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Caitlin MacDougall

University of Montana - Missoula

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THE MOUNTAINS AND THE MEN

By

CAITLIN MACDOUGALL

Bachelors, Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin

Thesis

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Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Dean of The Graduate School

Graduate School

David Gates, Chair

Department of English

Judy Blunt, Co-Chair

Department of English

Sara Hayden, Reader

Department of Communication Studies

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Mountains and the Men.....	3
Knowing Joni.....	26
Jon	41
A Clearing Treatment	55
New Yorkers	67
Riddle.....	79

THE MOUNTAINS AND THE MEN

Move-in

You move to Missoula, Montana without knowing the story. Maybe you should have read the newspapers. Allegedly, a female student at the University, probably about your age, just shy of 26, was raped by the star quarterback for the Grizzlies football team two years ago. The trial ended last spring, and the quarterback was acquitted. He is starring on the football team again. You Google the *Missoulian* article at your new job and there is a picture of the quarterback crying and he looks like Lucille Ball. The Dean calls the quarterback “a really good guy.” When your officemates explain the case to you, you sense exhaustion and a touch of sanctimoniousness. Donna says that the girl who accused the quarterback was, like, stalking him.

Donna is the receptionist. She has pictures on her desk of her son who is in the Army. He is fat. Her daughter has a name that sounds like a donut company, like Sara Lee but more precious. Donna has miniature Victoria’s Secret lotions on her desk, and a pump of hand sanitizer, which she uses every time she enters the office. She paints her nails “Griz” colors: maroon with silver glitter. She carries a Glock in her purse. She talks about her church (she is Lutheran) where she sings in the choir. You think she must be a good Christian woman because she lends you her truck to help you move out of your shitty apartment into your new one.

Your new apartment is a second-floor studio in an old pink house; even though you don't have curtains, something about the sunlight slanting through the bay windows and the shadows of the tree branches makes you feel like you're surrounded by lace. There's only one sink, which is in the kitchen, but you don't really mind wiping your butt and then opening the bathroom door to wash your hands. It feels like Paris. You wish your boyfriend could see it. Your boyfriend still lives in Chicago and you wonder if you will break up.

You lie on your new blow-up mattress that your dad thought he could blow up with his breath before you insisted that he go back to Target and buy the pump thing. The days are cloudless and hot; at night a cool breeze comes through the windows and feels especially good after you've showered and shaved your legs. You try to read and to feel at home with the lamp on the floor and the mattress crinkling. Missoula isn't home, but you feel homey, as if the safety of that corner of the room could spread to the corners of the city. You feel the breeze on your legs and listen to your neighbors on the porch downstairs. They sound like they're college-aged. You think about the girl with the football player on top of her, and wonder where she is. Probably not in Missoula. You hope not. You turn out the light.

The Man at the Coffee Shop

Missoula is mostly white and straight, but you do spot one queer person. This man comes into your favorite coffee shop wearing a beanie and a sweatshirt, skin-tight leather pants and 6-inch platform boots. When he orders his drip coffee, you find

yourself thinking that he doesn't sound gay. He reminds you of a paper doll, or those magnets of Venus de Milo that were so popular in the nineties, the ones you could put magnet clothes on, arranging the magnets so that she wore a motorcycle jacket and black panties the size of a hangnail.

Night

The strange thing about Missoula is there are hardly any streetlamps. It doesn't get fully dark until about 10pm in the summertime, and then it's completely black on some neighborhood streets. There are cracks in the sidewalk that you have to watch out for, tree roots veining concrete. Glass. The only street that is fully lit is Higgins Street, the main drag that becomes a bridge overlooking the Clarke Fork River. During the day, there are young people in wetsuits, surfing the eddies. At night, you can hear the river, but you can't see it.

Lock Your Doors

On a bright, cold February morning, your building on campus goes into lockdown. A man with a gun may or may not be on campus. You sit in the dark in your computer chair with the doors locked and try not to look at anyone in the office. Elementary schools are being let out early. Your favorite coworker is weeping quietly because her husband works at a bank and isn't answering his phone. You know you're not allowed to say it but that everyone is thinking it, deep down: "This is how I'll die."

Surprise

When you've been in Missoula for eight months, you fall in love with someone who isn't your boyfriend. Your boyfriend is great, only you don't really love the same music, he lives in Chicago, and he's likely moving to Japan. You start hanging out with a fiction writer from Tennessee with Rolling Stones albums framed all over his bedroom wall. You play in a band together. He gets drunk at a red-lit dive bar and follows you across the Higgins Bridge to tell you he's in love with you. He follows you to your apartment and you kick him out. You hope that he will not remember this, but he does, and he says it again the next day.

Your boyfriend senses there's another man and flies in to Missoula to surprise you at a bar after class. He comes up behind you. You break up before he leaves.

Bitterroot

On one of your first dates, the Tennessean takes you to the Bitterroot in his Jeep to teach you how to fly fish. The way out of town is lined with casinos: Maui Nites, Magic Diamond, Lucky Lils, The Silver Slipper. All the billboards are for hospitals. Balloons tied to trucks outside car dealerships dot the Bitterroots and move in unison against the wind like synchronized swimmers. Once you get on Highway 12, the mountains leap out at you. In winter they were the color of straw but now, in the last days of spring, they look golden.

The Tennessean takes you to a place called Bass Creek. You are wearing Birkenstocks and jeans and a leather jacket because it is not quite summer yet and when the sun goes down your arms get cold. The Tennessean has packed a cooler of chicken

salad sandwiches on toasted bread, and beer. The creek looks like a swamp. You tread through shallow, murky water with the Tennessean, who looks amused every time your sandals suction against the mud, making a *thwick* sound. The water gets deeper. Your jeans are soaked. When the Tennessean looks at you, there are mosquitos all over his forehead. You slip on the mud and you fall on your ass. A year or two ago, you might have cussed at yourself for being so clumsy, but you can see what you look like to the Tennessean, up to your waist in muddy water, mosquitos all over your face. He's looking at you, waiting for a cue. You start to laugh and then so does he. You feel the mosquitos drilling into your skin and realize that this is discomfort, not pain, and you can live with that. You fling off your sandals and slosh through the rest of the muddy creek until you meet the river, which looks like a mirror. You rinse your feet off in the clear water and run your fingers through the marsh grass. The Tennessean shows you how to cast a fly; you're no good at it, but you love picking through his medicine tray of flies. Purple Haze is the prettiest. The Tennessean goes a little ways downstream to cast his fly and you watch what you think is an otter across the river do a somersault.

Surprise II

A man comes up behind you on the Higgins Bridge and puts you in a chokehold. You think it is someone you know playing a trick. Maybe it is your ex-boyfriend, surprising you again. It is not him. The Tennessean is out of town. Not him, either. It is a homeless man. You smell this man's sweat. You look up at the stars as he pulls you backwards and everything seems to go brown. This is what dying is, you think. You piss

yourself. The man pulls you down and you claw at his freckled elbows and gulp enough oxygen to scream. People chase after him, mostly men. The women stay with you, in your dark puddle of piss. Two boys playing football in the park underneath the bridge see the man running and one of them chucks the football at his head, knocking him to the ground. Go Griz.

Bison Range

The day after you are attacked, your Tennessean comes back from Seattle, where he was picking up his dad and brother for a visit. You don't talk about what happened—not much, anyway. Your worst fear is that you might make them uncomfortable, so you make jokes, help them finish the wine.

You go with them to the bison range. Bison are what the word “beast” looks like, ogres with dusty black hides, slanted backs bulging above their horned heads, watching the people watching them from their Toyota Tacomas, iPhones raised. You can see how these beasts look harmless. Pettable, even. They still have those sweet animal eyes. But the signs tell you to stay in your car, and you do.

On the way home your Tennessean keeps one hand on your knee, the other on the wheel. You want to stay in the car forever. You cannot feel safe in the world, knowing there is even one person who has a mind to hurt you. You're mourning who you were before yesterday.

Big Sky

A week after your attack, you visit your best friend who is working at a ranch in Big Sky. Your Tennessean lets you borrow his Jeep and you and some friends make the four-hour drive, listening to Fleetwood Mac, curling around mountains on I-90 and counting the white crosses like a clock. When you get there, you feel that you might have a panic attack under so much sky. It's not that much *sky*, really. The red mountains crowd you in their valleys. You should feel safe. But it's not the mountains *either*—it's the men. They shouldn't remind you of the man who choked you, but they do. They are white. Their faces are hidden under hat brims. They sit on their horses and look down at you. You drink some wine. Someone finds a bunk full of cowboy hats and you take goofy pictures with your phone. You go to bed early and listen to the horses grazing the grass outside your cabin, spooking you with their grunting. In the morning, you wake up to the sound of their hooves drumming the ground and the distant whoops and whistles of wranglers.

Open Carry

It has been weeks now and you are still having nightmares. One night you wake up and start to cry, and your Tennessean goes to his closet and brings out a shotgun that his dad gave him as a graduation gift. He tells you to hold it. You stop crying. You have the best sex of your life.

Visitor

Your friend from home flies out to see you, and you start to feel like yourself again. She comes to see you at your other job, tending bar. She sits next to a bald man

and his wife, who has the big curls and the rhinestone-studded jeans. The man looks at your friend and tells her that he thought she was a little boy when she sat down. She is short. She is queer. She lives in San Francisco. You are humiliated. You wordlessly hand the man his Moscow Mule and he chides you for putting straws in it. He calls them “Sissy Sticks.”

The Prosecutor

You schedule a meeting with the city prosecutor about a plea agreement. You tell the Tennessean to just drop you off—you’ll be fine alone. A Crime Victims Advocate named Erin meets you at City Hall. Battered women file out of the prosecutor’s office with their heads down. At the last minute, you decide you really *do* need the Tennessean to come too.

The prosecutor’s desk is messy. She works with a number of victims of domestic violence, she tells you, but she’s never seen a case like yours. When she tells you there’s a chance it will go to trial if your assailant doesn’t take your plea agreement, she hands you a box of tissues.

Kim Williams

You can’t run down the Kim Williams Trail anymore because your assailant grabbed a woman there a week before he attacked you. Nevertheless, after a month, you decide to give it a try. When you pass another runner, a man in long basketball shorts, he yells after you, “Hey, you’re cheating!”

Holy

When you lived in Chicago, the street harassment was way funnier. One time you wore torn tights on the train and a man asked if you went to church. You said no. He said, “Cause you sure is holy!”

A friend of yours in Missoula is walking by a bar when a man outside says to her, “That mace won’t save you.”

Dill

You go to a party and there is a kitten on the porch. He is cream-colored like a latte. The kitten likes chorizo, hot dogs, tortilla chips, and veggie burgers. It starts to thunderstorm and the party goes inside. You sit at the window and watch the kitten scamper across the street in the rain and dart under a house. A half hour later, the rain stops and the kitten comes back. You take him home and name him Dill. He likes to sleep on your neck at night. You let him massage your throat with his tiny claws.

The Man In The Hat

You have been asked to volunteer at a fundraising auction. You buy a nice dress, one that shows a sliver of your midriff because every outfit that you loved in the movie *Clueless* is back in style again, and now that you are no longer twelve, you finally have the body to wear it. You buy heels, which maybe look—*oh let’s say* it—skanky. The woman at the boutique says you look totally hot.

While getting for the auction that night, you send pictures to your friend who works in fashion in NYC. “Is this too slutty?” you ask him, posing with various shades of lipstick, putting your hair up, shaking it out. “Maybe ditch the lipstick,” he texts back. You smear the lipstick off with a tissue, leaving your lips a raw shade of red that has its own immodest implications. But really, it’s the heels that still bother you. As you’re walking out to your car, a man on a bike slows down and says, “Very nice...” Just in that horrible way.

The auctioneer, who usually works cattle auctions, wears a white cowboy hat the size of a bassinette. Your job is to show off the items and then walk over to the winner with a balloon. You’re holding up a bottle of wine when the auctioneer points to you and says, “You get to take all of this home—the wine, I mean!” The room goes silent and everyone is watching you. You give him the finger. Afterwards, your friends ask you if you are okay. You are fine. You are fine. You are fine. The Scotch tastes like a dirty chimney, but you drink it anyway. Someone comes up to the auctioneer afterwards and says, “She sure showed you.” The auctioneer doesn’t get it. He hadn’t seen you flip him off.

Radio Silence

You haven’t heard from the prosecutor in months. You try calling her, but she’s in Mexico. Her intern says she’ll call you to set up a meeting when she gets back. Weeks go by. Isn’t the trial supposed to happen soon?

Kleenex

All these rooms—the detectives’ office, the prosecutor’s, the counselors’—have a box of Kleenex, printed with flowers or leaves, or sold in neutral colors that match the walls. The detective calls you “an ideal witness,” but haven’t you been an ideal victim? Haven’t you reassured everybody? You are fine, you are fine, you are fine. You take a tissue.

