ASSISTED LIVING

stories

A Thesis

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by

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Atlanta with extended family in Chicago, Jacqueline Reitzes worked as an editor on her high school literary magazine and played varsity basketball, receiving awards for poetry and the Williams College Book Award for academic excellence. She majored in English at the University of Michigan, where she was selected for the New England Literature Program and Wellesley College's foreign study in Aix-en-Provence. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa and with Honors. After working in publishing in New York City, she received an MFA from Cornell University, where she was an Assistant Editor at Epoch and a Lecturer.

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Dodge and Burn

He liked to crash the university's dark room to develop his prints. She followed him there that first time, a high-school insomniac enrolled in a college-intro photography course. There he showed her the steps, gliding her fingers in the darkness: the developing tank, a slow shake of the film canister. How to pour fixer and agitate the negatives in glassy mixtures of chemistry she didn't really understand. The stop-bath. The film rubbing and purpling the water. The blackened squares of failure when you over-develop. "You have to know how to get in and get out," Seth told her, hanging a crystallized wet square beneath an overexposed one.

At first, Julia knew his face most closely under the red light. Shirts that glowed lint particles and contact lenses emanating two green, foggy discs. Or the rubbery smell of his hands passing over her lips in complete dark.

She got good at enlarging. "That's it," he'd say, as she flipped the switch, bathing the glass surface in quick, mote-sparkled light, as she would project the smallest upside-down detail: a muffin crumb, a cake of soap, into something else, something that looked on paper more majestic than it really was.

The day was early spring in Chicago, one of those chilling mornings. Julia was twenty-three. She did freelance photography and worked at a hotdog stand called The Wiener and Still Champion.

"'Morning, Egg," said Flounder, Julia's red-headed boyfriend, as he felt around for his glasses somewhere on the night table, the whole needing your glasses to locate your glasses paradox. Flounder called her Egg because that was the name of her favorite character in *The Hotel New Hampshire.*

"What?" Julia answered, as was Egg's custom, but her mouth was lifeless as she said it, cottony from the weed smoked the night before, as smudges of her last dream upon waking began to fade like thumbprints on a steamy window. Yesterday she had found the negatives.

Flounder looked like a fish. He was a self-proclaimed computer geek in his last year at Northwestern. They shared an apartment above a used clothing store called The Crowded Closet, which overlooked one of the leafy, brick-lined streets in Evanston that ran along the train tracks. They had artistic friends without direction and practical ones with too much of it. They drank pumpkin beer in the fall at a local brewing company and mojitos on their fire escape in the summer. They smoked Camel Lights and bowls of pot, the bowls from Flounder's collection, his favorite a bluish crystal one from Venice.

She accidentally dug out the film sleeve from Flounder's bottom drawer, where she'd been rummaging for his Zippo. A drawer she hadn't looked in since Flounder had moved in; mostly video games, hiking socks, a Swiss army knife, stray baseball cards from the '80's Cubs. A line of five negatives whose prints she had since thrown away. Does he know these are even here, Julia wondered. Did he ever look at them? Seth had posed for her, a rare thing given his ADD shiftiness, his propensity to shuffle, pace, jab his toe into an imaginary pitcher's mound and then, turning as if from across a distance, grin at her in a slowed down, shrugging kind of pause.

The photos had been shot in her previous apartment, the tile molding behind him in her old bathroom. A solitary light bulb haloed his profile, the darkness of his sweat-spiked hair, eyes, and lashes in sharp relief from the over-exposed sink and faucet. He was wearing only a white undershirt and jeans. Painting the ceiling with a

wide bristle brush, Seth's wrists and back muscles were a little blurry from his perpetual motion, which seemed to swirl around him. The skin on his forearms shimmered bronze and gritty.

She had found Flounder's Zippo and returned to the fire escape, where he and his old roommates were grilling the bratwurst Julia had liberated from the walk-in freezer at work. Otis Redding drifted over the rising smoke of burnt onions from the laptop's play-list inside.

