's me. It's me you want to kill. You should let him go. He's going to have a baby."

"No," Maurice said. "No one's leaving. No one's getting killed."

"Please," I said. "Just let him go. I don't even mind."

And I realized, with some surprise, that I was lying. As I listened to my heartbeat in my ears I realized: I didn't want to die, not at all. I turned that thought over and over in my mind and it still came up true.

"No," Maurice said. "No one's going anywhere."

I went for broke.

"You said you're having a bad day," I said, and I almost called him Ears. "I am too. I'm having a bad month, actually. You can talk about it. I'll listen. You can tell me about the destruction of Israel, or whatever--"

I felt like maybe I was getting through, although it was probably just the look of a totally deranged person that he gave me in that moment. It was then that a slice of American cheese fell from the ceiling. It fluttered down like a snowflake. A firework went off in my brain and I screamed. The gun went off and for a second I really thought I'd been shot. That was how much I felt the sound of it in my body. But then Maurice made a sound I'd never heard before out of any living thing, and when I turned Ears was gone.

Maurice looked tiny as they loaded him onto the stretcher and into the back of the ambulance. I never thought he could look small. I put my hand up as the doors closed on him.

The paramedics kept saying that he was going to be okay. He'd just been shot in the arm. They wouldn't let me ride along in the ambulance because I wasn't a blood relative. But his blood is all over me, I wanted to say. Instead I stayed behind and talked to the cops. They kept asking me to describe the shooter, to describe what had happened and I just couldn't seem to say anything that made any sense.

"It was just Ears," I kept saying. "It wasn't a shooter."

I stood in the parking lot of Sandwich Hut and smoked a cigarette. A lot of people were standing around gawking at the scene and at me. I was covered in blood and I felt different from them.

“Tracie,” someone said, and I turned and it was my manager Steve.

“Oh God, Tracie, are you okay?” he said.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Nothing happened to me. I’m fine.”

“Oh good. I heard that Maurice is going to be all right. Do you need a ride to the hospital?”

“No,” I said.

“Tracie, this might not be the right time to talk about it, but I think you’re due for a raise,” Steve said.

“Why,” I said. “You always say I’m your worst employee.”

“I’ve never said that,” Steve said. “I just...I want to make sure that you feel appreciated by the Sandwich Hut. Because we do. Appreciate you. And there could be a bonus in store at the end of the year. More flexible hours.”

“I’m not going to sue you,” I said. “You should fix that fucking security camera, though.”

“I’m on it,” he said.

I stamped out my cigarette on the street and walked to my car. I drove to the hospital and sat in the parking lot for a long time. I thought about dealing with Maurice’s family and his crazy pregnant girlfriend. I didn’t think I could talk to another person who hadn’t been there.

I pulled out of the parking lot. I thought I’d come back in an hour, but I got on the interstate and just kept driving, further and further out of town until I stopped recognizing

things. I had about a half tank of gas, and that could take me far enough. Wasn't this something that women did in country songs, too—driving until they found a brand new life?

BRAVING VAST DISTANCES

When Sam and his mother went to pick Sam's older brother Charlie up from the bus station, there was a girl with him. They were holding hands like children crossing the street.

"Of course there's a girl," his mother muttered. "There's always a girl."

In the past few years his mother had gotten so frail and put-upon. Sam had added to her troubles because he hadn't graduated high school in May like he was supposed to. The Florida Board of Education had cut him a deal: retake five subjects in summer school and he could get his diploma in August. He still didn't understand how he'd failed five subjects. The woman in the guidance office had said, "It's not uncommon for people to act out in these kinds of situations," but Sam's face had turned hard and he hadn't said anything.

Charlie hadn't seen them yet and for some reason his mother was just sitting in the car, not honking or getting out. His mother was right. There were always girls around Charlie. He wasn't particularly good-looking but he was what people called "fun." He was always the loudest and the drunkest and the one getting himself in and out of the most spectacular scrapes.

"Which one's your brother?" people always said to Sam. "Oh, him. That guy."

There was a certain kind of girl who liked *that guy*, a womanly, insecure and beautiful type who wanted somebody solid to stand next to. Sam looked out the window at Charlie and

the girl. The sun was setting in their eyes and they were squinting. Sam could see Charlie and the girl, but they couldn't see him. The girl was tall and muscular, with short hair and thick glasses. She didn't look like one of Charlie's girlfriends.

Charlie looked fatter, and his hair was down to his shoulders, and he was wearing glasses too, but they must have been fake. Charlie had perfect vision. His mother finally honked, and they both started, and then grabbed their suitcases and ran into the car.

Charlie reached into the front seat and gave them both strained hugs. "Well," Sam's mother said as he hugged her.

"This is Astrid," Charlie said. "I told her she could stay with us for a little while."

Sam's mother gave Sam a deeply weary look but said, "Of course."

Sam had never ridden shotgun while his brother was in the car. As they drove home, he surreptitiously looked back at Charlie and the girl, who were draped over each other kissing in the back seat. Sometimes their glasses would clack together. They looked like a pair of lesbians. Sam glanced at his mother and she was looking into the rearview mirror, too. She cleared her throat and said, "You look good, Charlie."

"Thanks," Charlie said.

"We got a Chik-Fil-A in town, while you were gone," his mother said. "I think they're pretty good."

"I thought you weren't supposed to date. In rehab," Sam said.

"Sam," his mother said softly. She didn't like the "r" word.

"Date," Charlie said and he started laughing. The girl, Astrid, started laughing too. They were draped all over each other and their laughs seemed to harmonize, seemed to come from one body. Sam didn't see what was so hilarious. He didn't say anything for the rest of the car ride.

Sam went to work that night. It was a Sunday and he had the graveyard shift. Only the truly desperate took the graveyard shift at the Town Pump. Laura was desperate for the money, and Sam was desperate to be around Laura.

“How do you do it?” she said. “How do you go to school after one of these shifts?”

“It’s not real school,” Sam said. “It’s just summer school.”

In truth he never really felt tired the three days a week he would bike home at five a.m., watch the news, and maybe take a shower before school. The six hours he spent next to Laura felt like ten espresso shots. He also drank a lot of actual coffee during his shift. He didn’t really like the taste, but it made him feel older.

If nobody came in for a few hours, he started to feel like maybe when he went outside, everything would be destroyed and he and Laura would be the only people left on Earth. They could survive a long time on the food and liquor here. There was something about a shift from eleven to five that could really distort your perception of reality. He could never remember what day of the week it was, or what time of year.

Laura was not just beautiful but possibly the most beautiful person in the world. Her beauty was just a fact, and it had always existed. When she was eleven her face had been chosen for a bunch of national billboard ads for grape juice. Laura spoke about it with bitterness; most of the money had been conned away somehow.

She was so beautiful that it made Sam sick, and sort of ashamed of himself. He wanted to believe that his love was a pure thing, that he would love her if she had acid splashed on her face or gained three hundred pounds. She’d had all sorts of trouble, with ex-boyfriends and once she’d told Sam a horrible story about her uncle at a family reunion. Drunk guys were always harassing her in the middle of the night, and Sam hated how those creeps wanted the

same thing he did. He wanted to be different: he wanted to see into her soul, he wanted to believe that her face and body were the least beautiful parts of her. Sometimes she stood close enough for him to smell her. She didn't wear perfume or anything. She just smelled like herself. She had freckles but only from very very close.

"Do you want a little bit of Irish in your coffee?" she asked him. This was another nice thing about working late; there was little to no supervision. She poured whiskey from a water bottle liberally into his Styrofoam cup.

"I have this plan not to do any drugs this whole month," she said, "but I feel like it's just making me drink more."

"Did I tell you that my brother came back from rehab today?" Sam said.

"Seriously?"

"I guess he's all clean now."

"Well," she said, "I guess that's sort of inspirational. I have to have a negative drug test if I want to get custody back."

She had a one-and-a-half year old that child welfare had taken away and placed with her estranged parents. She was only a couple years older than Sam but she had really been through a lot of shit. The baby had eaten some acid, which was unfortunate but it had just been an accident.

"Have you ever been to Oregon?" she asked him.

"I've never even left Florida," he said.

"My aunt lives in Oregon, in this little town right on the ocean, and everything is clean there, and everybody is so wholesome and friendly. There's a community garden to grow your own fruits and vegetables, for fuck's sake. When I get Tyler back, that's where I'm going to go," she said.

“Can I come?” he said, hoping his voice didn’t betray how much the answer meant to him.

“You’ve got school, kiddo,” she said. “Education. Number one priority.”

“I’m graduating at the end of the summer,” he said. “We can meet up in Oregon.”

“Okay,” she said. “We’ll meet on the beach. Hey, did you go to any parties this weekend?”

“No,” Sam said. She asked him this every Sunday night.

“You’re smart,” she said. “I wish I hadn’t.”

“You always say that. Why don’t you just not go?”

“I know, I know,” she said. “It’s just, what else is there to do?”

“*We* could hang out,” Sam said, and his voice sounded strange.

“And do what?”

“I don’t know. Watch a movie. Eat food, or something.”

“Hmmm,” she said. “I can’t picture it. You and me, baking cookies and watching *The Sound of Music*.”

“Well, not when you make it sound all faggy like that. We could go to the beach.”

“Don’t say ‘faggy.’ You know what I love to do? Jigsaw puzzles. Like 1000 pieces. The more pieces the better.”

“That sounds like some wholesome fun,” he said.

“Shut up. I really do think they’re fun, and nobody will ever do one with me. All of my friends just want to get loaded.”

“We have some puzzles in our basement,” he said. “You should come over. Then you won’t be tempted to do something that will fuck up your drug test.”

“It’s weird that we’ve never hung out before,” she said. “I feel like I can tell you stuff that I can’t tell anyone. Do you think it’s just because it’s so late at night?”

He looked at her and then found he couldn’t really look at her. He wished sometimes that she would get a little less beautiful.

“Come over on Friday,” he said. “I’ll be around.”

His shift ended and it was Monday morning and nearly time for the violent misery of summer school. It was the third time he’d been assigned *The Great Gatsby*, and he’d still never made it past page 15, but he knew enough about the major themes to answer the essay questions. After it was over he biked down to the beach. The beaches in town were filthy and full of drug users, but they were the only beaches that he had. He ground his shoes into the grey sand and wondered what the ocean looked like in Oregon.

At the beginning of summer the guys he’d run around with in high school had called him to hang out a few times. Eventually they’d stopped calling.

When he got home, his mother was already asleep. He ate cold spaghetti and then went up to his room, which was next to his brother’s, and listened to Charlie and Astrid having sex. It sounded like porn.

There’d been one girl before, a freshman. Her name was Kayleigh and she was way too skinny and liked to jam pens into her arms, and they’d had sex in the back of Mike Fulmore’s car while everyone else was at a party. She’d been wearing a black hoodie and she wouldn’t let him kiss her, but then it turned out that she wanted him to be her boyfriend or something, or that’s what people said. School ended, and Mike went off to Iraq, and he sometimes thought about calling her but he never did.

Astrid came out of his brother’s room, wearing only a T-shirt and underpants.

“Oh, hi, Sam,” she said, standing in his doorway. “I can’t really see you. I don’t have my glasses.”

“Hi,” he said. He could see underneath her shirt.

“I’m bored,” she said. “Do you want to go get some ice cream?”

He had homework, but he found himself getting up and saying, “Okay. But you can’t wear that.”

It was miserably hot as they walked to the gas station, and it felt like a strain to even speak. Sam decided to go to the 7-11 instead of the Town Pump, in case he saw someone he knew. Astrid bought bubblegum-flavored ice cream, which was the most disgusting flavor Sam could think of, and she started to eat it on the walk home, humming with happiness. Sam took a couple of bites to be nice.

“So,” she said. “This town kinda sucks, huh?”

“I guess,” he said. “I’ve never lived anywhere else.”

“I’ve lived everywhere,” she said. “And this has to be the worst.”

“Have you ever lived in Oregon?” he asked.

“No,” she said, as if he was stupid for even asking.

“I think I’m going to move out there when I graduate,” he said. He was surprised at how easy it was to say.

“That’s good, Sam. Get the fuck out of here. I mean, why wait until you graduate? Look at me. I have a *college diploma*,” she said. “It doesn’t mean anything. The important thing is not to get stuck in any one place. My whole family lives in North Dakota. They don’t understand why anyone would want to leave.”

“North Dakota,” Sam said. It seemed like a fictional place. Astrid took another long lick of her ice cream off of the purple plastic spoon she’d gotten at the gas station.

“Don’t you want any more of this?” she asked and Sam shook his head.

“Sometimes I actually miss it. North Dakota,” she said. “It’s beautiful, in a really bleak way. This place feels a lot less real.”

Sam nodded.

“You’re really easy to talk to, you know. Are you a Taurus?”

“What? Oh. Aquarius,” he said.

“Oh, obviously. That was my second guess. You’re really brave for wanting to get out of here. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing here.”

“Aren’t you here because of Charlie?”

“I know he’s your brother and all, but Charlie and I don’t actually get along that well. He’s a huge asshole,” she said.

“No he’s not,” Sam said automatically. Charlie *was* an asshole, sometimes. But he was manic-depressive, so it wasn’t really his fault. “You guys were holding hands yesterday. You were having *sex* twenty minutes ago.”

“When you get older,” she said, “you’ll understand how complicated relationships can be.” It really pissed him off that she said that in that patronizing tone. Everyone treated him like he didn’t have any life experience just because he didn’t get fucked up all the time. He understood plenty. They were the babies, the ones who needed to distort reality just to get through the day.

“I hate bubblegum ice cream,” he said and threw his spoon into a passing dumpster.

“Suit yourself,” she said. She took another bite and smiled. Her teeth were sharper than Sam would have liked. He didn’t sleep at all that night.