Eric Garner

Everyone is watching the video of Eric Garner getting choked by the police officer in Staten Island. You accidentally but sort of knowingly watch the video and by the end you are in tears, like actual choking sobs and there’s snot running down your lips and you just can’t believe how fucked up the world is but then again you didn’t *have* to watch the video. You could have just skipped over that person’s Facebook post. You could have protected yourself. But it was sort of like the time you found a recording on Tumblr of a phone call from inside one of the Twin Towers on September 11th and you knew you should have just closed the computer and gone for a walk or something but you didn’t because you just *had* to hear the man in the Tower ask when the help would arrive and the woman from 9-1-1 tell him over and over that someone was coming and to be calm, even though you could tell she could tell no one was coming but felt obligated to stay on the line with this man in his last moments, felt obligated to wait for the inevitable “OH GOD” and the crash and the line cutting out.

Jody

A woman from your parents' church has asked to publish an item about your assault in the church newsletter. This is strange, since the assault happened months ago and your parents already told the congregation about it. Then again, Jody is strange. She is the woman you used to call the "dishwasher Nazi" because she hovered over the dishwasher during coffee hour to make sure people were loading it right. She is the one who stalks new members around the pews to make sure they have nametags.

You write back to her and ask if she would like to include a link to an article you wrote about the experience. She does, but in her item she writes that you were walking home from work. She explains that if she were to tell the truth, that you were walking home from a bar, "older members of the church might think you were asking for it."

Bizarre. Didn't Jody care that there was an obvious discrepancy between her story and the linked article? Did she think people wouldn't click on the link? You do the right thing, and send her an email about slut-shaming, victim-blaming, all the things you had been tired of talking about even before someone tried to strangle you.

Your email upsets Jody. She leaves a message on your parents' phone to ask if she can still print the item—with the same inaccuracies. She emails you too. Your fingers tremble as you type. "If you're more concerned with how other people perceive my story than with getting the facts right, please don't print the story at all." You still feel that you've lost.

Coffee Hour

You miss the days when you could hide. During coffee hour at church, you clutched a handful of salty Goldfish from the kids' table and crawled to the back of the Sunday School classroom in your sundress and starchy white tights, and hid behind the metal curtain, under the stacks of small, wooden, rainbow-colored chairs. It was cold and quiet under there, and you could lie on your back on the dusty marble floor and plop the Goldfish on your tongue, one by one, safe from the adult echoes, the shrieks of laughter.

Quitting

The day Donna starts a sentence with the words, "Say what you will about Hitler," you decide it is time to quit your job. You have a meeting with your boss in her office. You use your assault as an excuse. You say you just don't have the energy for it all anymore, and you'll be working on your thesis soon. She understands. When you leave her office you run into Donna, who squeals and tells you what a cute outfit you have on, in a way that makes it clear that she was just talking about you behind your back. Donna is the worst.

The Man and His Book

Jon Krakauer announces that his book, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, is coming out the month you graduate. The town is outraged—not by the book—but by the title. On his Facebook page, someone writes, "I hate to see a lovely town's reputation get destroyed." People ask you what you think of the title. You're afraid to tell them that the lovely town deserves it.

The Plea

After months of not hearing from her, the prosecutor calls you and leaves a message, saying that you need to come up with a plea agreement with her to submit to the defense. The only days she gives you to meet are days that you work, and every time you call her, she is not in the office. By Friday, you still haven't heard from her. She calls later that evening to say that she had to turn in a plea agreement that day, and because she couldn't get hold of you, she turned it in without your input. But she is confident that it is what you wanted: the assailant would get a Sexual Offender Evaluation, and based on his score, would draw a certain amount of jail time. Any score above 2 would be a 30-year sentence, with a fifteen-year suspension. It isn't until later in the conversation that you realize what that means. It does *not* mean that the assailant would be in jail for thirty years and *then* spend 15 years on probation. It means he will be in jail for fifteen years and then out of jail for fifteen years with a parole officer and AA meetings to make sure he stays out of trouble. In theory.

It doesn't really hit you until later, when you have a panic attack in your favorite restaurant, crippled in your seat by the fuzz in your head, the sound of chaos in the room, by the weight of what you'd just agreed to, whether you were ready to do it or not.

The prosecutor talks to you as if she can't believe you thought he would get thirty years in prison. What fantasy world do you live in? Even after she tells you that the plea isn't reversible once the defendant agrees to it, you think you might be able to

change the judge's mind. You feel more optimistic knowing the judge is also a woman, even though you've learned in the last year that women can hurt you too.

Christmas

Christmas comes and goes without much ceremony. No matter how many times you come home for the holidays, you always forget that it's different as an adult. When you imagine Christmas at home, you imagine the halo of the Christmas tree, Bing Crosby on repeat, finding the presents in the attic from Santa. When you called your parents out, they told you Santa was a spirit, and that felt almost realer than the real thing.

Believing in anything but your inevitable low-grade depression from the hours of 11AM to 8PM feels strenuous. Believing in anything but the 80% chance of freezing rain on Christmas Eve, feels foolish. When you picture Christmas, you picture everyone being home because in your fantasy Christmas world, no one has a job. Everyone is here for you. You feel light and warm. Actually being home for the holidays is always darker, colder. Somehow you have always been the latchkey kid. You wake up from a nap on the couch as the sun is setting and wait for your parents to come home. You wait because you don't know how to successfully light a fire in the fireplace for yourself. Your dad lights a fire for you after dinner and confesses that he feels bad for the man who attacked you.

The day you turn 27, the Tennessean takes you out to brunch. The only thing you know about being 27, you tell him, is that people die then. James Dean, Kurt Cobain, Heath Ledger, Amy Winehouse, you forget the rest. A palm reader told you once that your lifeline was short, and you can't help but think.

Afterwards you get a manicure with your girlfriends and tell them about the job offer you got in DC, the place where you grew up. Is the Tennessean coming with you? No doubt, you tell them.

Later that afternoon, you and the Tennessean go for a hike. The beginning of the trail is icy, but then the ground gets soft with pine needles. It is the best kind of quiet.

The Statement

A parole officer has asked you to write a "Victim Impact Statement" to the judge for your assailant's sentencing. You are not really a victim now—you are a witness to the crime. Still, this is your chance. You write it in order to beg the judge for a stronger sentence. You explain that the assailant accepted a plea agreement that you didn't really consent to in the first place. You tell the judge that you think your assailant is capable of murder. You tell her you felt it through his hands. You even write, "I hope you haven't had the experience of feeling your life end by another man's hands," before deleting it. You write the same sentence again. Delete it. It feels too dramatic, or not dramatic enough. There is no appropriate amount of jail time. There is no reasoning with the forces that made you write this letter. But you practically bleed on the page, hoping that someone, anyone, will hear you, will understand you exactly.

The parole officer encourages you to show up to the sentencing to make your statement in person. Sometimes," she says, "seeing the victim face-to-face can be more powerful." They might want more blood.

You don't go to the sentencing, though, because you know you will have another panic attack. The prosecutor calls you afterwards to tell you how well it went: the assailant got 30 years, fifteen years suspended. The assailant's *other* victim, the runner on the Kim Williams trail, did an amazing job with her statement to the judge, had the room "just riveted." You can't help but feel that the prosecutor sees the other assailant as the better daughter, the one who can play piano for her parents' dinner guests while the *other* daughter sulks in her room.

"She would just *love* to talk with you," the prosecutor says. *Probably to gloat*, you think, but you write down her number on your hand. Later, you let it rinse off in the shower.

Neighbors

The week after your assailant is sentenced, you walk down the stairs of your apartment building and your neighbor below you pounds on the wall on the other side of the staircase, as if to respond to your footsteps. It doesn't sound like a hand, but like some blunt object. The next morning, your neighbors *upstairs* tell you that after you left, the Pounder came up the stairs and pounded on your door for at least five minutes. You are afraid to go home. When you do, you see your downstairs neighbors standing on their porch; you call out to them and walk over. When you were a kid, you would

practice tongue twisters before talking to a group of people: *toy boat, toy boat, toy boat*. It always comes out as *boys toys, boys toys, boys toys*. Your stomach churns. You are brave, you tell yourself. You are brave. You are brave. You are brave. *Boys toys, boys toys, boys toys*. The man looks scared. He tells you he wasn't doing the pounding. He thought it was *you*. He leans against a tree and you can see he is clawing at the bark with his fingernails. The chips fall at his feet. He scratches his neck. He looks into the sun, recoils, and puts on his sunglasses. You can no longer see his enlarged pupils. His skin is yellow. Then he tells you he didn't hear the pounding after all. "I guess I must have slept right through it," he says.

Waking Nightmare

You're getting nightmares again. One night you wake up screaming. You could have sworn you heard someone banging the window next to your bed. In the twilight of sleep, it looks like water is trickling through a crack in the panes, like an aquarium.

Him

You feel you do not live here anymore. *He* lives here. *He* is a composite of your downstairs neighbor and your assailant, both beasts with goatish devil beards. The man you imagine banging down your door has a beard like your assailant's, but his yellow skin and icy frightened eyes are your neighbor's. Everything feels like a composite.

It's Your Call

You call the police about your neighbors, who you are almost certain are drug dealers: people come and go out of their apartment, their shades are always drawn, and their Subaru has tinted windows. The woman who answers your call makes you feel you should hurry up with your story. As you talk, you hear her talking to someone else in the room. It is 5pm on a Sunday—is she is actually that busy? She transfers your call. You leave a message for someone, trying to tell your story as quickly as possible because the receptionist told you to leave a *brief* message. You rush through it. You're pretty sure you mispronounced your own name. You try to imagine what it would be like to receive a message like that first thing on a Monday morning and decide that you wouldn't call the person back.

The Nail in The Coffin

You hate everything. You hate white men. You hate football. You hate Scott Walker, you hate that knuckle-dragging Idaho representative who suggested that women could swallow cameras to get gynecological exams. You hate the men who came up with the hashtag #notallmen. You even hate the women who came up with the hashtag #yesallwomen. Actually, you just hate hashtags. You hate the people who work at your favorite café because you found out that they're all ex-convicts and you hate that you hate that. One employee makes your sandwich extra big and you wonder if he wants something from you.

Walking down the street, you realize you hate homeless men, too. Even the harmless ones who just want to crack jokes with you outside a bar, the ones who puke

innocently into bushes. Liberal, progressive, empathetic you: you hate the homeless shelter that housed the man who hurt you. You hate the landlord who houses the man who *may* hurt you. All the men you see on the street look unpredictable. You want to tell your female friends that they are not safe. You hate how safe they seem.

Open Carry II

Your dad leaves you a message and tells you to buy a baseball bat to keep in your apartment in case the neighbors come back. You remember Donna and her Glock. You imagine holding a gun, the cold weight of it between two steady hands. You imagine firing it into your neighbor's skull. You imagine yourself as a cowboy boot-wearing, Glock-carrying, beer-drinking kind of gal, the kind men want to buy shots for. A few months before, a news reporter had interviewed you about the Open Carry Law on the University's campus, and you realize now what an alarmist liberal you must have sounded like. You are exactly the kind of person *he* would come after. You have spent the last year defending yourself against *him*, and now you have to defend yourself from *you*.

Miller Creek

You're staying at a friend's house outside of town until you feel safe again in your own apartment. You and the Tennessean leave at night, careful not to make too much noise coming down the stairs, and drive down the dirt road to the green house with all the lights turned on. The mountains are black with swirling moonlit clouds behind them. The moon is waning, smaller by a fingernail than the full moon the night

before. Full moons always give you insomnia. That night you drink whisky and soda and listen to country music. The whisky makes you smiley and sleepy. It is not even midnight when you turn in. This room feels safe, even if it is not your own. The bed in the guest room feels like a giant marshmallow. You start to read your book, then fall asleep with the light on.

When you wake up, you feel like a new person. You stand in the kitchen and let the sunlight warm your back. You put maple syrup in your coffee because your host does not have sugar. You drink it by the window and watch snowmelt trickle down the roof. Winter didn't seem that long. Soon you will be moving with your Tennessean, back East, where it is still winter. Washington, D.C., where you grew up, known as the Crack Capital in the nineties, then the Murder Capital. It's where men say, "Hey baby, can I talk to you?" and "Hey white girl, you got a fat ass!" Go-go music thunders in the streets. The sirens never sound very far away. There are dangerous white men there too, but in Washington, they wear suits.

92

The week before spring break, three students die in unrelated incidents. A law school student dies of an undisclosed illness. The next day, a freshman straps a plastic bag to his head and asphyxiates himself; his roommate finds him stiff and blue. Early Sunday morning, a football player accidentally shoots himself in the stomach at a party. His name was Kole.

This is probably what happens when people get used to guns. A person who grew up with guns will start thinking it's like some kind of flashlight and forget the safety's off and forget it's loaded and get drunk and fiddle with the trigger and then bam. *Boys toys, boys toys, boys toys.* Folks around town start taping the number 92, Kole's jersey number, on all the storefront windows. His dad was a UPS driver. He drives the same route downtown with the number 92 following him like an endless game of roulette.

It Follows

There's a scary movie out, about a 19-year old girl who has sex with a guy and the guy passes on a curse to her where dead people come after her and try to kill her. She can't rid herself of the curse until she sleeps with someone else. But even then, the curse doesn't go away. Even after she fucks someone else and moves on, she still sees the dead people. She calls them "it." *It* will follow her for the rest of her life. The movie is playing off of the "slut karma" trope you always see in horror movies. The whore dies first, or sometimes after the black person.

The movie is also about existentialism, though. Dostoyevsky gets mentioned. In *The Idiot*, he says that that pain is not really bodily pain at all, "but the certain knowledge that in an hour—then in ten minutes, then in half a minute, then now—this very *instant*—your soul must quit your body and that you will no longer be a man—and that this is certain, *certain!*"

They never figure it out, how to destroy a dangerous thing that isn't technically *there*. But you know as well as the girl does that it will always be right behind her.

A Man On The Bridge

It is spring, finally, and you are moving out of your apartment for good, scrubbing every inch of crown molding, when your friend texts you about a man on the bridge. He's carrying a sign that says, "MEN WHO ATTACK WOMEN ON THIS BRIDGE ARE COWARDS." When you go to see him yourself, he is gone. You will never know who he is or what he looks like. You will never know why. Why hope is budding now that you're leaving.

KNOWING JONI

How do I write about Joni Mitchell pre-posthumously without seeming, well, gross? When I heard she was in the hospital, I panicked. I had written a piece about her that had gone through so many edits already that editing it *again* with some kind of elegiac tone made me want to tear my hair out. *Please don't die*, I prayed to the walls of my room every night. Nevermind that her passing would leave a giant hole in the hearts of millions of women, including mine. Nevermind that there are already Joni Mitchell fans praying to their bedroom walls every night for more virtuous reasons. No matter how hard I try to justify it, this is about being first. This *is* gross. This is about claiming a love for Joni that no other woman could possibly understand, except of course they do.

There is a moment in every Joni fan's life when she realizes that she is not the only Joni fan, and it disturbs her. For me, it was in 2012, reading Zadie Smith's essay in *The New Yorker*, "Some Notes on Attunement," a piece that examines Smith's disdain for Joni Mitchell in college, and the pitying looks her friends gave her for not "getting" Joni until she listens to "River" and becomes a Joni fanatic. The title irked me and made me envious: not only was Smith claiming to love Joni Mitchell in what I interpreted as some loftier way to other Joni fans, she was also easily inhabiting the role of "Essayist": all real essays, as far as I was concerned, started with "Notes On," and, as a graduate

student, I had yet to write anything as authoritative, as writerly. Zadie Smith was a fraud, I decided, a reaction that, in retrospect, seems more than a little callow. She didn't even *like* Joni Mitchell until her twenties, and was impudent enough to admit that she had mainly listened to *Blue*. I hated the essay, hated how honest it was, hated the distinctive Zadie Smithness of it, the way she starts with one subject and Napoleonically covers eight others before winding her way back to the original subject at hand. She contends that she cries listening to Mitchell the way my friends and I used to claim we cried while reading *Where the Red Fern Grows*—as if not crying implied that I didn't actually love the book—or worse, that I didn't understand it. Can I help it if art doesn't make me cry? The only movie I remember crying over was an old French film with subtitles, in which a group of kids slaughter a chicken. The only book I remember crying over was a bathroom read about a cat whose owner accidentally kills it while giving it a massage. It seems I am a sucker for animals, not art. When I have cried over Joni Mitchell, the tears were less about the music than they were about a time in my life—a time when I felt so much pain that it became a kind of joy, a private pride in my ability to feel so exquisitely and deeply.

I don't remember exactly when I first heard Joni's music. I know I was in high school, and had already joined the jazz band. I was a freshman with little to no musical talent, despite ten years of piano lessons. I had only just discovered singing, and was admitted to the ensemble because of what my jazz director called my "bell voice"; in

other words, I was a meek soprano, delegated to songs like “Amazing Grace” and “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” No funny stuff, no improvisation, and certainly no scatting, unless I’d already rehearsed my “skee-bops” before going onstage. Jazz seemed to require a womanly confidence that I did not yet possess. It required feeling as sexy as you sang which I associated with unattainables like Billy Holiday and Nina Simone.

The tune I sang during my audition was “Autumn Leaves,” famously recorded by Nat King Cole. My teacher played it for me on a bug-eyed stereo and then I sang along to it on the piano. I knew the song from a mix CD that my first boyfriend had recently made for me. He was two years older and, to my mind, centuries more experienced. We had gone for walks at night all summer long until one day he tried to kiss me and I decided I didn’t like him anymore. The CD was his last appeal. I thought my director was playing a cruel joke on me. The song skips and pirouettes all over the piano and seems more suited for say, Blossom Dearie, than the fifteen year old I was—a girl afraid of kissing boys, whose orthodontist had just told her it would be another year before her braces came off, and who still (occasionally, *secretly*) watched “Arthur” after school. I ponied up and inhaled at the high notes anyway, feeling like I’d be a girl forever.

I had grown up, for the most part, gravitating towards the men’s section of the Gap and ignoring the girls jumping rope on my way to the soccer field at recess. My girlfriends and I acted like boys because somehow we thought that’s what boys wanted, to see us as equals first before navigating murky world of romance. The girls who got

their periods early stuffed pads in their fists on the way to the bathroom, and adjusted their sports bras to hide the straps that peeked out of their necklines. Womanliness was a private shame. By the time seventh grade rolled around, the same girls started flaunting their bra straps, chalking their eyes with black eyeliner, exposing their bellybuttons with cropped t-shirts, and having boyfriends, of course. I mourned the days when it was okay to wear pigtails and stained soccer jerseys. And yet, by the time I was a freshman, I dreamed of having boyfriend of my own, even though I was still bewildered by how to get one.

I fell in love, or so it felt, when I was a sophomore. It happened the way it often does when you're very young: suddenly and with someone completely undeserving. Alex Jenks, or "AJ," was a senior and captain of the swim team. He was lithe, with amphibian limbs and caterpillar eyebrows. His laugh sounded like a car horn, and he had, as he liked to say, "a face for radio," a description that somehow made him irresistible. After he made me laugh so hard that soda shot out of my nostrils, I decided he had to be my boyfriend. I watched for him during soccer practice, when he would amble across the parking lot with his gym bag slung across his chest. Before his car screeched out of its parking space, he'd turn on Atmosphere or Jurassic 5, and I'd listen to the bass thump through the open windows until I felt my heart lodge in my throat. How could I get him to love me back?

I never stopped asking that question, even after I asked him to "go steady with me," a charming line I was sure would win him over. I delivered it in front of my house

one afternoon after he'd driven me home from school. He turned the music down and said yes. I "pinned" him with a Michael Jackson button I bought at a thrift store. The hard part was over, I thought.

We broke up four months later.

"Listen," he said. I could hear him finish his speech before it started, like how some people could scat their way through eight measures of music in the right key. "So much on my plate right now," AJ said. "Great girl," "Not you." There are clichés, but I was hearing them for the first time. I cried in my bed that whole afternoon. Before I went to bed, I wrote shitty, shitty poetry.

That spring, while I was still nursing my heartbreak, my dad played *Blue* for me. Joni was hitting notes that I would never be able to hit. She was singing about heartache, but there was something *joyful* about it, like she was gleefully popping a blister and watching it run. She made pain sound lovely, and told me that whatever I was feeling, it was safe to say it in beautiful, lilting notes. I could recast my sadness into joy. For the Jazz Band's spring concert, I sang Joni's "All I Want," and I didn't even falter when I saw AJ's head poke through the theatre door during rehearsal. A part of me believed that my singing would convince him to ask me out again, but a larger part of me no longer cared.

The people most impressed with my performance turned out to be mothers, all watery-eyed middle-aged women who were ready to feel emotions as sharply as they did when they first heard Joni.

“That’s my favorite song.”

“Isn’t she the *best*?”

“You have to listen to *Ladies of the Canyon* now.”

I knew these women meant well: they were alive when Joni put out her first album, and as one woman told me, their generation “practically invented her.” They wanted to share the secret of Joni with me as a teacher would impart a lesson to a student.

Only she wasn’t a secret. Perhaps because heartache is so universal, many Joni Mitchell songs have mass appeal. My favorite song off of *Blue* is probably your favorite, too. And yet each of her songs can feel tailor-made for your personal heartache. On the other side of our respective heartaches there is joy, and we all convince ourselves that in mining for this hard-earned joy that we earn a right to know the artist, even resemble her. Our pain feels individual, unique, and her songs the soundtrack to that pain.

There were other hints during my teens that I wasn’t the only woman to learn the ways of the heart from Joni. In 2003’s *Love Actually*, there’s an iconic scene where Karen (played by the irresistible Emma Thompson) is listening to “River” while wrapping Christmas presents with her despicable husband, (played by Alan Rickman). Thompson’s despicable husband is partly despicable because he teases his wife for listening to Joni Mitchell. “I love her,” Karen retorts. “A true love lasts a lifetime.” She goes further: “Joni Mitchell taught your cold English wife how to feel.” Later in the

movie, Karen learns the pitfalls of letting your emotions run deep: after learning that her husband has been cheating on her, Karen weeps in the privacy of their bedroom to the tune of “Both Sides Now,” not the *Clouds* version, but Joni’s 2003 re-recording. It’s a scene that brings me to tears every time I watch it because I recognize Karen’s shock, not over the infidelity, but over the cost of her love: to love means to hurt. It’s a life-changing revelation that is best taught by a mature Joni, the one who can carve an uroboric path for us to one side of love and back again.

There’s a superficial side to Joni fandom, too. Ask most women about Joni, and you will hear, “I’m a huge fan!” If they’re not asserting their general devotion to Joni, they are naming a particular song from *Blue*, the only album anyone seems to have listened to. I know men who love Joni Mitchell, but it’s either with a fawning infatuation, like the geeky freshman has for the cheerleading senior girl, or with the tacit acknowledgement that the woman they are talking to probably loves her more. Whatever the reason, I don’t have the same conversations with about Joni with men as I do with my female friends.

Why do women who aren’t all that familiar with Joni Mitchell claim to know her music? Why is the first response to a simple question, “What is your favorite Joni Mitchell Song,” always a vague and uninformed assertion of fandom? Joni has a reputation for being a poet who wrote about deep, tangled emotions. Being a fan sometimes means loving that idea of her. It’s easy to love her California mane and her dramatic, chiseled cheekbones. It’s easy to say your favorite song is “Big Yellow Taxi.”

Calling yourself an artist too, is easy. Being one is not. It requires a constant evolution, always at the risk of losing your audience. Joni couldn't write folk music forever, yet the music we remember isn't off of *Mingus* or *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*.

There's probably a reason why most people glom onto *Blue* as opposed to, say, *Hejira*. *Blue* is easy to listen to; its emotions resonate with us. We hear the C and G chords and predict their resolutions. Even if "River" is about giving up a child for adoption, we can listen to it after our breakups because the poetry of universal heartbreak is easy to grasp, no matter who it's about. "Carey," upon first listen, is about a fling. However, if you read the lyrics, they tell a tale of a woman playing pretend. "Sure is hard to leave you, Carey/but it's really not my home." Her home is with the clean linen and the "fancy French cologne." Living in bohemian filth with dirty fingernails and beach tar on her bare feet is not really Joni's bag. Nevertheless, her man-of-the-hour gets out his cane, Joni puts on some silver, and the two of them play dress up for their short-lived affair. The premise of the song paints a more refined portrait of Joni than the bohemian, sundress-wearing flower child we see in black and white photos from her *Blue* period.

In *Hejira*, Joni flexes her musicologist muscles more, attracting fellow musicians who can appreciate how she expresses herself instrumentally as well as lyrically. Objectively, the music is more difficult, and, once again, complicates our idea of Joni as some Earth Mother romantic. *Hejira* or *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* or any of her other more experimental albums are not nearly as popular as *Blue*, and many of us

don't include them when we consider Joni's overall ethos. Maybe we don't want to. Maybe we want *Blue* to be enough to understand Joni. As long as we can understand her music, we can feel close to her.

While writing this essay, I picked up Meghan Daum's new book, *The Unspeakable*. There, on page 149 was the essay titled "The Joni Mitchell Problem." *Damn it*, I thought. I encountered a writer's worst fear: that someone else had already written your essay. I assumed I was the late arrival to the party. Surely Daum saw the Joni Mitchell "Problem" as I did: that being a Joni Mitchell fan was partly, if not mostly, a posture.