A few nights later Astrid asked if he wanted to come to the movies with her and Charlie. Sam had heard them fighting loudly the night before, so maybe he was being invited as a buffer. He had a bunch of bullshit worksheets to fill out for school the next day, but he'd been doing a pretty good job all summer, and all he needed was to pass.

They went to see one of those car-chase movies with explosions and people getting decapitated. Astrid sat between Sam and Charlie and put her head on Sam's shoulder a few times. Maybe to make Charlie jealous, although he didn't seem to care. As they walked out of the theater, Astrid reached for Sam's hand. Charlie looked back at them and smirked. Sam let go.

They got into the car, Astrid in the passenger seat and Sam in the back.

"Hey Sam," Charlie said as they pulled onto the freeway. "You like Astrid? Give me 50 dollars and I'll let her blow you."

"What is *wrong* with you?" she screamed. "Let me out of this fucking car. Let me the fuck out right now."

"Fine by me." Charlie pulled over, Astrid got out, and he hit the gas before she could even close the door. Sam turned around and watched Astrid get smaller and smaller.

"That's a really long walk," Sam said. "Don't be a dick."

"Some people leave you with no choice," Charlie said. "That girl is a disease."

"I thought you guys liked each other," Sam said. It sounded pretty dopey. Charlie popped three pieces of cinnamon gum into his mouth and chewed maniacally.

"No, Sam. We do not like each other. She needed a place to stay, she has serious legal problems, I said okay, and now all of a sudden I'm the bad guy? Fuck that. Last night she put my guitar in the bathtub and peed on it."

“Maybe she just has problems,” Sam said. “Maybe she just needs somebody to be nice to her.”

“Well, I have too many problems of my own to be that person,” Charlie said. From the backseat Sam tried to make eye contact with his brother through the rearview mirror, but Charlie kept his eyes on the road.

“I fucking hate everything,” Charlie said, chomping hard. The gum matched his tongue.

“Don’t say that,” Sam said.

“Don’t say that,” Charlie repeated in a whiny voice. “Why the fuck shouldn’t I say that? That’s how I fucking feel.”

“Hey, you know what we should do? Let’s go camping or something. You know that place up north that dad used to take us to? Let’s just get out of here for a few nights.”

Charlie took a deep breath. “No, Sam. We’re not going to do that. You can’t fix things just by being somewhere different.”

Sam looked backward one more time, which was stupid. He’d told himself not to, and of course she was much too far away to see by now.

The next day all of Astrid’s stuff was gone and Sam found a note on his pillow that said, “I’m going to be in the area for a while. You’re a cool kid, call me if you need anything—A.” She’d written her phone number. Her handwriting was surprisingly girly. Sam put the note in his pocket and headed for school.

Sometimes Sam’s life felt like a fever dream of school and work and school and he hardly ever slept and drank a crazy amount of coffee and nothing ever seemed to change and he’d close his eyes for a second and then he’d be somewhere different. That day at summer school he

made things different by actually raising his hand and answering a few questions. It wasn't like Mrs. DiPerna wanted to be here any more than he did. Why not throw her a bone.

When he came home his mother was sitting at the kitchen table sobbing, her head in her hands. Sam tried to touch her and she pushed him away. He knew before he went down into the basement that Charlie would be high but he went down there anyway. Charlie's head was lolling around in a way that made Sam think it was probably Dilaudid.

"What are you doing to yourself?" Sam shouted. "Do you know how much it cost mom to send you away? You're just throwing everything away."

"Who fucking needs you," Charlie muttered.

"You're making mom cry," Sam said. Charlie's eyes rolled back into his head. Sam had nothing left to say. He felt a strange sort of apathetic peace. He didn't want to be like his mother anymore, weeping about someone who wasn't conscious to understand it. He didn't care enough to scream at Charlie. It probably made him a terrible person, to give up on his own brother like that.

"Things are kind of fucked up at my house right now," he told Laura that night at work. "I don't think you should come over tomorrow night. Or tonight, I guess? I never know what to call it." Her hair was in braids that were twisted around her head. She looked so young and innocent and he never wanted her to step foot in his house.

"Oh," she said. "Oh yeah. The puzzles."

"Sorry," he said. "I wanted to help keep you off drugs. Like your own personal D.A.R.E."

"It's okay. I forgot that marijuana plays a large role in how much I like jigsaw puzzles," she said. "Did you ever notice how that D.A.R.E. lion looks like the biggest stoner ever? He practically has dreadlocks."

They sold cigarettes and whiskey to an older man who stared at Laura.

“If your house is a bummer, you should come to Keller’s bonfire tonight. You know Keller, right?” she said.

“I’m not a huge fan,” Sam said.

“Yeah, who is,” she said. “But it’s going to be so much fun.”

Sam wondered if she had ever planned on coming to his house at all.

“You know what fun is, right? You’ve heard of it?” she said.

“Ha ha,” Sam said.

“Here, write your address on my hand. I can get Josh to pick you up.”

Partying with Keller Carson and Josh Randall was not Sam’s idea of fun. They were loud obnoxious shitheads. They’d partied with Charlie a few times, before Charlie became too unfortunate. One time they’d left him asleep on a park bench twenty miles outside of town.

Still he reached for the pen Laura held out and wrote his address on her hand. He had to put his hand under hers in order to write it. Her hand felt cool and soft, and a little bit of sweat formed between their hands as Sam pushed the pen into her hand. There was something really beautiful about it, her brown freckled hand and his blue-inked writing. She would be walking around all day with his address on her body.

She pulled her hand away. As the sun came up and they were packing up to leave, Sam said, “I’ll *maybe* come.”

“We’ll pick you up at eleven or so. And Sam?” she said as he started to leave. “You should get some sleep. You look terrible.”

Sam couldn’t explain to her that there was something fundamentally good about sleeplessness, that it made the world feel lighter and softer and more focused. It felt good to

want one thing and know what it was and to hold on to that knowing. There was a certain power in keeping yourself awake.

After summer school Sam watched TV in the basement and waited for eleven to come around. Everything on TV was so stupid and so loud. Had TV always been this loud? He pressed mute and just watched the images. Charlie had disappeared last night and his mother was calling hospitals upstairs. He closed his eyes for a second, and then his mother was shaking him awake.

“There’s a truckload of kids outside,” she said, looking deeply aggrieved. As he looked up at her face, he realized how angry she made him.

Laura waved at him from the front seat of Josh Randall’s truck. He got into the back. There was a girl sitting on the other side, a girl Sam had seen around a few times. Her hair was long and straight and white-blond. Her eyes were deeply lined with black makeup.

“Guys, this is Sam,” Laura said. Josh Randall and the blond girl both seemed to be looking at him skeptically.

“He’s really funny,” Laura added.

Josh Randall snorted and pulled out of Sam’s driveway. The girl sitting next to Sam handed him a flask and he took a big swig. Sam didn’t usually drink that much or do drugs. He just didn’t like that feeling of being out of control. But this night felt like it contained the possibility of being different than any other night.

“You and Simone are the same age,” Laura said, turning around to face the back seat. “She just turned eighteen.”

Sam was hoping that his age was one of those things Laura kept forgetting, because he was so mature. He turned to Simone and said, “Happy birthday?” and she made a face. Josh Randall laughed really hard at this for some reason.

“You were right,” he said. “This guy *is* really funny.”

Sam didn’t talk for the rest of the ride but kept drinking heavily from the flask. He hadn’t had dinner. Josh and Laura talked in the front, but there was loud music playing and he could only hear scattered phrases.

“Look,” Laura said, “the fire.”

They were still a few miles away but they could start to make out the bonfire against the darkness, a tiny orange coin that kept surging upward. Sam knew rationally that bonfires were no big deal, but it freaked him out to imagine drunk people trying to control it. Whenever he looked at the fire he kept imagining everything burning to the ground.

They parked the car on the beach and stumbled out into the huge crowd. Sam hated people like this, who got fucked up until they screamed and fell on top of each other every single night. He wondered why he was here.

“Are you okay,” someone said, and he realized that it was Simone, and that they were standing next to the car, and Laura and Josh were long gone into the crowd.

“I think I’m drunk,” Sam heard himself saying.

“Let’s get into the keg line,” Simone said. “You need to get drunk enough to stop worrying whether you’re drunk or not.”

When they finally got to the front of the keg line, Sam downed his beer in a few quick gulps. Simone stood next to him and just stared into our beer cup. She was the kind of tall skinny girl who never looked comfortable.

“I think it’s only right to tell you that I have a yeast infection,” she said.

“What?” Sam said.

“In case you were expecting something,” she said.

“I promise you, I wasn’t expecting anything,” he said. “Where’s Laura?”

Simone shrugged. He left her standing there by the keg line, staring into her cup. He just kept pushing and pushing through the crowd of sweaty people and it seemed like he would never find her, but then he did. When he saw a glimpse of Laura's freckly arm he felt invincible.

"Hey," he said, interrupting whoever was talking to her. "Hey Laura."

She looked at him. Her eyes were glassy. Everyone seemed to be looking at her.

"Hi Sam," she said. "This is Sam, guys."

"I'm really funny," Sam said.

The people around her made sounds like they were saying hello.

"We're going to go to Keller's room and do mushrooms," Laura said. "Do you want to?"

"We don't have that many," some guy said. He had a tattoo on his neck.

"Actually," Sam said, "can I talk to you?"

"Sure," she said.

"No, like, over there."

"Ooooh," the tattooed guy said.

"Shut up," Laura said. She started walking in Sam's direction. They sort of careened into each other due to intoxication and the uneven sand. It took a while to find a spot without people. Laura looked out at the water.

"I don't care what anyone says. I think this beach is beautiful."

"I thought you weren't doing drugs anymore," Sam said.

Laura laughed.

"Don't you want to get your baby back?" he said.

She stared at him. He couldn't look at her. "You don't know anything about that," she said.

He didn't say anything.

"This is why you wanted to drag me out here?" she said. "What are you, my fucking dad?"

He stared at his feet. His shoes were wrong.

"You're better than this," he said.

"I promise you," she said. "I'm not."

He looked at her and felt like he might die, her face was so lovely. "Why did you invite me here?" he said.

"It's a party, Sam."

"Sometimes it seems like you're really serious about things and then some things you don't mean at all, and it's really hard to keep track," he said.

"I'm not in the right frame or whatever to be having this conversation," she said.

"Laura."

"I gotta go back," she said.

He grabbed her wrist and said, "Don't." He sort of fell into her. They steadied themselves, and he pulled her into him. His address was still written on her hand.

"Sam," she said. "No."

It was a clear no, and that meant he would be a total dick if he took things even one step further. He tried to kiss her.

"Jesus," she said and backed away. He let go of her wrist.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Don't go in there. It's not going to make anything any better."

"And what is? You?" she said. He looked down at his feet. He felt like he had destroyed something perfect, even if it was just the hope of something perfect.

“I’m sorry that I dragged you out to this,” she said. “It’s obviously not the place for you.”

And then she walked away, and Sam couldn’t ask what she meant but also a large part of him didn’t want to know. He needed to leave too, but he had to make it clear that he wasn’t following her so he stood there looking out at the water and wondering how much more he could hate himself. There was no such place as Oregon.

He didn’t know where he was running, but he was going far and fast, trying to get away from the sounds of the party, and when he stopped he was on the far side of town and still drunk. Every store and restaurant was closed and every house belonged to someone he didn’t know. He dug through his pockets and Astrid’s phone number was still there.

“Hello?” she said when he called.

“Hi, Astrid? This is Sam? Charlie’s brother? Okay, well. Hi.”

“Sam,” she said. Her voice sounded thick, like maybe she’d just woken up.

“Are you doing anything?” he said. “I’m sorry. I know it’s late. I can’t go back home right now.”

“I’m not doing anything,” she said.

“Where are you?” he asked. She was on the other *other* side of town.

“It’ll take me a while,” he said. “I’m walking.”

“Stay on the line and give me directions,” she said. “I’ll pick you up.”

A green truck pulled up and he saw Astrid’s familiar face. His phone had created a film of sweat on his cheek.

“Hey, I see you,” he said. “Where’d you get that truck?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not really an interesting story,” she said, and they both hung their phones up at the same time and grinned at each other like long-lost friends. He climbed into the truck. It was strange when something actually worked out.

“Hey man. Are you wasted?” she said.

“A little bit,” Sam said. Astrid rolled the window down and started smoking a cigarette.

“You crazy high school kids,” she said. “Want to go for a drive?”

They sputtered off into the night. Astrid was not used to the stop-start motion of the truck and kept sort of forgetting to pay attention. Sam grabbed the wheel a few times as she lit a new cigarette.

“It’s been really lonely,” she said. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Charlie relapsed,” he said.

Astrid shrugged. “That happens to a lot of people.”

“Well, but he’s my brother.”

Astrid looked at him. “Oh, yeah. Sure. That’s rough.”

They kept driving. Black smoke curled out of a factory building up ahead.

“Are you going to relapse?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I think about it a lot. I liked doing drugs. I was good at them. But at the same time, I’m pretty sick of being a piece of shit, you know?”

“You’re not.”

She shook her head. “I *was*, though. Maybe I still am. But I don’t feel like a piece of shit on the inside. There are vast distances between how I feel and how I am.”

He looked over at her. She had started driving well suddenly; her muscular body and the car seemed like one fluid machine. The moon made her face look very stark.

“I told a girl I loved her tonight, and she said she didn’t, you know, feel it,” Sam said.

That wasn’t what had happened, but that was how it felt.

“What an idiot,” Astrid said. “What a dumb twat.”

“She’s not, though,” he said.

“I would have done anything to have a guy like you tell me he loved me in high school,” she said. “I’d probably be married with three kids in North Dakota.”

Sam didn’t say anything.

“I always wanted to be happy in North Dakota, but I never was. I wanted to be the kind of person who could be happy there,” she said.