But it was a little more self-congratulating than that. Daum believes the Joni Mitchell Problem is that people like her for the wrong reasons, and she likes her for the right ones. Joni is not a poet; she is a musician. *Blue* is for the naïve fan. Daum doesn't like Joni Mitchell's early stuff as much as she likes *Mingus*, or any of Joni's other jazz albums. Daum likes *Mingus*, in fact, because "it does not spend even a millisecond of its time trying to make itself accessible to people who liked *Song to a Seagull* or even *Blue*." According to Daum, the people who like *Song to a Seagull* are the same people who keep Joni Mitchell albums in their Lake House and give you sad looks if you tell them you don't listen to her. They don't know Joni like Daum knows Joni.

Daum once had the opportunity, over dinner in Hollywood, to tell Joni that she understood her music like no one else. It was a fangirl's dream: Daum tells Joni that she sees her not as a folk singer but as a kind of "musical essayist." Joni lauds Daum for her

noticing the time signature change on “Paprika Plains,” and tells her she wants a copy of her novel. The two of them hug before parting. “You have honored me tonight,” Joni tells her.

I would do the same thing. Of course. I would try to convince my favorite musician that only I understood her music. I would tell myself that I was connected to her in a way that no other fan was. I would talk about it for the rest of my life, and watch my friends rot with envy. The only thing I wouldn’t do, as Daum did, is lose Joni Mitchell’s number after meeting her. (*Seriously?*).

I couldn’t help but love the essay anyway, for its self-effacing sense of humor and its hi-low language. I also loved it, let’s be honest, because it underscored the point of my essay *exactly*: the most confounding aspect of Joni Mitchell fandom is that we conclude that other people don’t understand her like we do, that in fact no one can *truly* understand her— but it doesn’t stop any of us from asserting our own superiority as fans. We are aggressive in our love for Joni. When we say we understand her, what we really want people to hear is, “I am her.” I am an artist who can know love, who can feel, as exquisitely as she.

I told you that my first love was in high school, but that isn’t quite true. My first love didn’t happen until years later, after college. Brady was a California boy so naturally his favorite Joni Mitchell song was “California,” which was endearing, albeit unoriginal. We met in DC through friends and decided to spend the summer in

California before he left for grad school in London in the fall. We moved to his parents' place in Chico, a small college town in the Sierras. We stayed in the guesthouse in the backyard under the olive trees, fell asleep to the *plink* of olives on the roof, and woke up to the clucking of chickens in the coop underneath our window.

His parents were welcoming at first, happy to have their son home for the summer before he went abroad. His father was a straight-laced dentist with his own practice; his mother played tennis and drank a lot of Turning Leaf. Both parents grew up as army brats. They were warm towards me until they realized that Brady's intent had never been to get a job for the summer, and there was no one else to blame. To earn money, Brady helped his father rebuild the lower level of the family cabin on Lake Almanor, about two hours northeast of Chico. During those weekends at the Lake, I sat on the couch upstairs and read, wrote in my journal, napped. The month of May was unseasonably cold and rainy, so I didn't go out often. I went for a run once, thinking the rain would hold off. After seven minutes, it started hailing. Brady's mother picked me up in her car.

"You shouldn't even bother this time of year," she told me.

I was alone for seven hours of the day, reading and staving off boredom with a series of naps, which were impossible next to the cacophony of Brady and his father gutting out old walls and erecting new ones. The rain wouldn't let up. Brady's mother always had friends visiting, but I didn't want to intrude on their conversation. All I wanted was for Brady to come upstairs to relieve me of my cabin fever, to make me feel

welcome in this strange house. I found myself singing a Joni Mitchell song called "Lesson in Survival," a song I'd always imagined was about being on a camping trip with your lover and all his loud friends, who make you feel like there's no space for you. Now, it feels like a treatise on the kind of quiet love every human being needs.

*I need my own quiet times
By a river flowin'
You and me
Deep kisses and the sun goin' down*

By July, the heat had zapped the last of June Gloom, and the Sierras looked like a desert again. When we spent weekends back in Chico, we often shopped downtown. One Sunday, I ducked into a record shop, where I found an old copy of *Ladies of the Canyon*, the one I didn't have yet, the one I needed.

"You don't even have a record player," Brady said.

"Not here I don't."

"Seems like a waste." He was always skeptical of my purchases. When I bought fresh flowers from the grocery store, he told me there was no point because they'd die eventually.

"Not a waste," I said, sliding \$5.00 across the counter towards the cashier.

When we got in the car, I took out the record and saw, in blue pen, a signature at the bottom of the sleeve. It was Joni's autograph. I showed Brady. Even he had to admit it looked authentic.

We broke up after our carefree California summer, which seemed less carefree in the raw morning light after restless nights of wondering what I did wrong. Although we planned to stay together after Brady left for London and I moved to Chicago, we barely lasted a month. I handled being blindsided as best as I could: I shut down, thinking my vow never to speak to him symbolized some sort of power over him, when really he was the one who had left the scene of the crime while I walked around the littered industrial streets of Chicago like an open wound. I didn't hear from Brady until after New Year's. He was back in California on a break from school, driving from Chico to Tahoe to see his best friend Eric, when someone called to tell him that Eric had drowned in a canoe accident in Lake Tahoe. Eric always lived dangerously: he had a kind of gonzo-vibe about him, what with the drugs and the feverish writing. Months before, he had broken his leg in a climbing accident, an injury that could have been avoided if he had used a landing pad. I hated to admit it, but in some ways his death came as no surprise. I didn't know if he had been wearing a life vest on his canoe trip, but somehow I doubted it.

After Brady broke his silence to tell me what happened, I walked for hours around the blustery city and didn't return until it was dark. I felt buried in a whole other layer of grief, my face wind-chafed and tight with salty tears, so depressed that I couldn't even listen to music, couldn't even transform the breakup into self-love the way Joni had taught me. I later heard that none of Eric's friends attended his funeral, not even Brady. It horrified me, but somehow fit my new understanding of Brady, the man who wouldn't buy flowers.

I didn't listen to Joni Mitchell again until that spring, riding the bus home from my miserable job as a receptionist. The high school kids, rowdy from dismissal, boarded in droves at each stop. I scooted toward the window to make more room, and stuffed my headphones in my ears to tune out the kids' howling. I had never listened to Joni's first album, *Songs of a Seagull*, all the way through. For the first time since high school, I let the music make me cry. My heart felt like the cactus in "Cactus Tree," full and hollow. For the first time since high school, I felt emptied by sadness, but this emptiness was just making room for better love. The bus windows weren't fogged with condensation anymore. The snow was melting, revealing patches of yellow grass. In a month, the grass would be green, and I wouldn't be armored in my winter coat anymore.

I'll admit it: I've never listened to any Joni Mitchell album as much as I've listened to *Blue* or *Song to a Seagull*. I've graduated from *Blue* to *For The Roses* as my favorite Joni album, but only because I've listened to *Blue* so much that I don't want to ruin it. When I hear Joni's 2003 rendition of "Both Sides Now," I miss the brightness in her voice, I miss her youth. This is not something I should admit. I'm supposed to grow old with her albums, to appreciate her jazz albums the way I appreciate her folk albums. Rejecting her later work makes me feel like the man who screamed "Judas!" at Bob Dylan in 1966. I'm so naïve. I want to hear albums like *Mingus* and *Hejira* and feel something, but all I feel is my attention wandering.

As of this moment, Joni Mitchell is still in the hospital recovering, allegedly growing stronger ever day. Maybe she will be released tomorrow and life will go on, but one of these days I'm going to wake up to that dreaded *New York Times* headline. I will be faced with the Pseudo Fan, and I will I have to stop myself from gauchely claiming an untouchable understanding of her. I will have to stop assuming that my friends who will grieve over her probably only listened to her greatest hits, because I guess I'm not that much different. I am the superficial Joniphile Megan Daum describes in her essay, the one with Joni's early albums in their parents' log cabins, if my parents had a log cabin. Surely I would have been one of the college peers who frowned at Zadie Smith, too, if she told me that she couldn't stand Joni. I don't know all of Joni's work the way some people do, but that doesn't make me feel any less connected to her music. I can't claim to intimately know her, but I can intimately know the feelings inside me that she elicits. I can hear her music and let my sorrow evolve into joy, but only when I make room in my heart for both.

JON

The picture of Fabrizio Moretti and me is in a shoebox at my parents' house. It's hidden under layers of glossy middle school photos, mostly ones of my best friends Emma and Meg and me rolling around the carpeted floors of our rooms after drinking too much root beer. Fabrizio was the drummer for The Strokes, and the second of two celebrities that I thought I would marry, Heath Ledger being the first. Ledger died when I was in college, but Fab, as his bandmates called him, is alive and well. I've watched those cherubic, Brazilian curls bounce on stage at least three times, which was as much as I ever will in this life because the band hit its peak a long time ago—their last two albums are barely tolerable. When I was a teenager, I was convinced that I would be front and center at every concert well into my thirties, which was as far into the future as I could imagine. I realize now how young I was, and how young they were—just boys. In 2002, I was fourteen. Fabrizio was just shy of twenty-three.

In the photograph, my pubescence is painfully apparent. No matter how hip I thought I was in my grey gap sweatshirt, flared jeans, and orange beaded bag (with tassles), I still have braces. In my photo with Fab, my face is as pale and round as a Babybel cheese, and my excruciating excitement at meeting my celebrity crush eclipses any pretense of coolness. I'm wearing a knit hat that my grandma knitted for my mother, with a kitten face on it.

Fab, of course, looks amazing. He's taken his cigarette out of his mouth and dangles it casually at his side, just above the rips in his jeans, so wide you can see his SCRAWNY knees. It was the Year of the Trucker Hat, soon to be an obnoxious trend appropriated by duck-faced L.A. girls on Myspace. But in 2002, Fab was hipster before my friends and I even knew what it meant, with his Von Dutch cap, his black curls licking the mesh panels at the sides. I still look for a vintage jean jacket like the one he wears in the picture: sky blue, perfectly faded, a pack of cigarettes impressed into the left pocket.

Funny how old photos can seem to stand for a period in your life, even if you only wore that t-shirt for six months, or only listened to that band for a year. But I *did* wear that t-shirt and listen to that band—every day. Their music and my image obsessed me. And then it was over, and I was searching for boyfriends as obsessively as I once searched for bootlegged live recordings of *Is This It* on Kazaa.

If it weren't for Meg's dad, Jon Bowers, the man who introduced my friends and me to cool music, I would not be able to pick up that glossy photograph twelve years after it was taken and wince the way adults are supposed to at what you grew out of, the person you thought you were when you were fourteen. It's worse than what you actually looked like. It's what you thought you looked like that's humiliating. Jon was kind enough to see me not just for who I was—a clueless, tow-headed spaz who fell asleep to the *Titanic* soundtrack every night—but also for who I wanted to become.

Jon never judged us—just the music we listened to. He was the founder of the 9:30 Club, a music venue in D.C. that housed the growing alternative music scene, booking new wave, reggae, and gogo acts in the early 80's. Jon bought the space on 930 F Street in 1979, when the city was still recovering from the 1968 riots downtown, and punk was dead. 9:30 is thriving now, as are the neighborhoods surrounding it: U Street, Shaw, Columbia Heights, Petworth. The Club now headlines acts from Dr. Dog to Kendrick Lamar. At the time he bought it, Jon was booking REM and The Red Hot Chili Peppers before people even knew their names, and these bands were tickled to be unloading their equipment in the same alley that John Wilkes Booth ran through after assassinating Lincoln.

When Meg and I watched MTV in her den, Jon would lean in the doorway, smiling to himself. "This is crap," he'd mutter when he thought we weren't listening. We ignored him. We played *Big Willy Style* and *Spice World* in Meg's room during sleepovers, telling secrets under a ceiling of glow-in-the-dark sticky stars until Jon came in to tell us to turn it down and go to bed, dammit. He was usually up reading the *Washington Post* or eating a bowl of ice cream in the kitchen after midnight.

He'd grown up outside of Detroit, but he seemed like a punchy New Yorker, with a loud laugh, a wide yawn. He gave hugs that could squeeze the life out of you. He was as competitive as he was generous; as our softball coach in elementary school, he always put me in right field because he knew no one would hit it to me. I hated him on the field. Off the field, I loved him like a daughter, and he treated me like one: cutting

up my dinner for me or making sure I zipped up my coat before going outside. In the mornings after sleepovers, he smelled my breath to make sure I had brushed my teeth.

Jon sometimes stopped at Barnes and Noble after work and came home with a bag full of new CDs, some for Meg, some for himself: The Clash, The Cure, The Violent Femmes, Fiona Apple. I could never tell if Meg actually liked the music her dad brought home or if she said she did just to please him, but she wore out the punk and garage rock albums he gave her nonetheless. Meg had her father's elegant Italian nose and thick hair—it was impossible to comb through when our school has a lice infestation—and like Jon, she was competitive and mischievous, with a wicked sense of humor.