“Maybe you could be. Now.”

Astrid shrugged. She was driving closer and closer to Sam’s house and he started getting nervous that she might drop him off soon.

“Why don’t you go back?” Sam said. “Start over?”

“I can’t afford to buy a plane ticket.”

“Take the car,” he said.

“This isn’t exactly *mine*,” she said. He waited for her to explain but she didn’t.

“I have money,” he said. “Not a ton but, you know, enough to get by.”

He’d saved every penny he’d made working those marathon shifts at the Town Pump. He’d been waiting for something worth spending it on.

“I can’t take your money,” she said.

“So take me with you,” he said, and he was both surprised and unsurprised to hear himself saying it.

They stopped at a gas station and filled up. It was connected to a convenience store that was not so different from the Town Pump. There was just an old man working inside.

Sam gave Astrid his credit card for gas. There was no time to pack things up or say any goodbyes. Those things weren't necessary. He was still drunk and it was dark and it felt thrilling and complete to have a girl driving him somewhere in a stolen car. He kept running the name over in his mind. North Dakota. He couldn't picture it. It meant absolutely nothing to him.

PROTECTION

It was September when Toby moved in. We were desperate to get a third person splitting the rent, and so the interview process wasn't too rigorous.

"Do you go to the U?" we asked him.

"Sometimes," he said.

"Do you have a steady income?" we asked him.

"Oh, don't worry about that," he said.

"Why are you moving out of your previous place?"

"It's kind of a heavy story. I'll tell you someday."

Evie and I were satisfied and gave him the lease to sign. We didn't want to give him an extra second to look at the cracked foundation, or the enormous orange mold spot in the bathroom. We didn't want him to realize that all of the bedrooms were freezing cold and that his was the size of a closet, or to hear the boys upstairs, who seemed to be practicing an Irish jig every night.

When he left I started to doubt our decision.

"What if he's an ax murderer?" I said.

“An ax murderer?” Evie said. “He was carrying a *messenger bag*.”

It was true that Toby hadn’t looked too threatening. He had thick black glasses and straight white teeth and was a little bit chubby around the middle.

“My mom would freak out if she knew I was living with a *boy*,” I said.

“Your mom would freak out if she knew you went outside sometimes without sunscreen,” Evie said. What I meant was: *I* felt freaked out by the prospect of living with a boy, one whose clashing shirt and pants reeked of heterosexuality. But I couldn’t say that.

These were our roles: Evie was the cool, fearless one, and I was naïve, unsophisticated, always a few steps behind. She was always saying things like, “Meg, when you say you’ve never heard of the Velvet Underground, what exactly do you mean by that?” I didn’t even know why she wanted to be my friend, but I was grateful for it. We’d been on the same freshman floor but didn’t talk much first semester. Then we’d taken a class together called Feminist Consciousness and we’d stay up late into the night in our common room, glaring at anyone else who came in, drinking coffee and talking. We talked about everything. We discovered we’d both been raped in high school.

“I’ve never told anyone about that,” I said.

“Me neither,” said Evie.

The horrible thing I kept thinking was, even her rape story was cooler than mine. She’d been at a concert in downtown Boston and got invited to an afterparty, where she passed out in the bedroom of the drummer of some cool band I’d never heard of and woke up missing her underwear. I had just been in a Denny’s parking lot with my high school boyfriend.

“I didn’t really even say no,” I said. “So I don’t know if it really counts, like the stuff we read in class.”

“Of course it counts,” Evie said. She kept encouraging me to call it rape and to call my ex-boyfriend my rapist. I had a hard time with this. He lived on my block back at home. His parents always waved at me when I was backing out of my driveway and they were taking out the trash.

“We’re not like other people,” Evie said. “We have to be really strong.”

I started crying.

After that conversation, Evie and I were more than best friends. We spent every waking second together. She taught me how to smoke pot and clove cigarettes. We borrowed each other’s clothes, even though I was almost a foot taller than her. We felt we had something that would bond us together forever.

One night when we had gotten drunk too early and it was clear that nothing was going to happen for us, I showed Evie the scars from my hysterectomy. It felt good to have a scar, some sort of marker of pain in the last sheltered eighteen years of my life.

“Ooooh,” Evie said, and she reached out her hand to touch them. Nobody had ever done that before. “What happened to you?”

“Endometriosis,” I said. “My junior year of high school.”

“What does that mean?”

“No babies. Ever. My doctor told me there were catalogues full of beautiful Chinese babies I could scoop up.”

Evie snorted. “That’d be a relief.”

“I guess,” I said. I’d been an only child and my dad had died when I was a baby and I’d always imagined what it’d be like to have a really big family, full of chaos and people and food and noise. That was part of what I liked about being away at college, the unbridled intensity of

it all. I felt like my mother was always just staring at me when I came home. It was a stronger stare than I could handle.

“Can you still have sex and everything?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. There was nothing stopping me from having sex, physically, but something else seemed to be holding me back. Evie was always going home with someone. I could never do that and I couldn’t quite figure out why.

“That must have been gnarly,” Evie said. “You’re really brave.”

I fell asleep in her bed that night, her sequined skirt scratching into my skin and leaving a fine red rash.

We moved into our apartment the week before sophomore year started. It was a shithole but it was ours. This other girl on our freshman floor was supposed to move in with us, but she’d transferred to some school in California right before the semester started.

Toby moved in the day after our interview. He only had two boxes.

“Do you have a bed?” Evie asked.

“I’m kind of a minimalist these days,” he said. “My girlfriend and her new boyfriend get to keep everything, apparently.”

“Ah,” Evie said. “You want a hit?” She thrust her piece in his face.

“Maybe another time,” Toby said and went into his room. Evie shrugged and passed me the piece. I declined. Evie was a political science major but this semester she’d decided to go to school part-time and become more involved in activism. Activism seemed to mean getting high with the boys upstairs and occasionally sleeping with them. But it wasn’t my life.

“Do you think Toby’s going to become our new best friend?” Evie said.

“No,” I said.

“You’re probably right,” Evie said. And it seemed like I was. For those first few weeks we hardly saw our new roommate. Free from financial ruin, Evie and I went back to living like we had before. The weather got colder. I got a job in the financial aid office and bought myself a new coat. Evie suspected the guy upstairs was sleeping with someone else, so she waited outside his door for six hours until he brought back a girl who was obviously less pretty and smart. I dropped out of an astronomy class that was supposed to fill my science requirement, vowing to take it next semester just like I had last year. We put brownies in the microwave to cheer ourselves up after hard days.

On weekends there were parties and clubs and bars that didn’t card and always this vain feeling that something might happen. One night I stumbled home from a party. It had been kind of a disappointment, just the same people I got drunk with every weekend saying the same things. Evie had gone home with some boy. She was always looking back at me pityingly.

“Hey,” somebody said as I reached the doorstep. I screamed, and he screamed a little bit too.

“Whoa, whoa,” he said, stepping out of the shadows. It was Toby, smoking a cigarette.

“Jesus,” I said.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said. He handed me a cigarette and I smoked it because I was drunk. I tried to think of something to say.

“Where’s Evie?” he asked. It seemed like that was always what people were asking me.

“Some guy,” I said.

He took another big drag of his cigarette and threw it out into the street. He stepped a little bit closer to me and wrinkled his nose.

“You smell like Evie,” he said.

“What does Evie smell like?” I said. I was wearing her perfume, and one of her shirts.

“Patchouli,” he said, making a face. “You should just smell the way you normally smell.”

I opened my mouth to say something, maybe to ask what I normally smelled like, but he had opened the door and was walking back upstairs.

I came home from class a few days later and Evie and Toby were sitting on the couch watching a movie and laughing like old friends. It made me feel like I was ruining something by coming in.

“Oh hey!” Evie shouted. “You’re home! We’re going to hear Toby’s band play tonight.”

“You have a band?” I said, standing in the doorway with my coat still on.

“He’s the bassist,” Evie said. “For the Horse Children. They’re like Applesauce meets Vulgar Miscarriage. And they’re playing at the Palace tonight! No cover!”

I finally put my bag down. “I can’t go,” I said. “I have to write a paper on the lesser works of Chaucer.”

“No, Meg, it’s Toby’s gig. You have to go,” Evie said.

“You don’t have to go,” Toby said quietly.

“I wish I could,” I said. “But the paper’s due Friday and I haven’t even started.”

“It’s *Wednesday*,” Evie said. “Just stay up all night tomorrow. Oh shit, I have to go to work. Meg, write your stupid paper for the next three hours.”

She ran out the door. I realized I was still standing in the doorway and that didn’t seem very normal, so I sat on the couch. I got out my copy of *Troilus and Cressida* and started underlining sentences to have something to do with my hands.

“You really don’t have to go,” Toby said.

“Wish I could,” I said. I wanted to go to my room but I was holding this book now and it seemed like I couldn’t just leave. I wondered why he and Evie could laugh like that and I couldn’t seem to say one normal thing around this guy.

“Horse Children,” I said. “Is that like the animal, or like your throat hurts?”

Somehow three hours later I found myself downing four-and-a-half tequila shots in our kitchen and wearing lip gloss with glitter in it.

“I knew you were going,” Evie kept saying. “I don’t know why you even pretend.”

We put on our big puffy coats over our more fashionable leather jackets and headed out into the night.

“Can you even believe Toby is in a band?” Evie said.

“I’m so cold,” I said. “Jesus Christ.”

“I just think that’s so...unexpected. And fascinating. I’m fascinated with Toby. I feel like he secretly might be the coolest guy on earth.”

“He’s just a guy,” I said. “You’re not going to sleep with him, are you?”

“What?” she said and stopped walking. “Why would you even say that?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled.

“I’m not going to sleep with Toby,” she said. “I’m not even attracted to Toby. I mean, sure, he’s my friend and we get along great. And I’m really fascinated by the fact that he plays the bass. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to sleep with him.”

“Sorry,” I said. I really didn’t want them to sleep together, I realized, and I didn’t know what to do with this information except crawl into a hole and die.

I didn't know him. The whole thing was stupid. But he had nice teeth and I wanted a boyfriend. I'd only had one boyfriend before and he'd raped me in a parking lot. I just wanted more than that.

The Palace was tiny and dingy with bad acoustics, and the only people there were grizzly hard-drinking men who stared at us with nothing good in their eyes as we bought our whiskey gingers. Evie pretended that she'd been there before, but I knew she'd never been there. We slammed back drinks to try to make the situation better. Then Toby and the guys in the band showed up and we all screamed our names at each other. Miles the lead singer with the white kid dreadlocks and Scooter the drummer with glasses and red hair and Jeff the guitar player who was hard to look at, he was so beautiful, with prominent cheekbones and bright blue eyes.

It was too hard to talk so we just kept drinking and doing a little dancing except that we couldn't really find the beat and the guys took us out back and we smoked a joint and Evie was saying stuff but I didn't really say much because I was becoming aware of how drunk I was and a little high too and I felt like I needed to sit down but I didn't understand how to make that happen so I just stood there and listened to the things that Miles the lead singer was saying to me about Buddhist meditation.

"Meg," Toby said, "are you okay?"

I looked around and everyone had gone back inside except Toby. I was sweating a lot.

"I'm okay," I said.

"You sound fucked up," he said.

"I need to sit down," I said.

I sat down on the pavement.

"Do you want Evie to take you home?"

“No,” I said. “I’m just going to sit out here for a while.”

“Okay,” Toby said. He went back inside and brought me out some orange juice. Then Scooter, who I didn’t even know, came out and rubbed my back. It was weird but it felt really nice until I threw up in a bush. I drank the orange juice to get the taste out of my mouth and it burned in my throat. Scooter got me some water but I just threw that up, then he had to go play with the band. Eventually I slunk home by myself, feeling wretched and crying for no good reason. I fell asleep on the couch and heard a bunch of people coming home and laughing and I writhed around and felt miserable.

The next day I woke up in the middle of the afternoon feeling like garbage. I had inadvertently skipped two classes. Evie started snuggling with me on the couch.

“Get off me,” I said.

“Hey Meg guess what,” Evie said. “Guess what guess what guess what.”

“I’m going to vomit in your hair.”

“I had *sex* with the guitar player,” she said. I felt relief.

“Jeff?”

“He is the most beautiful guy I have ever seen in my life. It’s unreal.”

“Congratulations,” I said. “I feel like shit, Evie.”

“Sorry, kiddo,” she said. “There’s another show tonight. We gotta go.”

“I have to write that paper,” I said.

“Oh you and your paper,” Evie said. She put on her coat and left. She was always taking off; I couldn’t keep up with her. I watched TV on the couch for a few hours and felt sorry for myself. I wrote two terrible pages of my paper and then fell asleep. When I woke up there were a bunch of people in my living room drinking, people from Toby’s band and other guys and Evie, who already seemed wasted.

“Are you coming to the show, Meg?” Toby asked.

“I have to write that paper,” I kept saying. “I should really go back to my room. I have to write that paper.”

Evie rolled her eyes at me. We both knew what was going to happen.

I actually heard Horse Children for the first time that night, in the basement of some guy’s house. They did not sound good. There was other bands too, The Redheads and Freezer Burn. One of the Redheads kept mishearing my name over and over again.

“Mange?” he said. And “Gray? Maze?”

We ate pancakes at midnight at a cheap diner. I hadn’t had anything to drink because of the night before, but I felt a little drunk from the music and being around all the drunk people. I kept trying to remember why I felt anxious, and then I remembered my paper. But I wondered, why couldn’t I be like Toby or Evie? Why did I always have to be responsible?

The Redhead who’d finally figured out my name was named Jeff but people called him Andy. I didn’t know why. He sat next to me at the restaurant and kept pressing his leg into mine. I didn’t know if he needed more room or if it was supposed to be some kind of sign. Everyone came back to our house and kept drinking and smoking and I knew I was supposed to go to sleep but it just seemed like everything was happening here. We listened to music and told stories. It felt like what I’d always wanted, to be surrounded by a big group of people who all liked each other. Like a family.

“Andy likes you,” Evie whispered in my ear. It was a loud whisper and felt pretty humiliating. I looked at Toby but he wasn’t paying attention.

“Stop,” I said.

“What?” Evie said out loud. “Why can’t you ever just have fun?”

People turned to look at us. I knew it was stupid, but I felt my eyes welling up a little bit.

“Leave me alone,” I said and my voice sounded like a little kid’s. I got up and walked into my room and took deep breaths and tried not to cry. It was all so stupid. I expected Evie to come after me, but she didn’t. Instead the guy named Jeff or Andy came in.

“Hey,” I said.

“Do you not drink?” he said, standing in the doorway.

“I do. Just...I had a bad night last night.”

“Oh. Okay,” he said and sort of wandered a few feet from where he’d been standing.

“You can sit here,” I said, moving some clothes off of the bed.

We sat next to each other for a while and then he leaned forward and so I leaned forward and then we were kissing. I stopped him.

“My name is Meg,” I said.

“I know that,” he said. “Hey, just so you know, we don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

But somehow we just kept going. When we were having sex I realized how easy this all was, just to sleep with a stranger, how the motions came naturally from millennia of evolution, how everything just kept happening and at no point was it horrifying and at no point was it wonderful and it was just a thing that my body was doing. The next morning he was gone but he’d written his phone number on a matchbox. I frantically tried to write my English paper, scraping together the worst two pages I’d ever written. It was still two pages under the limit and I kept writing sentences like “the effect of Cressida’s betrayal has many effects.” I turned it in with shame and rode my bike back to the apartment. It was getting darker earlier. I looked out at the city, which I never really looked at it unless I was sad. I had moved here to be a

really different person. I wanted to be cool with what had happened the night before, and I wasn't sure that I wasn't, exactly. Everything felt wrong.

When I got home Evie was lying on the couch smoking a bowl and eating buffalo-flavored potato chips dipped in ranch dressing.

"Did you have *sex* last night?" she yelled before I'd even closed the door.

"Oh my God, Evie," I mumbled.

"Toby's not here," she said. "Don't worry."

"What's that supposed to mean," I said.

She raised her eyebrows. "You know what it means."

I looked at my feet.

"You never hook up with anybody," she said. "I'm impressed or something."

I shrugged, like what can you do. Then Toby came home and told us the band was getting drunk at Miles's house. I thought about saying I was fucked in all of my classes and I needed to stay home and take a break. But it was a Friday night.

Soon it started to seem like every night was a Friday night. Evie and I became the girls with the band, the Horse Children girls. The music was still terrible, but the point wasn't the music. The point was going out, wearing our coolest outfits and our long chain necklaces. The point was us.

I started sleeping with people. There was Trevor and Randall and Todd and Logan and Charlie and Shane. Nobody more than a few times. It was like sleeping with Jeff Andy I had called my own bluff, and the more I did it the more I could say, *now that wasn't such a big deal, was it?* I wasn't particularly happy or any less lonely, but every time I went home with a boy I

felt like somehow I would be better when it was all over. I would get something out of my system. This person would cure something that was fundamentally wrong with me.

I never slept with any of the Horse Children. It felt wrong. Evie and the beautiful Jeff slept together for two weeks, but he told her she was getting “too intense.”

“Can you fucking believe that,” Evie wailed sitting on the floor of a women’s bathroom. “Can you fucking believe that guy.”

I had to tell her that Jeff was an asshole, although I didn’t really think so. Or maybe he was, but weren’t we all, running around drunk trying to get what we wanted out of other people. Evie started getting really fucked up at the Horse Children shows. She started doing coke around that time too, and I could barely stand to be around her when she was so manic and intense and convinced that every word she was saying was the most interesting thing ever.

I kept finding it harder and harder to make it to class. I knew that I had to stop doing that, but I didn’t. I would lie on the couch while I was supposed to be in class and worry about missing class. But I couldn’t go.

One of those afternoons I was lying on the couch. I wouldn’t let myself watch TV because that would be like a reward for skipping class, so I just stared at the ceiling and felt guilty. Toby came out of his room and said, “Hey, what’s that on your stomach?”

I looked down and my shirt had ridden up a little bit. It was my hysterectomy scar, a big long gash.

“Don’t look at it,” I said, pulling my shirt down. “It’s so gross.”

He sat down on the couch next to me. “I didn’t mean to pry. I’m just really fascinated by stuff like that. I used to be a biology major, you know.”

“It’s not like some fun story about a skateboard accident. I had a hysterectomy in high school,” I said. I was sometimes startled by the scar in the bedrooms of strangers. If anyone

noticed, they didn't say anything. It was dark and we weren't really looking at the person in front of us. You had to really be looking.

"God," he said. "That sounds grizzly."

"I can't get pregnant," I said. "So I'm lucky, I guess."

"I guess," he said. "What does it feel like?"

"Here," I said and I lifted up my shirt and put his hand on the scar. He traced it with his thumb. My face was very hot. I couldn't believe I'd done that. The only other person who'd touched it like this was Evie.

"Someone called from the school," Toby said. "They said you were on academic probation."

The whole time he kept tracing the scar with his thumb. I didn't say anything.

"Why are you on academic probation?" he said.

"You're the one who's completed two semesters in four years," I said. "All you do is fuck around and get stoned with your band."

He pulled his hand away from my stomach, and I wished he hadn't.

"Okay," he said. "But that's not you."

"Maybe it is," I said. The heater groaned on.

"So you're just going to fail out of college and be a groupie?"

"I'm sorry for coming to your fucking shows," I said.

"I'm not trying to say anything against Evie or anyone else," he said, "but you're not one of those girls. You can't just pretend."

He looked at me and I looked at the floor because his face was a little too much for me to take. I didn't want to feel all the things that him, looking at me, made me feel. They didn't do me any good.

“You don’t know me,” I whispered. And everything got kind of heavy, like time was moving against a current, and it felt like maybe we were going to cross some sort of threshold. It felt like something needed to happen, something major, some kind of eruption because it was just too much. We sat there and sat there. And then the door heaved open, and it was Evie and she was coming home from some guy’s house in the middle of the day, loud and probably messed up on something. I mumbled something and ran into my room and cried for no good reason.

Pretty soon it became apparent that Evie’s obsession with Jeff had gone from sad to scary. Toby told me that he sometimes saw her car parked outside of the basement where they practiced, just sitting there.

Backstage at an Eggwhites show she cornered Jeff and said, “Are you coming to my birthday party?” He was trying to tune his guitar and looked bewildered.

“You’re having a birthday party?” I said and Evie stared at me, like *don’t be stupid*. I was sitting on an amp and I couldn’t look away from whatever was going to unfold.

“It’s Saturday,” she said. “At our apartment.”

“Happy birthday,” Jeff said. “I could probably drop on by.”

“Hey, don’t do me any favors,” she said. “If you have something better to do, by all means. I really don’t need you to ruin my birthday on top of everything else.”

Jeff sighed. “Evie, do you want me to come or not?”

“I’m not going to like, beg you to come. I have a lot of friends. I don’t need any more friends.”

“Evie,” I said.

“Okay, whatever,” Jeff said and started walking away. Evie shook her head like she was so disgusted and walked in the other direction. Lately it had seemed like she was always too coked out to make sense or take care of herself. I walked after Jeff.

“Hey man,” I said, “she's just being weird. She wants you to come.”

“I'm really sick of her bullshit,” he said. “I'm not her boyfriend.”

“I know,” I said. Jeff looked up at me. He was so handsome, it sort of made him hard to look at.

“Like, I thought she was cool and we understood each other. I thought we could just be friends. Because relationships are such bullshit.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You get it,” he said. “You totally get it. You're really cool about it. You sleep with all those guys, and it's like whatever. It's just a meaningless physical thing.”

“Yeah,” I said softly and felt the world around me crumble. I was drunk. It occurred to me that I might be better able to handle this stuff if I wasn't always getting so drunk.

I was hungover the next day when my mom called. She always said, “You call me, I don't call you,” so I knew it was a problem when I saw her name on the screen.

“Margaret,” she said, “a woman called me today and said you're failing all of your classes but one. There must be a mixup, I said. My daughter is an honors student. My daughter wouldn't throw away an enormous tuition check from her working single mother. My daughter is a responsible person.”

“Mom,” I said.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

I sighed. “What's the class I'm not failing?”

Apparently I had a C in Social Psychology, a class I had only taken because everyone said it was painfully easy.

“I think you should take your Social Psychology final and then come home for a semester and enroll somewhere closer next fall. I don't think that girl you're living with is a good influence. What the hell were you thinking, Meg? Are you on drugs or something?”

I wanted to curl up in a ball and cry in my mother's lap and tell her about everything, how suffocatingly lonely I felt and how I couldn't seem to stop doing things that made it worse. But I had never curled up in my mother's lap. That was something I'd seen on some TV show.

“You've really disappointed me,” my mother said. “You've broken my heart.”

The next week I lived and breathed Social Psychology. I skipped one show and then it became easier when I realized that nothing ever really changed. We always just did the same things. I lived in my own head and avoided my roommates. But then Evie's birthday party rolled around.

I hid in my room as the party started. I tried to look at my Social Psychology textbook again, but my brain felt like it was made of cotton. People were yelling outside and the smell of marijuana was thick in the air. I knew I'd have to go out there eventually but I kept trying to put it off. I wrote “social psychology” over and over again on a piece of paper. Finally someone opened my door looking for the bathroom, and I came out. Our tiny little apartment was packed with people, everyone fucked-up and pushing and sweaty. I made a beeline for the kitchen, where I knew there'd be alcohol.

I grabbed a beer and I heard Evie scream my name. She was surrounded by people, so she climbed on top of the coffee table to get to me and dragged me into an unoccupied corner. We used to do this all the time—go out to parties and get drunk and only talk to each other.

“I’m fucked up,” Evie whispered into my ear loudly. “Meg. I love you. It’s my birthday.”

“I love you too,” I said. “You’re my best friend.”

“Who am I going to hook up with tonight, I wonder?” she said.

“There’s always someone,” I said.

“Jeff didn’t even come to my party,” she said. “What a creep. He’s always gotten everything he wants just because of how he looks. But I actually really saw who he was.”

“I know,” I said.

“The first time we made out, we had been kissing for like a minute and then he stopped me and said, ‘I think I should warn you, I have a really big penis.’”

I started cracking up.

“He doesn’t even know what to do with it. Like Toby is technically a lot better in bed,” she said and I was still laughing and I felt like an idiot because I couldn’t stop.

“What?” I said, and my voice sounded like a little girl’s.

“Oh, fuck,” Evie said. “Fuck. Can we pretend I didn’t say that?”

“What?” I said again. I was so stupid.

“It only happened two times, and we were both so drunk,” she said. “And I wanted to tell you, but he said it would make things weird. Are you mad? You’re not mad, are you?”

“No,” I said. “No. I’m not...he’s not...it’s not like that.” Now my voice had taken on a high pitch and an almost-British lilt. I couldn’t breathe right. It was like, the more you thought about breathing the harder it became. All of these people in the apartment were taking all my oxygen..

I looked at Toby over in a corner of the room. He gave us both a little wave. I needed to get out of here, so I started pushing through people, heading toward the fire escape. I felt

hot and itchy and like I'd swallowed something too big for my throat. But I couldn't cry in there.

When I walked outside, someone said, "Whoa," and I looked up and it was Jeff.

"Oh God," I said, and as soon as I opened my mouth tears started happening. I wiped them away and took a shaky breath inward. Jeff was smoking and I watched the smoke float from his mouth down into the city below us.

"Here," he said and handed me a chalky mixed drink. It tasted like Pepto Bismol.

"Thanks," I said.

"It's a little crazy in there," he said. We both looked out for a minute without saying anything.

"Do you want to go to my room?" I heard myself saying. "You know. Like we were talking about before. No strings."

He looked at the ground and coughed.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay. That'd be great."

We went inside and I grabbed his hand and pulled him through the party, pulled him and pulled him through people, and I felt like I was hurting and disappointing all of them, even the strangers, and it made me happy. I didn't look anybody in the eye. When we got to my room I realized how very sober I was. I took another big sip of my drink for courage.

The lights were still on when I took my shirt off, and Jeff said, "Whoa. What happened to you?"

"It's not a big deal," I said. "It means we don't have to use anything."

Jeff put some music on and tried to kiss me. I could hear the party outside, the two songs clashing against each other.

"I had a hysterectomy when I was seventeen," I said. "They took everything out."

“That sounds...bad,” Jeff said. He leaned in again.

“Is it dumb to always think you would have kids? Is that like, anti-feminist or something?”

“Uh,” Jeff said.

“You don’t have to answer that. It just seems like...I’m always going to be alone. It doesn’t matter who I’m friends with or who I hook up with. I do the things that seem to make other people happy, but it doesn’t matter. Something’s wrong with me. I’m always going to be like this.”

“I don’t really know what you mean,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” I said. He turned out the lights and I got my stupid revenge.

After that none of us roommates spoke to each other. I stopped going to shows and talking to people. I spent all of my time studying social psychology. I stayed in coffee shops until they closed and then snuck into my room.

The end of the semester came around. My mom was coming to pick me up the day after my Social Psychology final. She was still talking about me moving back home for a semester.

I took my final in the morning and knew I’d aced it. During the test I felt itchy and had to stop every few minutes to scratch. I thought it was just dry skin the night before. I finished my final with an hour left and went into the bathroom outside the classroom. There was something weird going on with my crotch.

When I came home from my final Evie was watching TV on the couch.

“Oh,” she said when I came in. I started walking to my room when I saw her surreptitiously trying to scratch herself.