The first cool band I took notice of was the Wallflowers. When Jon brought home their album *Bringing Down the Horse* in his plastic bag of CDs, Meg and I listened to it in the nook of her bedroom window. I liked the beat, and the gravelly voice of the lead singer, Jakob Dylan, who sounded like he was whispering. Was this rock 'n roll? The blues? What *were* the blues, anyway? My favorite music from my parents' collection was Aretha Franklin and "Octopus's Garden." When we were nine years old, Jon took us to see the Wallflowers in concert at Merriweather Post, an outdoor venue in the Maryland boonies. Even today, when I happen to hear "One Headlight" on the radio, I think of Jon in the seat next to me, the curve in the bridge of his nose, the Mick Jagger pout of his lips, and his bobbing head. My first lesson in looking cool: at a rock concert, don't let on that you're enjoying it too much.

The following year, Jon took us to see Eagle Eye Cherry at the 9:30 Club. No one remembers Eagle Eye Cherry, or knows his real name, but his one-hit-wonder, "Save Tonight," topped the charts in 1998, and for a year and I listened to it on repeat.

"Let's meet him," Jon said after the show. He led the way, weaving through a line of eager fans, who stared at us as if we were babies in Halloween costumes. Eagle Eye was beyond the curtain, signing photos. I didn't have a photo, or my ticket, so I handed him a 9:30 calendar to sign.

"Isn't it past your bedtime?" he joked.

Jon quoted that line all the way home in the car. "Hah! 'Isn't it past your bedtime.' Did you hear him, girls?" He glanced at us in the rear view mirror. "Man, you guys looked so cool," he said, shaking his head, as if he'd forgotten that he had been our ticket in.

Jon brought home *Is This It* when it first came out in 2001. Meg and I were in middle school: I was suffering at Alice Deal Junior High, and Meg was adjusting to a comparatively "better" school, National Cathedral, a private all-girls K-12 in Woodley Park. I was getting verbally harassed by black kids; Meg was getting shunned by anorexic white girls. I longed for the days when we walked home together from Lafayette Elementary, did our homework in front of the TV, and I'd end up staying for dinner.

I didn't "get" *Is This It* at first. It was heavy on the rhythm guitar, and the lead singer sounded sleepy. The album cover was mesmerizing, though: bright orange with a starry, swirling turquoise design all over it. Jon let me borrow the CD and I let it sit on my desk until New Year's Eve. My parents were downstairs, hosting a party, dancing to *Sticky Fingers* and whooping the way parents do when they drink too much champagne. In one of the least cool moments in my life, sitting alone on the floor of my room on New Year's Eve with my cat curled up next to me, I discovered The Strokes. My brain felt plugged in. I *loved* the rhythm guitar. I loved the long-distance-call effect on the vocals, the percussion that sounded like a drum machine. I had never gotten drunk, but suddenly I wanted to. I wanted the party, the hook up, the hangover, the early-adulthood ennui.

I spent 2002 completely obsessed with The Strokes and myself. I joined the fan club and bought every magazine that might have any reference to them: *Spin*, *NME*, *Rolling Stone*. My Livejournal was covered in band photos and close-ups of Fab Moretti. I read every article, every interview, and compulsively checked their website for photo updates. I also thought about outfits a lot: ones I wanted but couldn't afford. I had finally escaped Alice Deal and was attending The Field School, a small, "quirky" private school just north of Georgetown, where lots of girls like me catwalked through their freshman year with their mothers' credit cards. I didn't have a leather jacket like the ones I saw in *Teen Vogue*, and knew better than to ask for one. I made do with the wardrobe I had: flared burgundy corduroys that stopped at my ankles, stained hoodie sweatshirts that shrank in the wash and exposed my belly button. "Our style happens to

be one of not giving a shit,” Fab Moretti said in a *Spin* article in 2003, but not giving a shit was harder than it looked. I borrowed t-shirts from my mom’s closet that she had kept since the 80s, including one with a cartoon of a cat staring into a gramophone—another gift from my grandmother. I made sure that the only new item in my closet was a pair of forest green Chuck Taylor low-tops. I weaved my Strokes Fan Club shoelaces into its eyes, not really caring whether it was cool or not.

Meg and I still kept in touch and in October of our freshman year, Jon scored tickets to see the Rolling Stones at Redskins Stadium. The Strokes were opening for them, Jon reminded us before the show—not headlining. We didn’t care. For weeks, we planned our outfits and what we would say if we got close enough to them to say anything. Jon had an extra ticket, which he offered to my dad. I tried to listen to the Stones’ *12 x 5* album that my dad gave me for Christmas, but it didn’t grab me as much as The Strokes did. When the day finally came, the five of us, Jon, Meg, Emma, and my dad and I, piled into Jon’s purple Dodge Caravan, and made the hour-long drive to Landover, Maryland. Our seats were stage left, in a balcony—close but not close enough. Jon and my dad sat in their assigned seats while Emma and Meg and I tried to sneak up to the front of our section. The security guards shooed us back to our row. The Strokes came on before the stadium was even half full, and played a short set, though as usual, there were plenty of drunken, on-stage kisses between band members. They played all of our favorites—“Hard To Explain,” “Soma,” “Alone, Together”—but the crowd was remarkably subdued. Only a couple teenagers in the front danced. “You guys are great,” Julian called to them, but I could hear the disappointment in his voice. A

reviewer for *Spin* reported Nick Valensi saying afterward, “I felt like we were little kids at a grown-up party.”

Much to our delight, the boys showed up in the crowd after their set to watch the Stones, who, of course, killed it. Jagger wore a gold cape and popped and squawked and pecked like a rooster, or like one of those blow-up figures you see flailing outside of car dealerships.

During the last encore, a huge, wet mouth appeared on the digital screen behind them and licked its fat red lips. Gigantic cylinders of confetti exploded near the stage, speckling the crowd with rainbow dots, just like at the Super Bowl. Fab was sitting on a table next to one of the machines, underneath the sound tent. I watched him watch the torrent of rainbow sprinkles surging out of the unassuming tube. He stared at the stream admiringly, as if he were debating whether to reach out and touch it. When the show was over, we rushed to the edge of the balcony. I screamed Fab’s name and he looked up at me. I blew him a kiss. He blew one back.

“Jon’s knowledge about music is just *encyclopedic*,” my dad used to say. The one time he tried to take us to a concert at 9:30 was when Emma and Meg and I wanted to see a terrible band called The Hot, Hot, Heat. My dad took us in his work clothes, suspenders and all, and slept on the floor during the set. I pretended I didn’t see him.

A year after the Redskins Stadium Show, Emma and Meg and I were standing outside in the November cold at Constitution Hall. The Strokes had just gone inside and I had made a fool of myself in front of my biggest crush—and I hadn't even seen the picture of us yet. I had bought a bag of plastic toy dinosaurs for him, after reading in an *NME* article that he liked herbivores, and interrupted him as he was smoking and laughing with some roadies by the back door.

“Hey Fab, I don't know if you remember me—I blew you a kiss at the Rolling Stones concert?”

He took a long drag of his cigarette.

“We were in the balcony, you know—not a *balcony* but like kind of above the stage, to the left? And you were walking away and...well, anyway, here's a bag of dinosaurs because one time in *NME* you said you like herbivores? Except you called them 'vegetable-eating motherfuckers'? Well, anyway, we just thought it was so funny—do you want to take a picture with me?”

I was a wreck. Until that moment, I had felt so much older than fourteen. I knew who Television was for God's sakes, not to mention The Velvet Underground. I had seen the *Goddamn Rolling Stones*. I was a seasoned groupie, but without all the sex stuff.

Fab was kind enough to pose, although he hesitated before taking the bag of dinosaurs. I would like to think that he brought it into the tour bus later and the band played with them when they were on drugs, but I'll never know.

After everyone went inside, it was just the three of us with our bag of mini Milky Ways, which we thought we could use to bribe the security guards if we needed to. We started eating them. Jimmy Fallon, then on SNL, had his first and only hit that year, “Idiot Boyfriend,” and was opening for the Strokes. He came outside to ask where he could find a Starbucks and I took a picture with him too. Miraculously, he looks worse in the photo than I do. The photographer, either Meg or Emma, must have taken it before he was ready, because his lips are curled into an eerie toothless smile, which makes him look like Kermit The Frog.

Three other kids, slightly older than us—a blonde guy, his blonde girlfriend, and a third wheel—showed up after the excitement was over, wearing tight western t-shirts, skinny jeans, and Chucks. They looked the hipster part, but there was something artificial about their getup, like the CGBG t-shirts you could buy at Urban Outfitters. We mocked them behind their backs for thinking they could show up just two hours before the show and still meet the band. Please. We’d been there since four o’clock.

“Dude, I saw the guitarist wearing a shirt like this in the ‘Someday’ video and I *knew* I had to have it,” the blonde kid said. He lit a cigarette like someone who had never lit a cigarette before.

We made small talk in the parking lot, watching the roadies shuttle back and forth with equipment. I said hello to one guy who was carrying an amp. He looked like my guitar teacher, with the same blonde ponytail and blue eyes, but seemed older. He was on his second tour with the band. I was still mortified by my interaction with Fab,

so I just asked him how the tour was going and what the band was like. He was friendly, relaxed, and told us that the tour “kind of sucked most of the time.” Soon he invited us to take a peek inside the bus and warm up. He opened the door and led us all inside, including the clowns who’d showed up late. The bus was cozy, with dim cabin lights that made me feel sleepy. It wasn’t quite the shit-storm I was expecting: no smashed bottles or drug paraphernalia anywhere; just empty bags of Doritos and unmade bunks. We sat down on the stiff, fake suede couch cushions on either side of the cabin. The blonde kid started to light another cigarette.

“Dude, what the fuck?” the roadie said. “You can’t smoke in here. Take that shit outside.”

I was vindicated. The kid was officially not cool.

After that year, Meg and I gradually lost touch. We occasionally chatted on AIM—she had changed her screen name from Megasaurus88 to margaretw1977—1977 because “That’s when all the good music happened.” (Her middle name was Waldo, which she hated.) Jon had planted the seeds of a post-punk scholar, and she’d begun to look like those girls in the Street Style section of Teen Vogue. Braces had closed the gap in her teeth, and she’d started taking weekend trips to New York with her new friend, Katie. I wasn’t too disappointed. Emma and I had remained close, and some senior boys, nerdy music kids, had adopted me after I was spotted on the school shuttle listening to Velvet Underground’s self titled album. We would sit in Tommy’s basement

and eat Dove Bars and watch Mel Brooks movies. I had my first drink—a rum and coke—when I was fifteen, the night before the PSATs. It wasn't as glamorous as the lyrics in "Barely Legal" made it seem, but it was delicious.

In 2005, at age sixty, Jon was diagnosed with transitional cell carcinoma—kidney cancer. Meg and I were juniors in high school. I heard updates about his treatment from my parents or Emma's dad, Howard, who often drove over to the house and brought dinner to the family. Jon had always seemed so tough, so it shocked me when I ran into Howard on his way to the Bowers's house and he told me that Jon "wasn't doing so well." He had a plate of salmon covered in tin foil in the back seat of his Volvo, but his face told me that there weren't too many dinners left to bring. Still, I told myself that Jon would be fine. Meg would be fine. Lizzo, her sister, would be fine. Lynn, their mother, would be fine. The idea of death didn't strike me as an ending. It felt more like a diagnosis, not a prognosis.

Two months into my first year of college, in 2006, my dad called to tell me that Jon had died. I tried to explain to my roommate why it was so upsetting. It wasn't just that was close to Jon's daughter—I was close to Jon. At least I had been. I hated myself for not visiting him, or Meg either, before the end. I hadn't wanted to see him like that, so enfeebled. I wanted to remember his thick, dark hair, his wide torso, his big laugh. I didn't want to see what chemo had done to him.

I called Meg. She didn't pick up. No one does in these situations, but I suspected that Meg had screened the call because we weren't close anymore. What was there for

us to say, beyond “I’m so sorry,” and “Thanks”? I fumbled my way through my voicemail, apologizing a hundred times, for not visiting her dad, and for my terrible voicemail, and told her that she could call me no matter what. She never did.

A few years later, after I graduated, I was home in DC again, about to go out to Chicago to live with some college friends. My dad had built me a bike and I took it out for its first ride through the neighborhood that evening. It was almost September, which meant the sun had already set. I biked a few blocks to Lafayette under the orange street lamps and made my way back up the hill towards my house again. But instead of turning home, I found myself on Meg’s street, where her mother still lived. Meg had graduated too, and moved to New York. She’d spent her first semester of freshman year at Michigan, her dad’s alma mater, but transferred to Wesleyan after he died. I pedaled faster down 31st, past the huge yellow plantation-looking house that we always assumed would have the best candy on Halloween, but only served Twizzlers; past the ancient oak trees that lined the sidewalk. I arrived at the Bowers’s brick colonial, where one light was on in the dining room. Lynn must have been home, and I hoped Lizzo, at least, was with her. It was too late to knock, so I mounted my bike again. It didn’t feel like the same street when I rode in the opposite direction.