“Do you have an itch?” I said.

“I’m not talking to you,” she said.

“My skin is like blue down there,” I said.

“That’s disgusting, and I’m still not talking to you.”

I went into my room and started packing my things. About twenty minutes later Evie knocked on my door.

“Toby and I are going to the doctor. You can come if you want,” she said.

We loaded silently into the car and drove silently to urgent care and silently sat in the waiting room and filled out our forms. The doctor saw us all individually and then brought us in a room together and laughed when he told us we had crabs.

“That’s not funny,” I said.

“No,” the doctor said. “You’re right. Of course not.”

He gave us a shampoo and told us to put our sheets and clothes outside, where the cold would kill the little bugs that were crawling around on our bodies. I shuddered. On the ride home Toby started laughing in the driver’s seat.

“It’s not fucking funny,” Evie said.

We put our clothes and towels and sheets in big garbage bags and took them outside. My clothes were dirty and stained and covered in the remains of so many different nights. We wore the clothes we could most spare, sweatpants with our high school mascots on them or oversized t-shirts that advertised a bowling alley.

“You guys have to admit that this is a little bit funny, as a way to end the semester,” Toby said.

“No, I will not admit that,” Evie said.

“It just figures,” I said. “It’s just exactly what I deserve.”

“Can everyone just shut the fuck up and never talk about this again?” Evie said.

“This is just the cherry on my fucking sundae,” I said. “I’m flunking everything.”

“Oh yeah, that’s our fault,” Toby said.

We all stormed off to our rooms.

The next morning, I woke up to hear Evie screaming, “Oh my fucking God” over and over. She ran into my room.

“People are trying to sleep,” I said.

“The bags are gone,” she said.

I walked outside and she was right. Our bags, all our clothes and our sheets and towels, were gone. Jackets and dresses and jeans and shirts and gloves. There were clothes from high school and from before I met Evie and from our Horse Children nights. They were all the proof that we’d ever even been here.

“It’s garbage day,” Evie said. “I bet it was some fucking Good Samaritan.”

Toby had come out to see what was going on. We all just stood there. There had been so much love between us and now it was all gone. My mom was coming to pick me up in a few hours, and I didn’t know if I’d ever see these people again. I knew they wouldn’t miss me as much as I would miss them. I went inside and packed what was left.

HOUSE ON THE ROCK

Sometimes Gabe and I would get really high and ride the train into Chicago, and then we'd get there and realize we had no money and nothing to do, so we'd just ride the train back home. On the train we played a game I'd invented called "mash-up" where we each wore one of our own headphones and one of the other person's and put our music on shuffle. Mostly it sounded heinous, two good songs butchered. But every so often there'd be a perfect connection. We wrote down the songs that worked well together on our hands, but then we'd wash them and forget. It didn't matter. Nothing really did. I was deliriously in love.

After high school Gabe got a shitty job selling video games at the mall and then a better one in a factory. I stayed at my mom's and commuted to Northern Illinois University. I got decent grades but dropped a lot of classes. I wouldn't graduate in four years. Sometimes I was a hostess at a Chili's, quitting dramatically every few months and then begging for my job back a couple months later. Our parents let us do whatever we wanted and still paid our cell phone bills and car insurance. We were in heaven.

One day we both had the day off and wanted to do something weird, so we decided to drive to Wisconsin and go to House on the Rock.

"This looks pretty insane," Gabe said as we looked at pictures on the internet.

“It is the world of dreams come to Wisconsin,” I said.

The website said that it was “filled with the exotic, the majestic, and the unexpected.” It had an indoor carousel and a 200 foot model of a “whale-like sea creature” and instruments that played themselves. It was like a refuge for everything weird and disturbing.

“It has an Infinity Room,” Gabe said. “I don’t even know what that is, but it sounds trippy as all hell.”

“House on the Rock!” I shouted. It was less than a three-hour drive.

Gabe’s father was standing behind us waiting to use the computer. He said that if we were driving to Spring Green, we should go to Frank Lloyd Wright’s house.

“Maybe you could actually learn something,” he said.

“I have no interest in that,” I said. “Unless that is the place where his servant went insane and lit the whole family on fire.”

Gabe’s dad frowned at me. “Yes,” he said. “But it’s also an architectural gem.”

“I think the House on the Rock sounds like a manmade miracle,” I said.

I liked Gabe’s dad but sometimes he could be a real bummer. He still called me “Gabe’s vegetarian friend” or “Eleanor the vegetarian,” even though Gabe and I had been together for three years. He was astounded and offended by vegetarianism and believed that it was the root cause of everything, like if I got a C on a paper or got a speeding ticket.

“You need more protein,” he always said.

Gabe’s dad and I got along, except sometimes we didn’t. He thought I was dragging down his son, which was laughable because I was the one in college. But Gabe had taken some test that had diagnosed him as a genius when he was a little kid, and no one could seem to forget it.

“Are you going to get off the computer anytime soon?” Gabe’s dad said.

“We have to make a mix CD for our trip,” I said. Gabe’s dad put his hands over his head and walked out of the room, and we couldn’t help but laugh. He made it so easy to push his buttons.

“Do you really actually want to go to this?” Gabe said.

“Of course I do,” I said. “It looks like a museum devoted to human life created by extraterrestrials who have only seen a few episodes of America’s Funniest Home Videos.”

He stared at me for a second.

“It’s kind of a long drive. Don’t you have homework?” he said.

I laughed, and then he did too.

We made our amazing CD and stole a huge bag of Cooler Ranch Doritos from Gabe’s pantry. The first hour of our journey was wasted driving around in circles while I texted a guy I went to school with who sold weed. By the time we got a hold of him the car was out of gas and we’d eaten so many Doritos that our mouths were dry and our stomachs were lined with a fine orange ranch-flavored dust. We decided to stop at a gas station to get enough gas to get to Wisconsin and some pop and other snacks that would neutralize our nausea.

“We’ve wasted so much time and money already,” Gabe said, and I laughed. He wasn’t smiling though. He pumped gas while I went into the station. I bought two Cherry Cokes and some cherry-flavored licorice. When I came out of the gas station, he was standing next to his car talking to Kerrigan Reed.

Kerrigan Reed was Gabe’s ex-girlfriend, his only other girlfriend, the girl he’d lost his virginity to at some party when they were both fifteen. She was skinny and blonde, pretty if that was your kind of thing, but also really boring, and her parents had named her after a figure skater. When they’d dated he’d been a dorky honors student who wore turtlenecks and didn’t know anything about music. Then Gabe joined a band and stopped letting his mom cut his hair

and dropped out of orchestra and Model U.N. And he'd dropped her too. She went to Williams now.

"Hi, Eleanor," she said.

"What are you doing here?" I said, and it came out sounding mean. "Sorry. I just thought you were in school."

"Fall Break," she said.

"It's her Fall Break," Gabe said.

"Oh," I said. "Of course."

I dug into the licorice and took a big bite. I wondered if Kerrigan was jealous that Gabe was so much cuter now than he'd been at fifteen. He'd slept on his hair right and he looked really good that day.

"So what are you taking this semester?" he asked her. I couldn't believe that I had to stand out in the cold and listen to the answer to such a boring question. She listed all of her classes and Gabe nodded after each one, as if he even knew what "The Deconstruction of the Phallus" meant.

"I always thought I'd go to medical school," Kerrigan said. "But now I think I might want to major in anthropology and do something with that."

"That is so cool," Gabe said.

"I'm taking an English class too," I said. "American Lit. It sucks."

They stared at me.

"This summer I might go on a dig, actually," she said. "Like a real anthropological dig, in Yemen. My professor asked if I want to go."

"Oh my God," Gabe said, "you should totally do it. That would be so cool."

“My mom thinks I’ll get some horrible disease,” she said and grinned, like as if she were saying *can you imagine someone like me getting a horrible disease?* I could.

“No way,” Gabe said.

“We really have to go,” I said.

“What are you doing these days?” she said.

“There’s really not much to tell,” he said.

“He just got a promotion,” I said. “Above guys who’ve worked at that place for years.”

“Don’t you think Kerrigan should go to Yemen?” he said.

“I guess,” I said.

“Tell her she should go,” he said, and the insistent way he said it pissed me off. They were standing closer to each other than they were to me.

“Do you even know where Yemen is?” I said. “Could you find it on a map?”

Gabe turned to look at me.

“What does that have to do with it?”

“So you can’t,” I said.

“It’s in the Middle East somewhere. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, you don’t know anything about Yemen. I’m not saying Kerrigan should or shouldn’t go to Yemen. I’m just saying, you’re expressing this strong opinion about something you know next to nothing about. Maybe Kerrigan’s mother is right to be concerned. Do you know anything about the disease rates in Yemen? I’m sure Kerrigan does. I’m sure she’s done her research, and she’s not sure if she should go, so I don’t know what business it is of yours to push her decision one way or the other.”

They both just looked at me.

“What the fuck are you talking about,” Gabe said.

“It was really nice to catch up with you, Kerrigan,” I said, “but we’ve got somewhere to be.”

“Where are you guys going?” she said.

“House on the Rock,” Gabe mumbled, and it seemed so empty suddenly. He looked at her for a long second and I almost thought he was going to ask her if she wanted to come along. They gave each other one of those awkward halfway hugs.

When we got back into the car, our Cherry Cokes were lukewarm and we sipped them silently, wrathfully. I was so angry I could spit, but I didn’t even know where to begin without sounding like a lunatic. We listened to the mix CD we’d made. This song came on that I loved, just a bunch of ambient sounds and creepy wails.

Gabe reached over and switched from the CD to the radio. The only thing he could find was some lite FM and a high school basketball game.

“Why did you do that?” I said.

“I hate that song,” he said.

“No you don’t,” I said. “You love that song.”

“It gives me the willies.”

“That’s the *point*,” I said. “It’s beautiful. It’s ghosts wailing for their long lost loves.”

He shrugged and wouldn’t say anything.

“This sounds like elevator music,” I said. “This makes me feel like I’m in the dentist’s office.”

He wouldn’t say anything. I wanted to fight but he wouldn’t let me. I turned the radio to the high school basketball game and turned the volume all the way up. The Indians were beating the Chiefs, but it was a close one. Gabe was ignoring me. We ran into a huge traffic jam on the highway and came to a standstill.

“That’s fucking wonderful. Will you look up when this place closes?” he said.

I had looked at the website longer than he had. I knew it closed at 5 or 6, but I couldn’t remember which. If it was 5, there was no way we could make it, even without all this traffic. If it was 6, there was a chance.

“I can’t,” I said. “My phone charges up the butt for internet.”

“Well, we need to know when they close,” he said.

“What do you want me to do? I’m not the one who got wasted and peed on his iPhone.”

“I don’t want to get there and have it already be closed,” he said. “Can you call someone and get them to look it up?”

“I don’t have any bars,” I said. “We’re halfway there. Let’s just keep going.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. He reached out and pushed the radio off. We sat in silence until he laid on his horn. I almost screamed.

“Well maybe if you hadn’t spent so much time talking about Yemen or whatever the fuck,” I said. “Maybe we’d be there by now.”

“Oh my god,” he said. “These cars aren’t even moving.”

“If it’s closed, I bet we can find some store or weird diner to go to,” I said. “We’ll figure something out.”

“That’s stupid,” he said. “We’ll have wasted the whole day.”

“Who cares?” I said. “That’s what we always do.”

On the side of the road there was an old man selling peaches. It was strange to see anyone selling anything next to I-90, and this old man looked particularly weird. He was standing behind a cardboard box and his sign said “PEECHES.” It was so sad and yet I couldn’t look away.

“Sometimes I feel like you’re really hard to talk to,” he said.

We moved a little bit forward in traffic and then our car stopped right in front of the old man and his cardboard box. I could see now that he was really incredibly old, with skin flopping around in all the wrong places, and that he had a sign that said “DISABLED VET GOD BLESS YOU GOD BLESS AMERICA” in Magic Marker. All of the letters were shaky sticks and the E’s were all backwards. Nobody was ever going to buy this man’s peaches.

“What are you looking at?” Gabe said. “I’m trying to talk to you about something here.”

“The peach man,” I said. “Sorry, what?”

“Do you ever feel sick of just never really doing anything?”

“No,” I said.

It felt like the peach man was looking at me, even though the window was tinted. We were really close to him, so now I could see how many peaches he really had. On his box they were lined up by color, from yellow to practically brown in a long line. There was a coffee can on his cardboard box that said “PITS.” And then he was surrounded by three small boxes of peaches. One had a sign that said “ONE BRUZE,” the next one said “TWO BRUZES” and the next one said “THREE BRUZES.”

“Look,” I said. “THREE BRUZES.”

“Aren’t you even going to think about what I said for a second?”

I sighed. “I’m not unhappy with anything about my life, and neither were you until you met Miss Teen Yemen.”

“Stop,” Gabe said. “She’s an old friend and I’m really proud to see her doing so well. I wish somebody could be proud of me.”

“Proud?” I said. “Proud? You’re *proud* of her? Proud?”

Gabe didn’t say anything.

“Proud. You’re so proud, of someone who thought she was special for writing captions for yearbook? She is never going to do one interesting thing with her life. She needs to go to *Yemen* so she can have some cute little story and a bunch of photos on Facebook and then she’s going to go back to living the most boring life imaginable.”

“She’s not like that,” he said.

“If you want to be with someone like that, then I don’t even,” I said, but I couldn’t finish. We pulled away from the peach man finally, and that was when I really felt like I was going to lose it.

“I don’t want to *be with* Kerrigan,” he said.

“You can’t just let people make you feel bad about yourself in gas stations,” I said.

“You’re not really listening to me, though. I’m saying, I already feel bad. And sometimes I think, maybe this is something we’re doing to each other.”