The next day I wrote to Meg about my night ride to her house. I didn’t expect her to write back, just as I hadn’t expected her to call after I’d left her my rambling condolence voicemail. But she wrote back right away. “You don’t know how much it to

me to have people remember my dad," she said. "It happens less often than you would think."

When I think about Jon now, I still think about The Strokes. I still love music, but I wish I could feel the same obsession I felt for it now as I did then. Jon always felt that passion. Mine, I realize now, was partly a pose, as if I were perpetually taking my own picture. I loved the look as much as the music. I'm sure Jon recognized this shallowness in all of us girls, but he still thought we were the coolest kids he knew. I'm still obsessed with how I look, with vintage leather and denim, but my biggest obsessions are writers now. The jukeboxes at the bars I go to don't have The Strokes, at least not yet. They have The Stones, The Clash, even Velvet Underground. I put my quarters in and listen to the songs that shaped the man who helped to shape me. A man at the bar with thick, graying hair nods his head, as if to encourage me.

A CLEARING TREATMENT

Six hours before I was attacked by a stranger on a bridge in Missoula, Montana, I talked to my older sister, Lindsay, on the phone. She told me about her married Argentinian lover whom she met at a club, the fight she had with her best friend, her money troubles. She was working as an acupuncturist in Takoma Park, Maryland, and couldn't pay rent for her office space. She couldn't pay her student loans, either, which amounted to around \$60,000. But she wasn't worried. She was going to be a millionaire. If she envisioned herself rich, surrounded by a library of her own self-help books, and if she "deconstructed the cycle of suffering that our parents taught us was our reality," success would find her.

Lindsay tended to talk about "cycles" of things, "non-reality realities," and *qi*. Sometimes the *qi* was dead, usually around the cats' litterbox. She was still heartbroken over her 20-year old lover, a boy 8 years her junior, because a psychic told her that they were engaged in a previous life and were destined to be together. "Woo-woo," was what my mother called her. As a writer, I opened Lindsay's email newsletters to her clients like a workshop piece. *Too wordy. Awkward. Word choice. Rephrase. Examples?* Her newsletters featured lyrically opaque explanations of her spirituality. Her emails, on the other hand, were delightfully cynical, full of hilarious descriptions of people she met in clubs, scathing reviews of her conversations with the spiritually

bankrupt. I felt closest to her when we were writing to each other, and furthest when she told me about her problems, when I pictured her floating, her head like a balloon drifting over the rest of the world.

Before we got off the phone, she mentioned that she had someone who watched her from her bedroom window. She said it as casually as if she were telling me she'd gotten a parking ticket at Whole Foods.

"Like a Peeping Tom," she said. "I think it's my neighbor."

She lived in Columbia Heights, the sketchier part, many blocks from the Target, the vegan bakery, the Gold's Gym. Her neighbor was a man her age who lived with his mother. She'd noticed him peeping several times: the first time he was hiding in the bushes with his penis hanging out of his jeans. The second time she saw his face.

She hadn't called the police. She turned out the light and crouched in the corner of her room, next to her bed. She texted a friend. As she typed, she saw the man through the window, craning his neck to see where she had gone.

"I CAN SEE YOUR FACE, YOU ASS," she screamed from her corner. "AND I'M CALLING THE POLICE." The man vanished.

"So you *did* call them?" I said.

"Yeah. They asked me if I wanted to file a report and I said no."

I asked her why, trying to hide my frustration. She told me she didn't want cops driving up and down the street, freaking people out.

"It's not a big deal," she said. "I told my landlord and he installed a motion light."

A few months earlier, my sister had "accidentally" given out her number. She was walking home after a long run through the park, and a man sitting on a porch remarked how amazing it was that a beautiful woman could exercise in the neighborhood without being harassed. My sister, euphoric from exercise, failed to recognize the irony. She spoke to him for a few minutes about the changes in the neighborhood, and the man told her he wanted to take her out sometime. He was older than her by a few decades. His stomach sagged over his belt and his breath smelled like weed. But like many women, who are crippled by the desire to be "friendly" and "liked" in potentially dangerous situations, my sister felt trapped. "It was like I was in middle school again," she told me. She handed him her number. Giving it to him was the only way he would leave her alone. She could screen his calls.

The man called her at 5AM on Easter Sunday, and every day for two weeks. At last, she blocked his number.

When she told me stories like these, it always reminded me of the story she never talked about. She was seven, walking home from school with her friend when a

man jumped out of the bushes and exposed himself. I don't remember much more than that, except that the school was alerted, and the next day, I saw an undercover cop in a black Cadillac with a scratched passenger door drive by the school, speaking into a walkie-talkie. I pictured my sister and her friend Allison running away when they saw the man in the bushes. They sprinted down the sidewalk in floral skirts, the barrettes in their hair bouncing. In my imagination, the man looked like Timothy McVeigh, whose face I saw on TV a month earlier: pale, with hair cut so close you could see his scalp, an undershirt, stained brown at the armpits. A blur where he penis would be.

Six hours after my conversation with Lindsay, I was on that bridge, in a chokehold. A man, a stranger, had followed me, removed his shoes, and sneaked up behind me. When he wrestled me to the ground, when I thought I was going to die, I thought of my friends at the bar three blocks behind me, paying their tabs and unlocking their bikes to go home. I didn't want them see me like this, curled on the sidewalk, blue in the face from asphyxiation, my skirt wet with urine. I thought of Jules, who always thinks everyone drives too drunk, too fast. She lectures her friends who don't wear helmets. When we tube down the Clark Fork River, she looks behind her to make sure she hasn't lost anyone; a mother duck with her ducklings. She's the one who took me to the hospital afterwards. But on the bridge I didn't have her, or any anybody telling me to fight back. I had the fear of an ugly death. I scratched at the man's arms, I screamed when I found enough air to breathe. People ran to help me, the man fled, was caught.

A woman dropped her bike in the road and leapt over the guardrail to hold me. She was older than me, in her late thirties, and I never found out her name. She rubbed my back until the police showed up. It was hard to let go of her.

I spent the days after the attack with an entourage of women. They escorted me to and from work, to the gym, and even to the grocery store. Emma played Beyoncé for me. Natalie bought me a sandwich. I showered at Alicia's, slept on the couch at Jules's. I jolted awake when cars passed by, their shadows towering over me on the wall. PTSD made it hard to let surprises surprise you. My body would remember the man's arms around my throat and send a deluge of adrenaline to my neck, making my tongue feel fuzzy. Sometimes I had panic attacks just from being afraid of getting a panic attack. Day-to-day life was a minefield, and everyone understood that I couldn't walk through it alone.

Weeks later, hoping to escape all my triggers, I joined my family for a vacation in upstate New York. My parents had rented a house on Lake Ontario, and although the scenery was beautiful, the neighborhood wasn't as secluded as I'd hoped. The house was on a paved road infested with roaring SUVs and white-haired men walking terriers. Folks waved to you from their porches as you walked past them, or gave you a "Thanks/Hi" wave with their thumbs hooked to the steering wheel as they drove by. You couldn't sit out front in the Adirondack chairs in a bathing suit without feeling like you were being watched.

The house was cramped too, with wall-to-wall carpeting, plush couches that overwhelmed the living room, and fake vintage wall decorations that said things like, “Keep Calm and Drink Wine,” and “Live. Laugh. Love.” My family, none of us shorter than 5-foot-eight, had to duck under low-hanging pots in the middle of the tiny kitchen. “No awareness of the *qi*,” Lindsay said.

The door to the basement, where my sister and I shared a bedroom, was down a small hallway next to my parents’ room. One day I came upstairs and opened the door on my father, who happened to be walking by at the same time. The door slammed against his shoulders, forcing me backwards. Adrenaline ignited in my body, and I started screaming at him. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” “What the fuck is wrong with *you*?” he said.

I ran out of the house, slamming the screen door behind me. I walked along the lake, trembling, like a soldier who hears a balloon pop, a rape victim who smells her attacker’s cologne. I passed my neighbors on their porches watching the sunset, and forced my hand into a wave.

At a vista about two miles from the house, I sat on the shore to cry, finally. Across the lake, the low sun bloomed blood-red behind white houses. I pulled my knees to my chest and closed my eyes, trying to focus on the tide splashing against the rocks. After almost an hour, I felt calm again.

My dad was waiting for me when I came home. He held me and told me he was sorry, that he didn’t realize until I had left that I had been triggered. We both said sorry

for screaming at each other. I sat with him and my mom on the floor. My sister was lying on her belly a few feet away, writing in her journal. At one point, she put her pen down. “You are so much bigger than what happened to you,” she said.

The next morning, Lindsay insisted on giving me acupuncture. She got her Ziploc bag of packaged needles from her suitcase and told me to lie down on the floor upstairs in the loft that had a balcony above the kitchen and living room. I could hear my dad cracking peanuts on the counter beneath me, my mother making a sandwich. I lay on the brown carpeting in my boxers and t-shirt, self-conscious that I wasn’t wearing a bra, and waited for my sister. Lindsay came upstairs in her kimono, her thick, strawberry blonde hair pulled into a French bun on top of her head. We both have the same frizzy tendrils at the napes of our necks. Lindsay always played with mine when we sat next to each other.

“I want everyone to know,” Lindsay announced at the balcony, “that I’m giving Caitlin a treatment. Please hold her in your heart and help me create a space of healing.”

“Mokay,” my dad said, his mouth full.

Lindsay had treated me before, so I knew what to expect. First, she took my pulses. In acupuncture, each organ has its own pulse, and acupuncturists can determine if the organs are in sync by taking the patient’s pulse at different points on the wrist and

forearm. If an organ isn't in sync, the acupuncturist can direct *qi* to that organ by sticking a needle in the body on a point that is connected to it. A sore shoulder, for instance, is treated at the base of the thumb because the muscle that moves the thumb mimics the shoulder that moves the arm. When my menstrual cramps were bad, my sister would stick a needle between my toes. Different parts of the body had miniature, dollhouse versions of themselves. All the points had names like "Returning Current," "Broken Bowl," and "Palace of Weariness." My sister spent four years memorizing all of them.

When she'd finished taking my pulses, she gently squeezed my wrist. Her hands were soft and cold, like a pediatrician's.

"There's too much heat in your pericardium," she told me. "You know, around your heart? You're still in shock."

Lindsay, The Healer, was still a pleasant surprise for me. I always felt like I was meeting her for the first time, yet it also was familiar, as if we were kids again playing pretend. I could hear her breathing deeply over the splashing waves outside, creating a trance in which she could finally act as the older sister, the healer. When she concentrated on my body to find the correct points for needling, her mouth twisted into a grimace, as if she felt the pain for me. She slid needles into my skin in parallel lines down my spine. Some points stung more than others. This was called a *clearing treatment*, which practitioners use to treat patients suffering from trauma.

“I’ll be right back,” Lindsay said, her kimono grazing my arm as she stood. She returned with some crystals and her cell phone.

“I’m going to play some healing music.” A Native American drum thumped out of the phone’s tiny speakers. She circled my body, placing crystals on either end. Rose Quartz at my head, Amethyst at my feet.

She left me like that for what felt like an hour, enough time for me to fall asleep like a cat in the sun. When I woke up, a puddle of drool had formed at my mouth. Lindsay was sketching in her notebook. “Look,” she said. There I was, in faint traces of pencil, coming into focus.

The day before I left Lake Ontario, Lindsay and I went kayaking. I was feeling a little happier since my treatment, but couldn’t really tell much difference. Lindsay and I smoothed sunblock on each other’s backs and dragged the kayaks out of the garage on to the lake. Lindsay wore her tiny, silver American Apparel bikini, a green and white polka-dot visor, round sunglasses, and jelly sandals. Her style wavered between yoga instructor and “Di” from Clueless. When she was lounging, she wore diaphanous tunics and stretchy sweatpants with ballet flats. When she went out clubbing with her friends, she wore crop tops, sequined miniskirts and four-inch heels that made her rise to a daunting six-foot-four. She outlined her eyes in electric blue eyeliner, daubed her lips with fuchsia-pink lipstick. She blow-dried her hair and smoothed it with Moroccan oil

pooled in her palm, making it shine like a model's. Her look was over-the-top, but just flashy enough to get away with. Men went wild for her.

The kayaking trip turned into a photo shoot, as I expected. Lindsay had spent the vacation with her phone always within reach, in case she found herself in an Instagrammable moment. She also loved Snap Chat. The last major fight I had with her was at Christmas when she Snap-Chatted almost every scene of "It's A Wonderful Life." I was enraged that she let her impulse to "Share" ruin my favorite movie. I was also embarrassed for her. On the lake, she brought her iPhone with her and asked me to take photos, posing with her jellies daintily pointed in the air.

When we got to the shore, we pulled a raft out of the garage and lay on top of it with the water lapping at our feet. A wall of rocks shielded us from the road, safe from any male gaze. I was dozing off when Lindsay started telling me about the Brazilian church she'd joined, and the man she had met there a couple months ago.

"We had this crazy connection," she told me.

"Yeah?" I closed my eyes, hoping she couldn't see them behind my sunglasses.

"But he's kind of a drunk."

"Oh."

"And he's almost fifty."

"Oh."

Lindsay seemed only to date men who were either ten years older, or ten years younger. When he met her, the man from her church had been dating someone. He said Lindsay enchanted him. He started texting her late at night, telling her that he was going to break up with his girlfriend to be with her.

“I was attracted to him, but not necessarily in a sexy way, you know? I told him I just wanted to be friends, but he kept texting me. Then we went to a concert one night.”

I took off my sunglasses and faced her. She had turned away from me, studying the canvas on the raft.

“What happened?”

“Well, we got really drunk and he wanted to come home with me. He was far away from his house, so—“

“So he came over.”

She started drawing circles with a stone.

“Did you sleep with him?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t want to.”

I had heard this before, from almost every woman I knew. A man and a woman got drunk, or didn’t, and one person, usually the woman, was too timid or intimidated

to send the other person home. It wasn't consensual, but something always stopped you from calling it what it was.

"It really wasn't rape, Caitlin." Lindsay turned to face me. "But it was scary. He was saying really dirty things to me."

I asked her how she felt afterward.

"It was just totally fucking gross. Like I let him possess me. Like I let him steal a part of me. I didn't even leave my house the next day. It hurt down there. I cleaned my room. I cried a little bit. It wasn't rape, though."

I didn't want to be honest. I wanted to be kind.

"You can call it whatever you want," I told her. I pulled her towards me and held her, the way a woman did for me once.

NEW YORKERS

I arrived in New York in January with a cold. My mother dropped me off at Union Station and kissed me on the mouth, which we rarely do, but in the spirit of goodbye, we touched lips and she successfully passed on the worst rhinovirus I'd ever had in my life. I knew it when I got up the next morning in my friend's one-bedroom in Brooklyn Heights, my head throbbing, snot packed into my face like dynamite. I spent the next hour terrified that I would pass the illness on to Roger Angell, whom I was to meet for breakfast that morning.

Angell was a famed editor at the *New Yorker* and one of the best sports writers in America. He came from a legendary pedigree—his mother was the first fiction editor at the *New Yorker*, and E.B. White was his stepfather. He was famous for his brilliant, conversational essays, sharp editing, and friendly, generous demeanor. In the '70s, he served as my grandfather's editor, and helped him edit two stories before my grandfather's suicide in '77.

The novel I had decided to write about my grandfather was DOA. I started it because I felt I should. I never knew my grandfather, and always found it suspect that my mother never talked about him. He was a writer, and I felt a connection to him for that—at least I convinced myself I did. In all honesty, fiction wasn't really my thing: the book was originally going to be written as a kind of memoir, but I quickly realized that most of the people who knew my grandfather were dead. His brother, his old Army

buddy and best friend, his agent—all had passed on. The only people left alive who knew him were my mother and Roger Angell, and so I decided to fictionalize the story with what few resources I had. The piece hadn't quite caught sail, however. There just weren't enough sides of the story to tell. I got in touch with Angell through my friend, his stepdaughter, Emma, hoping that meeting him would resuscitate my contrived passion for the book.

My grandfather, Jake Murray, was one of seven siblings born from a well-to-do Irish Catholic family in the South Shore of Long Island. The Murrays were almost Kennedy-esque in their celebrity. Jake's great uncle, Thomas E. Murray, was the assistant to Thomas Edison and unofficially was the mastermind behind the light bulb. Jake was a Yalie, and served overseas in World War II. He and my grandmother married in 1947, and had my mom in '49. The marriage crumbled when my mom was thirteen—Jake was a drunk and a bipolar schizophrenic. He worked as a copyeditor for Bishop-Hayden Inc, an ad agency in New York, and lived in an efficiency in Greenwich Village, where my mom would visit on the weekends. He took her out to Broadway plays, like *How to Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* with Robert Morse, *A Family Affair*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In a collection of letters my mom kept from college, his writing is crisp and pleasant:

September 19, 1966

Dear Mousie,

I don't know whether this will be the first letter you get at Wheaton, but I hope so.

First of all, I'm sorry I was twitchy the other night at the show. This goes with the recovery of the illness, and I am much better now. I'm glad you enjoyed the play.

Everything goes well here. The book revision is fairly smooth and the job is very smooth—they fired the horror I worked for—and last weekend I got invited down to Water Mill by Arthur and Ero Williams who just bought a house that hasn't any furniture. But it has beds, so we slept okay and took the sun and the sand. Both Saturday and Sunday were beautiful.

Now, big sweetheart, do you need anything I can get you in N.Y.? Even money, if you need more money. I know you must be very busy, so don't bother to write unless you get the chance.

Love and Big xxxxxxxxxxxS,

Daddy

The 'D' in his signature loops into a smiling cartoon face.

In 1969, Little Brown & Company published Jake's first and only novel, *The Devil Walks on Water*, a 24-hour account of a teenage boy in the 1938 hurricane in South Hampton, which Kurt Vonnegut said featured "The best blow job in literary history."

It was the most gracious feedback he got out of *Devil Walks*, unfortunately. After it was published, Jake had a two pieces published in the *New Yorker*, “O’Phelan’s Drinking,” and “O’Phelan’s Dilemma.” Angell worked with him on both. The *New Yorker* did this often, allegedly—take chances on writers who were down on their luck, drunk, or homeless. These poor, huddled masses stayed on the payroll long after their brief moments of fame. In the late 60s, my grandfather’s illness took a turn for the worse. He missed my mother’s graduation after attempting suicide in 1967; the bullet grazed his head, leaving an ugly scar. He met Angell for the first time in 1976, when my mom was in law school, and was working with him on his second piece, “O’Phelan’s Drinking,” by ’77. “O’Phelan’s Drinking” is an autobiographical narrative of that spring ’67 breakdown: a man takes his kids to Nantucket a week after his release from a mental hospital. The kids in the story are Melinda, Jeff, and Matt—my mom and her two brothers.

When Angell told Jake the piece would have to be put on hold for a couple weeks while he caught up with some editing work, Jake started showing up at the office unannounced, usually drunk, demanding to see Willian Shawn, the editor. Sometimes Angell would find him asleep on the couch in the waiting room, his work boots next to him, and he would shake him awake and tell him to leave. After a few days of this, it became clear to Angell that Jake didn’t *have* a place to go. He had a brother, Tom, but Tom was out of town. It was winter in New York, and they felt they couldn’t turn him away in good conscience. Eventually, his visits started scaring the receptionists. Shawn told Angell to handle it. Roger took Jake into his office.

“I’m a staff member,” Jake said.

“You’re not a staff member, Jake,” Angell told him. “You’re a valued contributor. Come back when I’m done with my other stuff, and we’ll work on the story together.”

“I just want a place to hunker down,” Jake said.

“You can’t hunker down here.”

“This is it?”

“This is it.”

“Roger, goodbye.”

Jake left the building and no one ever saw him again. My mother always told me that he jumped off a bridge into the Hudson. His body turned up after the ice melted.

I got in touch with Angell a month before I arrived in New York to see if he would be willing to meet with me to talk about Jake. He wrote back right away, telling me he would be delighted to. His stepdaughter, a good friend of mine, set up the meeting. I would come over for breakfast with the family at Roger’s fifth-floor apartment on the Upper East Side the day after I arrived.

That first Sunday in January, I navigated my way from Brooklyn Heights, where I was staying with a friend, to 96th and Lexington. My phone was dead when I got out of the subway and I had to ask passersby where Madison Avenue was, much to their

amusement. I finally arrived at his apartment, a limestone building overlooking the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir in Central Park, and rang the intercom for apartment five. There was no doorman, not even a scratchy voice from the other end of the intercom. The door buzzed open, and I let myself into a small foyer with a potted orchid in front of a large mirror. It seemed obvious the elevator was intended for an apartment with a doorman. There were two unmarked buttons, and when I pressed the one at the top, it rang. I inspected the machine to see where the intercom might be, but before I could find one, the metal doors opened. I pried the gold accordion fence in front of it aside, and entered the lift.

The lift opened directly into Roger's apartment, where I was greeted by a jumpy fox terrier named Andy. In some ways, the apartment was exactly how I pictured an apartment uptown: dark hardwood floors, high ceilings, and valuable paintings all over the walls. It was huge, but like most nonagenarians' houses, it was timeworn, with balding oriental rugs, sagging white couches, and antique curtains. Nothing glitzy or contemporary, like the famous New Yorkers' apartments I envisioned. Everything the man needed had been there for years. It was Old Money.

The only lights that had been turned on were lamps, which, in the cloudy, late morning light, made the place feel like a cave. I met Roger in the dark of the hallway, where he extended a dry hand as thick as a catcher's mitt and told me it was a pleasure to meet me. He was a small man, with wool slacks up to his navel, dark-rimmed glasses

and a sparse, white mustache. I suddenly felt self-conscious about my torn black jeans. When I sat down on the couch, I covered my exposed knees.

The four of us, Roger, his wife Peggy, and her daughter—my friend Emma—and me, faced each other in the living room next to a large Christmas tree sprinkling its needles into a Steinway. It was a couple days after New Year's, and red knitted stockings still hung over the fireplace. Andy, the terrier, brought me a gutted toy squirrel. I started to play fetch with him, but Roger insisted that I not indulge him. Peggy offered me a mimosa, but I asked for orange juice instead because of my cold. Roger drank champagne. I asked him if I looked anything like my grandfather.

“All I remember is that he was tall,” he said.

I told Roger I admired his library, a floor-to ceiling collection built into the walls behind the piano. He started talking about Robert Graves, whose name I knew I should know but couldn't recall from where. We sat listening to the traffic outside the bay windows. Peggy announced it was time for brunch and we followed her into a dining room with carpeting the dull blue of an indoor swimming pool. In the window was an overgrown potted plant, its tendrils spilling over the radiator. A Metropolitan Museum print of “Girl With A Pearl Earring” hung on the wall over Roger's chair. On the table waiting for us was a china plate of bright pink salmon, small bowls of capers and diced red onion, and a wicker basket of bagels covered in cheesecloth.

“I have plain, everything, and sesame,” Peggy said. “I also have raisin.” She scrunched her nose.

“Only shikas eat raisin,” Emma said.

“Sesame, then,” I said.

Andy put his bristly head between my knees while I listened to Peggy tell stories about her time as a reporter at Newsweek. The room wasn't tense, per se, but I felt a shared nervousness over her husband's comfort, an electricity in the room that you could almost smell. Peggy didn't stop talking unless someone, usually Emma, interrupted her, but when she listened, her whole body lurched forward in earnest, like a child. She fussed over the small amount of cream cheese on Roger's plate, while Roger continued to drink his champagne. Every time I looked over, his glass was miraculously full.

Peggy and Roger had only recently married, but had known each other for years. Roger wrote about love after loss in a recent *New Yorker* piece, “This Old Man.” He quotes his late wife, Carol, who told him when she was dying, “If you haven't found someone else by a year after I'm gone, I'll come back and haunt you.” Peggy was over thirty years his junior, and when Emma expressed some pessimism over their engagement, Peggy told her, “I know. But we just really want to.”

“We'll give you and Roger time to talk,” Peggy said, standing to clear the plates. Emma followed her out of the room. I didn't want them to leave. I have a tendency, when I'm nervous around important people, to ask a question and while they're

answering it, to think of a list of questions to ask so that there will be no pauses. Then I end up not listening to anything they are saying. I had considered bringing a digital recorder, but I didn't want to make Roger feel uncomfortable, or treat an invitation to a pleasant brunch on a Sunday afternoon like a formal interview.

With Emma out of the room, the only thing we had in common was Jake. I started with their last meeting. Roger retold the story, but left off the part about the suicide.

“Do you remember which bridge he jumped off of?”

“Bridge?”

“My mom said he jumped off a bridge.”

“I don't think so. It was January, and colder than it is now, if you can imagine. After he left the office he must have gone to the Hudson and submerged himself in the water. He would have been in shock immediately.”

He fiddled with a sugar spoon, letting the small teardrop of coffee in its basin spill onto the tablecloth.

“Funny thing about memory—once you write a memory down, it's gone. It's become the thing you wrote about. Now I remember Jake as I wrote him.”

The Jake I knew from Roger's writing—the last chapter of his memoir, *Let Me Finish*, a speech at the Writers' Guild Award ceremony, and my grandfather's obituary—

was brilliant, but troubled. “A tall thin man of great style and humor and with an air of elegance and dash,” Angell described him in his obituary. In other references, my grandfather is missing teeth. The scar from his first suicide attempt mars his handsome face.