My head felt hot and thick on the inside, like there was blood flowing in it. Sometimes when I was really high I would become paranoid that I had become deaf and all of the noises that I were hearing were simply noises in my head. Which begged the question, why did it matter? But somehow it did. I felt like that. I pulled the car door handle.

“What the hell are you doing,” Gabe said. The car was moving but not very fast.

“I have to--” I said. I needed some air.

“We need to talk about this,” he said.

“I need a peach,” I said and jumped out of the car. I landed on my hands and knees and jumped up and started running. Cars honked at me. It felt really good to be out in the fresh air, running. I probably hadn’t really run since freshman year of high school, when I was briefly on the volleyball team. I’d been really good, but it was just too much work

Once, when Gabe and I were having sex, he whispered, "I'm never going to get over this." And I thought, why would you ever have to? I looked down at my hands and they were bleeding from the fall.

The peach man was further away than I remembered, or maybe it just took longer on foot than by car. When I got to him I was panting and my whole body seemed involved in the things that I was feeling. He stared at me calmly. His eyes were green but everything else about him was dirty, his face and his hands and the old coat he was wearing. I wanted to turn my eyes away from him but I wouldn't let myself.

"I need a peach," I said when I finally caught my breath. "But I don't have any money. I'm sorry. My car is up there. Maybe it's coming back to get me, or maybe it's going further away, I don't know. But I can get some money up there."

He reached underneath his cardboard box and pulled out a peach and held it out for me. It was getting darker outside but the peach caught the remaining light and shone like a flame in his dirty hand.

"I don't have any money," I said again.

"Yours," he said. "Yours."

I took it from him and held it in my bloody hand. It felt heavy. I knew it was dirty but I took a big bite. The juice ran down my face.

"It's delicious," I said. "It's perfect."

EVERYONE IN THE WORLD WORKS AT OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE

Penny and Jack are making a movie, one last movie before Jack goes to New York. Penny is the one who holds the camera and Jack is the one on camera. From behind the lens Jack looks different to Penny. She can imagine him as someone she's never met. She thinks she'd still like him.

A few months ago they won second place in a film festival for a documentary about ghost hunting. The festival was just some dinky St. Louis thing, but they won \$200 to invest in their next project. They mostly invested in marijuana.

This next movie isn't going so well. They haven't really found a focus. They want it to be about St. Louis and about youth and art and the American Dream and despair. They want to end it on a wistful note that really makes you think. But no one seems to be doing anything interesting when they turn the camera on. Mostly they stumble around the Delmar Loop farmer's market and Penny moves her camera from person to person.

"Don't fucking film me," a homeless guy says. "I'm sick of being used as a political pawn by you people."

"Okay," Penny says.

“I mean it,” the guy says. “Hey, did you know that I was born two blocks from here? My mother did a lot of drugs back then. I mean that. A lot. All the bad ones. When I was born my whole face was caved in.”

Strangers are always cornering Penny and telling her things like this, dark things, secret things. She doesn't know what aspect of her face makes people think that she wants to hear these things, but she wishes she could turn it off. She imagines that they think she is a nice piece of furniture, just a sponge to absorb their fucked up lives.

“I'm sorry,” Penny says and she just walks away. It's November and the weather is gross. Yesterday a grayish-green sleet fell from the sky. Now the ground looks like God's used tissues. Penny focuses her camera on Jack. He is trying to talk to a lady wearing a garbage bag on her head, but she clearly doesn't want to talk to him and walks away.

“These people aren't really inspiring me,” Penny says.

“Yeah, fuck em,” Jack says. He reaches into the grass, makes a sleetball, throws it at Penny and shouts, “death to infidels!” But it sails past Penny's head and hits an angry-looking guy selling cantaloupe. Penny and Jack look at each other and start to run. As Penny is running behind him, careful not to let the camera drop, she thinks about how Jack is leaving her behind, how she will spend the rest of her life looking around the farmer's market for someone as interesting as he is.

In the afternoon Penny goes to her internship at a Saint Louis artist's collaborative. Mostly she just checks her email over and over and plays Uno online. Sometimes people give her papers to file. The whole place is probably about to crumble within the next few months, and they don't even pay her. She would quit, but her dad got her this internship, and she owes

her dad a lot. He thought she could get some college credit if she ever wanted to go back to school, and Penny didn't have the heart to tell him how misguided that was.

It's always freezing in this building, no matter how many cardigans she wears. Her boss is named Sage and sometimes brings a ferret to work. Penny is positive that nobody would notice if she just didn't show up. She takes long cigarette breaks. Today a sweet old golden retriever on a leash walks by. Penny smiles and says "hi buddy" in a baby voice and its owner walks past her quickly. Penny wonders why it's so easy for her to smile and say hello to dogs and not people.

When Uno gets boring she plays a game called Don't Think About Jack. The only way to lose is to think about Jack. Penny is a loser no matter what.

At work that night everyone is in a mood, and all of the customers want their Bloomin' Onions and strawberry margaritas now, and all of the hostesses keep fucking up the seating, and the cooks take a million smoke breaks, and everyone keeps snapping at each other. Penny is a waitress at an Outback Steakhouse in a strip with a Starbucks and a K-mart and a Best Buy. Jack is a waiter there, too, and so is everyone they hang out with. Almost everyone has slept with everyone else.

"Hey," Jack says. "Would you sleep with OJ Simpson for one hundred thousand dollars?"

They are standing around in the back with Lyle and Cristina. They've taken much too long of a break but they're hoping no one will notice. Jack is always asking questions like this and Penny hates answering them.

"Does the money come from him, or from, just, the universe?" Cristina asks.

"I would do it," Lyle says.

“The universe,” Jack says. “It’s not his money.”

“I would definitely do it,” Lyle says.

“Do I have protection to insure that he would not murder me?” Cristina says.

“Well, nothing in life is certain,” Jack says. “He probably wouldn’t murder you. He hasn’t committed any murders since that first one.”

“First *two*,” Cristina says. “And only that we know of.”

Whenever someone looks over at Penny like they want her to contribute to the conversation, she takes a deep drag of her cigarette.

“You would totally do it, Cristina,” Lyle says. “You love murderers.”

“I’m interested in them,” she says. “I don’t love them. But yeah probably. That’s a lot of money.”

“This isn’t even a good imaginary situation,” Lyle says. “Who wouldn’t do it for one hundred thousand dollars? I would sleep with Michael Jackson’s decaying corpse for one hundred thousand dollars.”

“I wouldn’t do it,” Penny says quietly.

“You are a fucking liar,” Lyle says.

“No, I really wouldn’t,” Penny says and then drops her cigarette on the ground and stamps on it.

“We should go back,” Cristina says.

“Shut up,” Lyle says.

“Would you do it for a million dollars, Pen?” Jack says. Every time he calls her Pen it hits her heart so hard.

“No,” she says.

“That is fucking ridiculous,” Lyle says. “You’re just being an idiot.”

Sometimes Penny and Lyle sleep together, when they're both very sad and too drunk to stand, and Lyle is always angry at her and Penny doesn't know why.

"A *million* dollars," Jack says. "Do you know how much you could do with a million dollars? You could quit your job, and move out of your dad's house..."

"Yeah," Penny says, "that's just what I need. I'm such a loser that I have to sleep with OJ Simpson."

"I'm not calling you a loser," Jack says.

"Then I can move to New York and walk around feeling so great about myself," Penny says. Lyle laughs.

"Hey," Jack says, "why are you being so mean?"

"I could go on," Penny says.

"Jesus, Pen," Jack says.

"Don't call me that," she says.

She goes inside and she doesn't look behind her to see who is following.

Penny and Jack have been best friends for six years. They have slept together five times and never talked about it.

1. Halloween 2006, when Penny was dressed up like a moth. She was tripping and she thought that everyone at the party was dead and that Jack was an ambulance worker. He took her home and tried to calm her down. He was dressed up like Grimace, that big purple thing from McDonaldland. She doesn't remember this time, but he was pretty fucked up himself and she doesn't hold it against him.
2. The next morning, to make what happened the night before okay.

3. Jack's sister's wedding, 2008. He'd been with Hailey at the time, but he'd brought Penny to the wedding, and she'd walked around with a smile on her face like it meant something. There was an open bar involved.
4. The next weekend at some blowout at Steve's house.
5. A week after Hailey left.

Hailey Whippenworth lives in New York City, which is where Jack is moving in two weeks. He doesn't have a job or an apartment lined up; he's just going to crash on peoples' couches and expect the universe to provide for him. And it probably will. Penny knows that New York is a big city and it's not like Jack will be right next door to Hailey or anything and he's told her that he doesn't even know if he's going to *talk to* Hailey when he gets there (even though he will, Penny knows that he will) but she's only ever seen New York in movies and it seems like a fake place, like Narnia. She can't even picture him there.

"Hey," Jack says in the kitchen, "are you mad at me?"

Penny grabs a plate of sirloin steak. "I have to get this out."

"Are you mad at me?" Jack says.

"No," Penny says.

"Don't just say no."

Penny sighs. "No, Jack, I'm not mad at you. I'm getting my period or something."

This is a cheap maneuver.

"Please don't be mad at me, Penny," Jack says. "I would literally rip myself into shreds if I thought that you were mad at me."

"I'm not," Penny says.

"I didn't mean to insult your life or anything," he says.

Jack and Penny almost never fight. He is different from other people. He actually listens to her. Whenever he hurts her feelings it is without meaning to, like a week after they first two times they slept together when he said, “Only stupid people are good in bed.” It was at a party and everyone laughed, and it *was* sort of funny. He’d been talking to Penny, though, and it was sort of a fucked up thing to say to someone you’d just slept with a week before. It meant that she was one of the two. Or maybe what it really meant was that he’d forgotten about their encounter entirely, he didn’t think of her that way, the whole thing had never happened, she was half of a person or maybe nobody at all.

After work Penny gives Jack a ride to her house. They are going to go over their footage from today and try to find an angle. They wanted to enter this movie in a bigger festival, maybe, but the deadline just keeps getting closer and they don’t have anything. And Jack is leaving soon anyway, and he says that they can still work on it once he’s left but Penny knows that they won’t.

They sit on Penny’s bed and watch the footage. Jack keeps trying to make the best of it.

“That building is sort of interesting,” he says. “Who knows how long it’s been abandoned?”

“No,” Penny says.

“Or, or. Okay. That weird guy who dresses up like a Clown Elvis. Let’s go talk to him.”

Penny sighs. “I just thought it would be easier to find something interesting or meaningful.”

They are disappointed. Jack goes to the bathroom and his phone starts ringing in his coat at Penny’s feet. She takes it out. The screen says “HAILEY.”

“Hailey Whippenworth called you,” she says when Jack comes back from the bathroom. Jack stands in the doorway for a second and looks tense.

“Weird,” he says. He doesn’t sit back down on the bed, but on the beanbag chair in the corner. They don’t say anything for a while.

Then he says “Look, I know we’re supposed to be working on our movie, but would you object to just getting stoned and watching the Twilight Zone?”

Penny says okay, but her heart’s not really in it. She’s still thinking about that phone call. She didn’t even know that Jack and Hailey were still talking. Penny didn’t have any problem with Hailey. She’d even loaned her a copy of *Mulholland Drive* once (Hailey never gave it back and then she ran off to New York). Penny had just never really understood what Hailey and Jack liked about each other. Hailey was okay, if not particularly funny and kind of sheltered by her parent’s money. She was a perfectly fine person.

Before Jack and Hailey started dating, Penny had never really thought about Hailey much. She was just sort of around. Then there was a party where Penny went into the bathroom and there she was, Hailey Whippenworth, weeping with her head against the toilet.

“Sorry,” Penny said.

“Penny,” Hailey said, and she looked so ugly with her tears streaming down her face. “Please stay and talk to me.”

That was about the last thing on Earth that Penny wanted to do. She hated this thing where girls made you talk to them while they cried just because you were a girl too.

“I think I’m pregnant,” Hailey said. “Oh God. I haven’t said that to anyone. What am I going to do?”

“Um,” Penny said. She put a hand on Hailey’s back. She heard herself actually saying the words, “There there.”

“How am I supposed to tell Jack,” Hailey said.

Penny thought, *Jack who?*

“Why would you tell Jack?”

Hailey looked up at her and opened her mouth and then shut it a few times. “Oh, Penny,” she said. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

Penny had never even seen Hailey and Jack talking to each other, but after that they were boyfriend and girlfriend, for real. Penny never found out what happened about that whole mess, whether the baby was real or fake or a scare or miscarried or whatever. Hailey had wiped her face and left the bathroom and done a bunch of lines and Penny went home. Nothing else good was going to happen for her. She buried underneath her blankets and put a hood over her head and imagined that all of her bad feelings were sinking into the bed.

After that it was like, Jack and Hailey were together, but Jack and Penny always hung out, every single day, and they never talked about Hailey, and then Jack would look at his watch and he’d have to go off to Hailey and Penny was willing to bet they never talked about her either.

Her dad knocks on Penny’s door to tell her that he made chili so Penny and Jack go downstairs and eat. They watch cartoons with Penny’s little sister Audrey.

“What are you learning about in school, Audrey?” Jack says.

Audrey smiles and says, “Rocks.”

She goes upstairs to get her folder to show Jack. She’s ten and she has downs syndrome and she’s nice to everybody. She wears her hair in a long braid down her back.

“So Jack,” Penny’s dad says, “I hear you’re leaving us for the big city.”

“Yeah, I guess I am,” Jack nods. “It’s still kind of crazy to me.”

“What are your plans, exactly?”

“He doesn’t have any plans,” Penny says.

“Well, I have some ideas,” Jack says. “I just feel like I have to get out of Saint Louis.”

“It’s a dying city,” her dad agrees. “If it’s not dead already.”

“There’s just not a lot left for me here,” Jack says.