“Did you ever feel, you know, responsible? Or like, guilty?”

Roger thought a minute. Mortified that I had offended him, I backpedaled, telling him that he shouldn’t feel bad, of course not, but these things naturally have an effect on people, and—

“I don’t blame myself, no,” Roger said. “You don’t know what someone like that is going through; you can’t imagine. It’s like this big ball you have to walk around. You’ll never get through to fully understand it.”

A few minutes later, Peggy entered with a bowl of strawberries and a small dish of powdered sugar.

“Ah,” Roger said. “I know how to do this.” He dabbed a strawberry into the sugar, and popped it in his mouth.

“This Old Man” is, in some ways, a eulogy for Roger’s daughter, Callie, who committed suicide a few years ago. What surprises him is how the oceanic weight of grief that washed over him didn’t crush him. The faces of the dead return: the photographs, the gestures and glances, “that pale yellow Saks scarf,” will pop up out of

nowhere. “Callie returns, via a phone call. ‘Dad?’ It’s her, all right, her voice affectionately rising at the end—‘Da-ad?’—but sounding a bit impatient this time. She’s in a hurry.”

My mother never talked much about her dad. “What was there to say?” she would ask me when I was old enough, the rhetorical question a hard line. “He was sick. His work was licentious.” When she was a girl, she remembers going into his studio and reading a sex scene in a story he had left on his desk. A therapist once suggested he might have he left it there on purpose.

I called my mother after I left Roger’s apartment.

“What bridge did you say granddad jumped off of?”

“He didn’t jump off a bridge. I think it might have been a ferry, actually.”

The next day I felt worse: I had been awake almost all night, blowing my nose and coughing into couch cushions to avoid waking my friend. In the morning, I took a hot shower, hoping that the steam would clear out my nasal passages. I put on a blazer and some bubblegum pink lipstick, ate a fried egg, and made my way in the unforgiving cold towards the subway for my first day at Elle.

The Hearst building was monumental. In the marble lobby, waiting for my ID to be made, I felt the eyes of a hundred other interns on me: the 20-somethings of *Cosmopolitan* with their perfectly barrel-ironed hair, smoky eyeliner pinching their lids

into cat eyes. There were *Real Simple* girls with immaculate jewelry, gay boys with gleaming penny loafers for *Esquire*. Down the bench were the zaftig interns for *O Magazine*, and *Good Housekeeping* ladies with pearl earrings and sensible kitten heels.

The elevators perplexed me. There were eight of them waiting for me at the top of the escalator ride from the lobby, labeled A through H, and I walked inside the first door that opened. There were no buttons inside. I followed a flawless-looking black woman in six-inch boots to the 25th floor, watched her leave, and descended back to the lobby, alone. The doors opened and I asked a woman outside how the elevator worked.

“You have to punch the floor number over there,” she said, pointing to a metal kiosk with a pin pad.

The day my nose dried up, I went for a run through the neighborhood. I stopped at the Brooklyn Bridge and took a photo with my phone. If my grandfather had jumped off a bridge, it wouldn't have been that one. But what did it matter? The closest I would ever get to knowing him was on the page.

RIDDLE

For the first time, I attended a memorial service over Memorial Day weekend. The service wasn't for a veteran. Jamie Wallace was a victim of a different kind of battle. A few months after starting hormone replacement therapy for his eventual sex reassignment surgery, he committed suicide. I never asked the details of his suicide, but his mother told us his death was "by his own hand," a phrase that I thought lent the incident its own kind of private dignity fit for a soldier.

A few months before he died, around Christmastime, Jamie had come out as transgender to his parents. He wanted to become a woman, but would keep his name, since it worked both ways, and why explain yourself more than you have to. Growing up, his body always seemed fragile: he had a concave chest, sinewy legs and bird-boned wrists. After puberty he had become almost exotic-looking, like those "ugly duckling" French models who'd grown up with gapped teeth.

He had been in my Sunday school at Dumbarton United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., and I last saw him at the church's Christmas Eve service, soon after he came out: his coarse, brown hair was long enough to tuck behind his ears. His face, once pocked with raspberry-colored scars from picking, had become smooth; his cheekbones sloped like a doll's. He was smiling. Tiny, black jewels studded his earlobes.

The day of the memorial service, the old church had cracked open the stained glass and you could hear birds singing in the magnolia trees. An altar at the front of the

room displayed Jamie's talismans: a worn baseball glove, a picture of the Smoky Mountains, a candle, a riddle typed on a fortune cookie-sized strip of paper. *I have an eye but cannot see. I'm faster than any man alive and have no limbs. What am I?* I didn't get it.

Jamie's parents, Barbara and Jim, had asked me if I would read a passage from "Song of Solomon" at the service. I only realized when I sat in the pews with the program pamphlet that the verse wasn't from the Toni Morrison book, but the Bible. I learned later that as far as Bible verses go, this was one of the sexier passages, basically a love poem from the Old Testament about the union between King Solomon and a Schulamite—a country girl. Some interpret it as an allegory for the marriage between God and His bride, the church; others read it as metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. But those are pretty clean interpretations. The fig tree kind of gives it away:

*Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,
Come with me
See! The winter has passed; the rains are over and gone
Flowers appear on the earth;
The season of singing has come,
The cooing of doves
Is heard in our land.
The fig tree forms its early fruit;*

The blossoming vines spread their fragrance.

Arise, come, my darling;

My beautiful one, come with me

I read the passage after the pastor greeted the congregation. The mic sounded fuzzy with static, and everyone who spoke into it seemed as distant and crackly as an old radio until halfway through the service, when a member of the congregation jimmied the wires and fixed it. I read the passage, trying to imagine that the words were my own. I was taught to read out loud slowly—you're always speaking faster than you think—but this made the words feel leaden. I hadn't been to a memorial service in years, not since my high school friend's dad dropped dead in the middle of his kitchen from a heart attack, and I was self-conscious in my black dress; everyone else had worn color. Hours before the service, I'd stood in front of my closet, fingering two different shades of black fabric from two different dresses until my boyfriend picked one for me. Jamie's mom sat at the front of the room with her husband, watching me in her coral sundress.

To everyone's palpable dread, the pastor read Jamie's final letter to his parents at their request. In the letter, Jamie said he'd been thinking about doing this for a while. A lot of people think you commit suicide because they don't feel loved, but this wasn't the case. He had never felt more warmth and acceptance than he had from his friends and family, but he was ready for "the next chapter," he wrote. He believed in reincarnation. He wanted rebirth.

I had a neighbor friend growing up who used to lie down in the middle of the street and wait to be hit by a car. His mother took him to therapy when he was five, and the therapist gave him a prescription for anti-depressants. The last I heard of my neighbor, he was living in Maryland, a recovering alcoholic. Once, on my fourth birthday, he walked down the street in a blizzard, wearing a magician's cape and hat to show me his dead parakeet. He didn't say anything, just unwrapped the paper towel to reveal the green bird, neon under blue twilight.

Dumbarton, the church I grew up in with Jamie, was profoundly liberal. We were part of the Reconciling Ministries movement, a national network of Methodist churches that openly accepted gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender folks. At Dumbarton, references to God as "He" and "Lord" were changed to "Her," or just "God." Church veterans even had the improvisation skills to sing the gender-neutral words when they came across them in the hymnal. Transgender members had been quietly slipping into the back row of the pews since I was a kid; sometimes I wouldn't notice the transgender women until I saw them join the baritones in the choir. Transgender men joined the contraltos, sometimes the altos. Dumbarton took in folks who had been rejected from their churches, their family. Our openness might have been the reason why, in the 90s, the Clintons joined Foundry Methodist Church on 16th Street, instead of ours. "We're too radical for Bill," my mom always said.

I talked to an old family friend after the service, and told him I thought that committing suicide was an "adult decision." When I said it, the friend stepped back a

few feet from me. I didn't mean to sound radical, but it was still a relatively radical concept, even for a Dumbartonian. Despite having no say in your birth, you could end your life whenever you felt it was time. If the miracle of life is predetermined, it might make death predetermined, too. Maybe fate was beyond anyone's control, like the weather.

Jamie had been adopted by his parents, and like most people, his life was a series of decisions he had no say in: his sex, even his gender, were all assigned to him the moment he left his mother's body, perhaps even before that. The last decision he made that was truly his own was to end his life.

I used to ask my mother why God allowed people to do bad things, to kill or get killed. I heard suicide was a sin, but our church focused on compassion. But if God didn't want people to kill themselves, why would he give them the power to do so? "God isn't a puppeteer, sweetie," she would tell me. Her explanation made me think of God as some Geppetto-like maestro, fashioning the puppet but allowing him to break the strings. In the traditional story of *Pinocchio*, the carpenter, Mister Antonio, sells Geppetto the piece of magic pinewood that the puppet is carved from. Once carved, the puppet laughs in his creator's face and steals his wig. When Geppetto teaches Pinocchio how to walk, he flees.

Pinocchio is visited throughout the story by The Fairy With The Turquoise Hair, whom he finds in a cabin in the woods. The Fairy chides him for bad behavior and curses him with the infamous protracting nose. Every time Pinocchio lies, the nose

blows his cover. After Pinocchio is launched from the spout of The Terrible Dogfish, The Fairy With The Turquoise Hair transforms Pinocchio into a “real boy,” free of the phallic proboscis.

A few weeks after Jamie’s death, Caitlyn Jenner, formerly Bruce Jenner, made her debut as a woman in *Vanity Fair*, with the headline, “Call me Caitlyn.” In the article, Jenner tells writer Buzz Bissinger that her former persona, Bruce, was “always telling lies.” Caitlyn “doesn’t have any lies.” As Bruce, she made public appearances wearing a bra and pantyhose underneath her suits. She underwent hormone replacement surgery in the early nineties, but stopped treatment after she started dating Kris Jenner, of Kardashian fame. Caitlyn was permitted to cross-dress when the couple was apart, but never in public.

Since the operation, Jenner anticipates girls’ nights where “You can talk about anything you want to talk about. You can talk about outfits. You can talk about hair and makeup, anything you want. It becomes not a big deal.” The apparent lies that Caitlyn told herself were to make life more bearable, even as her friends and family caught on to her gender dysphoria. Then, through the magic of surgery, her gender became the fantasy that many people undergoing transition long for, that is, “not a big deal.” The Fairy with the Turquoise Hair forgives her lie.

Social media’s response to the article was almost unanimously positive. People called Caitlyn brave, and lauded her for making it through years of struggling in what felt like the wrong body. Other folks, while happy for Caitlyn, pointed out that most trans

people didn't have the means or the support to adhere to cultural standards of beauty: the touseled hair, valentine face, and Jessica Lange lips cost thousands of dollars in surgeries. She was a woman in Hollywood splendor, with makeup artists and mimosas, white satin bustiers, breast implants. A campaign started in response to the *Vanity Fair* feature, where trans women cut and pasted their own photos underneath the *Vanity Fair* insignia. "Call Me _____," the headline read, blank so that users could enter their own names. Many left it blank.

Jamie and I took sex ed together. Our teacher, Melanie, had been kicked out of her last church because of her open relationship with her partner, Cheryl. Over the course of a weekend, we learned about the difference between sex and gender, gay relationships, straight, monogamous, polyamorous. The words fell out of our prepubescent mouths like marbles. "Now wait a minute," Melanie said to me once after I tried to define sex as "requiring a penis." She stood with fleshy arms akimbo at the front of the room, her face scrunched in judgment. The phallogentrism of my comment suddenly hit me, and shut me up for the rest of the weekend.

There were two boys in the class, Jamie and Daniel, and I knew they were the exception to the rule: "real" men were dogs. Once, Melanie asked Daniel what he would do if he saw that a female friend had a period stain on her pants. "I would pull her aside and tell her," Daniel said. Sweet, but stupid, I thought at the time. The right answer was obviously to tell her friend to tell her. Jamie was silent throughout the

seminar, sitting with his legs crossed, peering intently at the carpet with his back against a mural of Noah's Ark on the wall.

June was gay pride month. On the day of the parade in DC, my boyfriend was working and I didn't have too many friends yet, so I walked a block from my apartment by myself. I stopped at the steel gates blocking 17th and R, and stood among groups of men and women passing red solo cups back and forth to each other. During the parade, float after float coasted down the street. Lithe men in tank tops cartwheeled in front of them; drag queens perched on thrones patted their brows with paper towels, careful not to smudge their makeup in the heat. Mardi Gras necklaces rained down on the crowd. Couples kissed in front of me, spilling their margaritas. I longed to talk to someone, to make a connection among the people who looked like they belonged. A float rolled by, igniting rainbow confetti into the humid air. A gust of wind twirled the residual tissue paper into a cyclone.

"Oh my God," the man next to me said. "It's a gay tornado."

"A *gaynado*," his friend said. The two of them screamed with laughter. I got the joke.