“Are you going to miss Saint Louis a little bit?” her dad says, and Penny wants to hear the answer to this question, but then Audrey comes downstairs with her folder. Penny helps her dad wash the dishes while Audrey shows Jack pictures of rocks. Jack doesn’t use the fake voice that most people use with little kids but just listens to everything that she says.

Audrey goes up to her room, and her dad is not far behind. She and Jack sit at the kitchen table eating Chips Ahoy and Jack says, “We should make our movie about Audrey.”

“No,” Penny says right away. “No way.”

“You’re not even thinking about it. It’s perfect,” Jack says. “She’s the interesting person we’ve been looking for.”

And Penny understands what he is talking about, understands why he wants to use Audrey for the movie. Audrey is special and beautiful and perfect, but that is exactly why Penny can’t let her be in the movie.

“She’s my sister,” Penny says. “It’s not *cool* or *special*, okay? It’s her life. It’s not just something for you to exploit for your movie.”

“It’s *our* movie,” Jack says.

“It isn’t anything,” Penny says. “There is no movie. I mean, come on, you have a plane ticket. There’s never going to be any movie.”

“Of course there’s going to be a movie,” Jack says.

Penny stares at her refrigerator and tries very hard not to cry.

“You *are* mad at me,” he says. “First at work, and now this. You keep blowing up at me and I have no idea why.”

“I’m not mad,” she mutters.

They both just sit there.

“I really don’t understand what you want from me,” Jack says. “Can you just tell me why you’re mad? I’m your best friend.”

“Maybe we should just take some time,” she says. She can’t look at him and he can’t stop looking at her.

“What does that even mean?”

“I mean...it’s not really normal to spend this much together, is it,” she says softly.

Jack doesn’t say anything.

“Because, the thing is, you’re moving away,” she says.

“Why does that always have to be the thing?” he says. “You act like I’m just moving to hurt your feelings.”

“Maybe we should take some time,” Penny repeats, and it’s a phrase that she hears people say and never really understands what it’s supposed to mean. Jack stares at her and then he stands up. He is cartoonishly tall and skinny. When he stands up it reminds her of one of those big fake air-filled people who blow in the wind outside car dealerships. Who would fall in love with such a tall skinny person? What kind of idiot?

He leaves without saying goodbye, and that is what Penny said she wanted so she doesn’t know why she feels so miserable afterwards.

The next morning her dad knocks on her door. “Hey, honey,” he says, “don’t you have to get going for your internship?”

Penny feels achy and unclean.

“I think I’m sick,” she says.

“Well...” her dad says, and she can hear him worrying. She has been lying in her bed awake for the past two hours. The walls of this house are thin and she listened as her dad and sister woke up and got ready for their days, found the courage to face the things that were waiting for them outside the door. She doesn’t know why she can’t do it too.

“Never mind. I’ll be right out,” Penny says finally.

When she gets to her internship there is yellow construction tape over her old building. Sage is standing outside, smoking. Penny breathes a sigh of relief that her ferret is not with her.

“What’s going on?” Penny says.

Sage takes a deep drag. “I guess the building is condemned,” she says. “There are toxic chemicals leaking. They say it might take six weeks to figure this situation out, and I don’t even know if we have the funds to make it that long anyway. Do you have health insurance?”

“No,” Penny says.

“Yikes,” Sage says.

“I think I’m going to quit,” Penny says.

“Yeah, okay,” Sage says. Penny stands there for a minute waiting for her to say something more.

“Thanks for helping us out, Perry,” Sage says, or at least Penny is pretty sure that she called her Perry, which is a man’s name. She walks away. She doesn’t want to go home so she drives around using up gas until her shift at Outback starts. The CD player is playing a mix

that Jack made her for her birthday. On the cover he'd pasted an unattractive picture of Penny, sweaty and drunk, smiling with her eyes half closed. Jack doesn't really understand the concept of mix CDs. The first six songs are the first six songs from Neil Young's *Harvest* album. Then there are three songs from Jack's cousin's electronica band, then there's a Public Enemy song and a French woman singing Happy Birthday. Penny loves this stupid CD.

At Outback they're slammed and that is good. It feels easy to avoid Jack. Penny thinks about how they had sat on the floor of her room with a highlighter, lining up all their shifts so that they would always work together. He looks at her just once. His eyes are very blue. The bluest.

During her break Penny smokes weed in Cristina's car. She doesn't usually get high at work but today it feels like she should just go for broke.

"How are you getting to Pheobe and Lyle's party?" Cristina asks.

"Fuck," Penny says. "That's tonight?"

Cristina nods. "It's possible that my brother's friend could give us a ride. But don't tell a bunch of other people. You met Harris, right? He has a tattoo of a lion on his neck. Did you think he was cool?"

Penny has been resting her head against the seat rest, letting Cristina's talk fade into her ears. She realizes she is supposed to answer the question.

"He seemed okay," she says.

"I don't know. Sometimes I think...well, whatever. I'd like to date somebody who doesn't work at Outback Steakhouse."

Penny says, "Everyone in the world works at Outback Steakhouse."

Penny doesn't want to go to the party, but Phoebe asks her if she is coming three times before she leaves work. She brings a flask into the backseat of Cristina's brother's friend's car and drinks liberally, and then Andy hands her some pills right when she walks in, so she is on a whole different plane before 11:00. Jack is standing in the corner with his hands in his pockets, talking to some girl with blunt-cut bangs.

Lyle suddenly bursts into her vision.

"Penelope," he says.

"That's not my name," Penny says.

"It's my birthday," he says.

Penny shakes her head *no*. Lyle's birthday was a week ago. But somehow Penny and Lyle end up in an upstairs closet. He pulls her up the stairs and it feels good to be pulled, sometimes.

"We're just going to make out," Penny says. "Okay?"

"Okay," Lyle says, and then they do. Lyle has yellow eyebrows and eyelashes and the beginnings of a yellowy-reddish beard that keeps scratching at Penny's face, but she doesn't pull away. They claw at each other. It is so sad, being with Lyle.

Downstairs are the sounds of the party, and she thinks she can hear Jack's laugh, and Lyle's beard is tearing her face apart, and Penny feels like crying so she does, a little at first and then a lot.

"Pen," Lyle says. "Penny. What's wrong?"

Penny shakes her head.

"You're such a trainwreck," he says.

"You don't always have to be so mean," Penny says. She is crying like a crazy person, snot dripping down her face.

He sighs. "It's because you're in a fight with Jack, right? What's so great about Jack anyway?"

"Nothing," she says. "That's the whole thing of it." She runs to the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later Jack bangs on the bathroom door.

"Are you okay?" he says. "Lyle says you were freaking out."

Penny splashes some water on her face and opens the door.

"A little bit," Penny says. "I don't know. I'm pretty wasted."

"Do you want to go up to the roof?" he says. Penny nods. They climb up the fire escape ladder without speaking.

"Fuck," she says. "It's cold."

"Here," he says and gives her his sweatshirt.

"Aren't you cold now?" she asks. He is wearing just his blue T-shirt, the one with a golden retriever on it.

"I'm never cold," he says. "Keep it forever."

She puts the sweatshirt on. They both look out at the city and don't say anything. The lights create oily shapes on the river. Saint Louis groans on, unloved but persistent. Penny wonders what Jack sees when he looks out. He feels far away already.

"Are we okay?" he says finally.

Penny wants to say yes but she also wants to say no. Instead she says, "If you see Hailey Whippenworth, will you ask her to mail me back my copy of *Mulholland Drive*?"

"Why do you always have to call her Hailey Whippenworth? Why not just Hailey?"

"We aren't really that close," she says. "I tried to like her. I just never saw what was so special about her."

Jack doesn't say anything for a long time. Penny doesn't want to be mean but she's kind of drunk and she wants to know the answer. Penny realizes this is basically the same thing that Lyle had said to her about Jack. She imagines that Jack might feel about Penny the way that she feels about Lyle, and feels like throwing up.

"I don't know why anyone likes anyone," he says. "She's a really loving person. She lets people in."

"Oh," Penny says and wishes she had never asked. "Why'd you guys break up then, if she's so great? Why did you cheat on her if she's so *loving* and *open*?"

"Look...what I did back then was wrong, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have...cheated on Hailey."

"You shouldn't have had sex with me," Penny says. She can hear herself saying these things and some sober part of her is horrified, because this is not them. They do not talk about these things.

"You don't have to say it like that. I shouldn't have done it. It doesn't matter who it was with."

"Yes it does," she says. "It really really does."

Jack puts his face in his hands. "You're my best friend," he says very softly.

"But you're moving away anyway," she says.

"It's not like I'm never going to come back," he says. "I feel like you think I'm just going to move away and we won't be friends anymore."

"We won't."

"What do you mean?"

"How are we supposed to be friends when you're there and I'm here?" she says.

"That's crazy," he says. "Things can't stay the same forever."

“I wish you could choose the things that change and the things that stay the same,” she says.

They stare at each other for a while. They have run out of things to say. Or maybe Penny could say a million things, she could scream until her lungs ruptured, she could light up the city with all of the things she is feeling. But nothing will make anything any better. She is going to have to feel the way she feels. Jack is leaving very soon. People will talk about him and Penny will say, “He was my friend.”

“I thought making this movie would be so easy,” she says and throws a rock off of the building.

“Let’s not give up yet,” he says. “Let’s try again tomorrow.”

“Okay,” she says. She doesn’t believe in any of his optimism but she is glad that he has it. In her best moments she wants such profoundly wonderful things for him. He should cast all these assholes aside and start over. Especially her. If she had to make a list of the things that are great about Jack she wouldn’t know how to stop herself.

The next morning she wakes up on Phoebe’s couch. She’s hungover and the world feels very unkind and she can’t find her coat, someone must have stolen it, but she leaves Jack’s sweatshirt on the couch and walks home. Her skin will get used to the cold. It will be good for her.

LOCK-IN

In the middle of the night, when Laurie had been awake so long that she didn't know how long she'd been awake, when Josh's mother upstairs had begun her night screaming, when Josh was in a sleep so deep that nothing could wake him, Laurie talked to Josh. She told him that she thought she might be having a crisis of faith. Josh did not say anything, of course. If he were awake, he'd probably mumble that maybe God was testing her, that God would always be there whenever she wanted to come back to him. And Laurie would say, no, he didn't understand, she didn't want a God who tested her, and she didn't want to come back. She wanted it to be done. She wanted to burn it out of her skin.

She didn't know what Josh would say to that one. If she really wanted to know, she'd probably have the conversation when he could answer.

At some point Laurie did wake up, and so she must have fallen asleep. It was impossible to tell for how long. That night and every night felt like a long sleepless marathon through the darkest parts of her mind. Josh was still asleep. Sometimes when he slept he smiled a little bit to himself.

She went upstairs and stuck an Eggo waffle in the toaster. Josh's mother, Helen, was watching a soap opera on the kitchen TV. Laurie ate her Eggo plain, with her hands, straight out of the toaster.

"That's barbaric," Helen said. "We have syrup."

"It's okay," Laurie said. "I like it like this."

Helen looked at her for a long moment and then turned back to the TV. Helen and Laurie had been, over the course of the past few years, great friends and horrible enemies. Now they had no idea what to be around each other. Laurie lived rent-free in Helen's basement and had to assume a certain amount of contrition for screwing everything up.

"Are you working this afternoon?" Helen said, and Laurie nodded. She was a waitress at a family restaurant that served breakfast all day.

"If they keep you on your feet too long, just tell them you need a rest," Helen said. "I still think you went back to work too fast."

"Everybody's been really nice," Laurie said. "Sometimes a customer will come in who's been away for a while and say, 'oh did you have your baby?' That's when I don't know what to say."

"What do you say?"

"Yes and no," Laurie said.

Helen turned away from the TV and looked at her. "What is that? A joke?"

"No," Laurie said.

"You have to say something that makes people feel comfortable with the situation. Tell them that it didn't work out this time, but that it was all part of God's plan."

Laurie poured herself a cup of coffee and realized that it wasn't really what she wanted. She stood there, looking at it.

“Joy at the church keeps calling me. A lot of people still want to have a little service. It wouldn’t have to be a big thing,” Helen said.

“You have to tell them that it’s not going to happen. It’s been months and it’s time to move on.”

“Maybe it’s for people other than you,” Helen said.

Laurie had been twelve when Mrs. Buckley first took her to the World Overcomers Church next to the highway. Mrs. Buckley lived two houses away from Laurie’s family and would let Laurie come over after school and watch whatever she wanted on cable TV and eat cheesy popcorn and fudgsicles. Her parents never seemed to notice that she was gone and when her sister Fay asked where she’d been, Laurie was too embarrassed to tell the truth.

Laurie knew she wasn’t supposed to like church, but she’d never been somewhere that felt so special. It was like she was queen for a day. There were girls with long thick hair dancing down the halls as the service began, with streamers in their hands, and the music swelled, and everyone seemed to be smiling, and Laurie felt like there was love everywhere, people were just giving it away. The pastor shouted, “Hello!” and everyone said hello back.

“Really? Just anybody can come in here?” she asked Mrs. Buckley as they were leaving, and Mrs. Buckley laughed.

When Mrs. Buckley died, Laurie felt untethered. Apparently she’d had lung cancer for a long time. Laurie had started getting rides with other families at the church. She joined the youth group, the bell choir, the Bible study. She was particularly moved by the story of Job, the man who learned he did not have anything that God could not destroy. She met Josh, who had long floppy hair and played the guitar in a group called The Righteous and the Almighty.

Josh could have dated any girl at the World Overcomers Church, but one day as they walked toward their cars he reached for Laurie's hand, for just half a minute. Nobody was looking.

Her mother said, "I think this is a cult." But her mother wept at red lights and would bake beautiful pies just to throw them in the trash. Everyone else thought Laurie and Josh were wonderful. They were like the prom queen and king of World Overcomers. When her parents announced they were getting divorced, Laurie moved in with Josh and his mother. Fay shuttled between her parents like a disease and hated her sister, the last Laurie checked. After high school Laurie worked at Sweetheart's Diner and Josh got a job at a coffee shop and led a youth group, unpaid.

It was Laurie's fault, all Laurie's fault, that she and Josh had given in to temptation. It was true what they said, it was a slippery slope, and it just seemed to keep happening. But it hadn't felt wrong. Just the opposite: it had felt perfect and warm and Good with a capital g. When she'd signed the pledge to stay a virgin until marriage, she imagined some dark room, some ugly man pushing himself inside of you. When they told Josh's mother that Laurie was pregnant, she looked at Laurie as if to say: *I should have known*. They'd gotten married, months later, but it felt like only moments after that conversation, like Laurie had never quite caught her breath.

And then the baby was born dead, its body hard and grayish-green. You could go over it a million times in your mind, but that was what happened. She had given most of her shower presents away, the diapers and wipes and swaddling blankets. There was just one pair of tiny little socks that she had stuffed inside a tampon box underneath the bathroom sink in the basement. They had ducks on them and they were so tiny, so unbelievably tiny. Your feet would have to be so small to fit inside them. How did they ever expect him to make it?

At work the waitresses were talking about how the new dishwasher had just gotten out of prison.

“It’s *not* because he’s Mexican that it bothers me,” Meghan said. “It’s because he’s a felon. I just think we should have some say in this. I think we should be able to know what he’s done.”

“He served his time,” Caitlin said. “And I think he’s Puerto Rican anyway.”

“Whatever. What do you think, Laurie?”

They both turned to look at her. Laurie was forever on the outskirts of their conversations. They expected her to say something sweet and Christian about forgiveness.

“I wonder what he ate as his first meal on the outside,” she said. They turned and restarted their conversation.

She waited tables. Her body was still unfamiliar to her, and so was the way people smiled for too long. She brought the dishes into the back and saw the new dishwasher she’d heard so much about. He smiled at her, revealing a flash of gold on the left side. She smiled back when she realized that it wasn’t because of her dead baby.

Two months ago she’d taken up smoking. She knew how stupid it was and how angry Josh would be if he found out. But it seemed to help to have something to do with her hands.

People had given her a wide berth lately, so she was surprised when the back door opened. It was the Puerto Rican dishwasher, the man with the golden tooth. He smoked Kools and looked a little bit past her.

“I’m Laurie,” she said.

He nodded. She had a nametag on and she wondered if it was rude to tell him her name like that, if it was presuming that he couldn’t read.

“Victor,” he said.

“Victor,” she said. “Victor Victor Victor.”

She didn’t know why she said his name four times. He nodded as if to say, yes, that is my name. She tried to say something normal.

“To the Victor go the spoils,” she said, failing.

“I’m going to go back inside,” he said.

“Hey, nobody tells you this, but you can eat as much free soup as you want and no one will know. It can be a pretty hearty meal,” she said.

He smiled at her very very quickly and she saw that little flash of gold. “Okay, Laurie,” he said.

“If you like soup,” she said. “I like soup a lot.”

“Soup’s fine,” he said. “Like I said, I’ve got to go inside.”

She wondered what it was like to be in prison, to have every part of your life chosen for you. She wanted to ask: do you become slowly less and less human? And do you ever really get that back?

She went back inside a few minutes after Victor. A few years ago, when she and Josh had secretly discovered the miracle of each other’s bodies, her shift seemed interminable. Now it never seemed long enough. Time passed and it seemed to somehow already be time to wipe down tables. A thunderstorm had started raging outside.

She was handing a bunch of dishes to Victor when the lights went out. She heard herself scream, and the dishes dropped and broke, and everyone around her was shouting. She screamed again and then she felt wet soapy hands pull her body into his.

“Is everybody okay? What was that sound?” she heard Meghan said.

Laurie took a deep breath against a stranger's chest. "Sorry," she said. "It was me. I dropped the dishes. Everything's okay."

Everyone was talking all at once and Victor took his wet hands, which had gotten colder, and reached underneath her skirt, underneath her tights, and held firmly onto her buttocks. Laurie gasped but didn't move. She couldn't really imagine how long they'd been standing there like that when he pulled his hands away and, a split second later, when the lights came on. Everyone seemed to be staring at her.

"Jesus Christ, Laurie," Meghan said. "I mean, shit. Sorry. Not Jesus Christ, not shit."

"You're bleeding," her boss Mike said. And when Laurie looked down, she saw that her calf was gushing blood mixed with soap bubbles and it was spreading all over the floor of the kitchen. Her blood was on him. She thought, I am going to faint.

They wouldn't let her drive home, so they called Josh to come pick her up. She didn't see when Victor left.

"I can drive," she kept saying. "I was just surprised, that's all. The blood."

But nobody was listening to her. They practically carried her into Josh's car.

"How do you feel?" he said as they got onto the highway. Mike was following behind them in her car.

"Embarrassed," she said. "But my leg's fine." They'd wrapped it up in bandages so tightly that she could barely move the muscles of her calves.

"Well, Mom will be relieved. When I told her you fainted at work she went on and on about how you'd gone back to work too soon," he said. She knew this was Josh's way of saying that he thought she went back to work too fast.

"I don't know," she said. "The lights went out. It could have happened to anyone."

“She wants to talk to you about having a memorial service,” he said.

“She already tried, this morning.”

“And you don’t want to?”

Josh drove slowly, putting his turn signal on way ahead of time to guide Mike to his mother’s house. Everything he did was so careful, so painstakingly deliberate.

“There’s a new guy at our work who just got out of prison,” she said.

“You should invite him to church,” he said.

She scoffed. “No way.”

“I think that’d be a really nice thing to do. He’s clearly been through some difficult times.”

“It’s not everyone’s solution,” she said.

“Well, it should be,” he said. She looked at Josh. He was a good man, a good Christian, a responsible driver. He smiled in his sleep and he recycled and he taught kids how to believe in a beautiful world. He would be a good father one day. He wept when the baby died instead of just nodding over and over again. Whatever sick thing was happening to them was entirely her own fault.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said. “Why don’t you want to have a memorial service for Isaac?”

She didn’t know why the name always bothered her so much.

“We had a burial,” she said.

“But this could be much more meaningful,” he said. “You know everyone in the youth group was so excited about him, and they’re sharing our grief. And they want to see you and tell you how much they love and support you. You’ve been away from church for so long.”

They pulled into the driveway, and she just walked out of the car without answering. She knew that this memorial service would happen no matter what. She thanked her boss for driving her car home and went inside. Helen had made pork chops and mashed potatoes. It all tasted like hot nothing in Laurie's mouth.

"Poor Laurie," she said and ruffles Laurie's hair. It seemed like this was what Helen was always thinking. After dinner Josh and Laurie went down into the basement and watched TV. Laurie had slept in this basement since she was seventeen. Once they got married, Josh moved in. He was very tall and there never seemed to be quite enough space for the both of them.

"Ooh, let's watch *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*," he said as he flipped through the channels and she felt a dumb rush of love for him. She reached for his hand and he held it like they were two chaste teenagers in the church parking lot all over again.

They hadn't had sex since the baby died. They were no longer medically restricted but every night they lay down on the opposite sides of the bed and Josh said, "I love you" before turning out the light.

When she and Josh started getting closer and closer to giving in and having sex, the world had seemed full of mystical grown-up knowledge. Now Laurie found herself constantly thinking, "Oh, that's all it is." You had to keep waking up and putting on your clothes right-side out and facing the day. The world was exactly as it appeared, it turned out.

When she got to work the next day everyone fluttered around her.

"Oh God, Laurie," they said. "You don't have to work today. We were so worried about you."

That was what Helen said, too.

"I'm fine," she said. "Really." She wished that everyone would just forget about it.

On Saturday evenings business was primarily people getting out of AA meetings or bible study. It was close to her church and she saw a lot of people that she knew, and she waved but tried to avoid getting their tables.

Victor was there, washing dishes, and he didn't look at her but she could feel his presence like a hand around her throat. She waited until he takes a smoke break to follow him outside.

"Hi," she said, nearly dropping her cigarettes.

"How's your leg?" he said. "Or your head?"

"Fine," she said.

"I caught you. Before you fell too hard."

She nodded. She'd suspected that. He lit one of his cigarettes and peered out into the distance. She turned around and tried to figure out what he was looking at, but it was dark and there was just a bunch of factories and strip malls out in the distance anyway. There was nothing to see.

"You can touch me," she said. "If you want."

He looked at her for a long minute. Her armpits pooled with sweat.

"You have a husband or something, right?" he said.

She looked at her feet. He shrugged.

"All right," he said. He stubbed his cigarette into the ground. She backed up towards him and he put his hands down her skirt, under her tights and underwear to the sweaty warmth of her butt. He didn't squeeze but just stood there cupping her. She was sweating all over. After what was probably a minute but felt more like fifteen, he took his hands out.

"You're a strange lady," he said and then he went inside.

When she got home Josh was at a lock-in with the church youth group. He was probably playing the guitar. The girls were probably all in love with him. Laurie had loved those lock-ins. Everyone had come to it bursting with hormones and emotions and gossip, eating junk food and playing Boggle, but to Laurie, once the doors closed she felt like a person with a purpose. It was cool and clean in the church basement, and she felt like she was completely changed, a vessel for something pure and serious. It was here where she could figure out what God was asking of her. It seemed so simple in the night, in the church basement, but then of course the world complicated things.

“I ordered some Chinese food,” Helen said.

Laurie set the table and they sat down. They had nothing to say to each other.

“This is good,” Laurie offered. It might have been true.

“Tomorrow after church they’re having a memorial service for the baby,” Helen said.

“It’s going to be very nice and simple. We’re just going to go outside, into the garden, and say a little prayer for him. I think you’ll be surprised by how much support you’re going to get from the community.”

“Oh,” Laurie said.

“You know, just because something bad happened,” Helen said, “that’s not the time to turn your back on God. Just the opposite.”

Laurie looked down at her moo goo gai pan.

“I’m sorry for everything, Helen,” she said. “I wish you didn’t hate me, but I understand it.”

“I don’t hate you, Laurie,” Helen said, wincing. “I just sort of think you ruined my son’s life.”

Laurie went downstairs and felt like parts of her body were crawling out of her skin. She flipped through the channels on the TV very quickly and then shut it off. Then she looked through all the names on her phone and thought about who she could call. She'd called her sister a few times; Fay still resented her for leaving but always told the truth in a way that other people in Laurie's life didn't. But this made Fay difficult too. She would say something like, "You weren't that sad when your baby died, big whoop."

She called her boss Mike. "That new dishwasher left his wallet at the restaurant. Can you give me his number?" she said. She wrote it down in pencil on a napkin and then erased until the napkin ripped into shreds. It didn't matter. She remembered.

"Hello?" a man said.

"Victor?"

"No, hey, this isn't Victor. Hold on."

There was a long, long pause. She could hear people talking and yelling. Saturday night, of course, was a night when lots of people had fun. Finally someone said, "Hello?"

"This is Laurie. From work?" she said.

There was a pause. "The fainter," Victor said. "What's going on?"

Her throat filled up but not with any words. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know why I called. I'm sorry."

"That's all right. Are you okay?"

"Sure," she said. "I'm okay."

No one said anything for a while.

"Are you still there?" he said.

"I feel like I might not really be okay," she said.

"Oh," he said. "I'm sorry. If there's anything I can do to help—"

“We should go away from here,” she said. He didn’t say anything for a very long time. She breathed into the phone many times and could hear her own breath echoing back on the other end.

“You seem like a really nice person,” he said.

She hung up the phone. She went into the bathroom and just looked at the duck socks. She wouldn’t let herself touch them.

When she woke up Josh was watching TV with the sound off on the couch. She tried not to stir but he noticed her.

“Good morning,” he said. She yawned.

“How was the lock-in?” she said.

“Oh, it was fun. Those kids are so funny. A lot of hormones running around. Well, you remember,” he said. She did remember. He was still staring at the TV, playing one of those commercials for a machine that chops every kind of food, with his back to her. The back of his head was making her sad.

“They’re having a memorial after church today.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“So I guess I’m going back,” she said.

“It will be easier than you think it will be,” he said. “You better get up and start getting ready though.”

She lay back down for a second in the warm space her body has made in the bed. She remembered the phone call she made last night and then tried quickly to think of something, anything else.

“I can’t live in this basement anymore,” she said. They both let the words hang there for a moment.

“What other options are there?” he said.

“Well,” she said, “I’ve looked at some condos on the other side of town that seem okay, but I don’t know if we could afford it. Someone just moved out of Caitlin’s place, too. They only pay two hundred a month through some negotiation her dad set up.”

“Well, but,” Josh said, “that’s for one person. Not a married couple.”

“Yeah, sorry,” she said. “I was just thinking out loud.”

“So maybe you should do it. Move in with Caitlin,” he said softly, almost so soft that she couldn’t hear it, but once she heard it she couldn’t unhear it.

“Oh.”

He finally turned around and looked at her. He opened his mouth a few times, and then he finally said, “I’ll always love you. We did everything that we thought was right.”

Then he went upstairs to eat his breakfast.

At the memorial they went out to the garden. The sun was shining and there was a little breeze and all the flowers looked more colorful than even seemed possible and everyone held hands and the pastor talked about how much love they all had for little Isaac. Josh played a wordless version of that Eric Clapton song about his kid falling out of a window, about seeing him again in Heaven, and that was when Laurie got a bit misty and she was glad to be crying. It felt normal. Helen and Josh were right. It was nice, and when it got to be too much, she stared off into the distance like Victor. On the playground next to the church children were shrieking and running. None of this could touch them.