"Thanks, Julia," he'd said, retrieving his lighter from her palm and then pulling her onto his lap. She smiled and squinted through the sinking sun. He ruffled her hair like he would a good dog and then turned back to his friends.

"Watch this—see how good I'm getting?"

"Yep. Chicks love the Zippos, man."

Lying in bed, she recalled her dream. The morning light broke upon a fading image. She saw Seth, his dyed orange hair still black at the roots, like charred wood leading to flame. His whole body—the worn black cotton t-shirts, the chained belt, the skinny arms, seemed on fire; his smile a demonic one, and shallow. In the dream she felt the vague certainty one finds of knowing without having to see, and she felt herself witness to the moment before he was to commit suicide. In reality, of course, he hadn't, but truth feels more real when it lies in that grainy cave beneath shut lids.

Before Flounder, Julia hadn't known anyone who owned a Swiss Army knife. She didn't even own an umbrella. To her an occasional soaking cleared the head. She did not believe in hot water bottles or clipping coupons or balancing a checkbook or pushing a credit card without a prayer to the bank-account gods to please not let this one get declined in public.

Flounder never smoked cigarettes. But he spent a whole lot of time swiping the coast of his hand back and forth over the roller of his Zippo, until he had perfected opening and lighting at the same time. He wanted to be an engineer or an architect; graph paper splayed across the floor and his desk. He did his dishes and emptied the trash and knew real card tricks. Once he'd figured out his opener, he began trying to learn to snap the flame to life with his fingertips. Flounder was a believer in rehearsed-cool. He was not one who could coax flame from its cradle without practice.

An idea rippled through her brought on by the knowledge of those buried negatives, by the dream, by the day, by the slow progression, her life inching toward mundane. She didn't admit how, at times, her thoughts still wandered toward him, as across a newly vacated bed, feet still fleck for contact, the body's memory a slow unlearning of dance steps. She remembered the way he'd first taught her to focus a lens, how to work the F-stop and the shutter. The snapshots he'd taken of her on the roof. She remembered how rare it felt to see how someone else sees you, and she'd believed then that she was beautiful, not because he'd ever said as much, but because of the way those photos drew light about her face like the clutch of a lover.

"Flounder, you have to go to class right now?" Her words came out muffled, a pillow over the back of her head to block out the shadows of gray creeping through the blinds.

"Uh-huh, and you've got work, sleepy-ass," he said, pulling a hooded sweatshirt over his head, his glasses coming crooked with the movement; this she could also see without having to look. She felt his weight bounce the mattress; his hands yank away the pillow over her head, his body straddling hers like a warm electric blanket, sending what felt like ants up her legs.

"Hey, give me that pillow back." A shifting of legs and layers—jeans, blankets, skin.

"You drink too much last night?" he asked. She pulled him in closer, whispered he would be late for class, and ran her hands along his chest before taking off the sweatshirt he had just put on. He kissed her slowly and traced the line of her jaw with his mouth. Julia wanted this, hoping the feel of Flounder's fingers circling her hipbones would erase the potential of anything else. She kissed Flounder's neck, whispered, "I love you." She could feel his heavy breath in her ear, and she knew that it was Flounder who was her first bout with a stable, normal, not-screaming-at-each-other-and-then-screwing-it-all-right relationship, as it had been with Seth. Flounder who was her only reason for saying "yes" on the phone with her mother when asked if she was happy, and Julia knew he had saved her in a way.

She felt his thrusts quicken, his barely audible, low mutterings and her deepening gasps. She would not let herself think about Seth. She would not let herself go there again. This time she knew. This time would not crush her. She was okay. She was okay. She was okay.

She cried out and she came, her breaths quick and shallow. He kissed both her cheeks and then got re-dressed and said he'd see her tonight and they could maybe make a stir-fry or take a walk by the lake if it wasn't too cold. She sighed and rolled onto the pillow. She felt the kind of weepy gratitude for someone upon his leaving. The door clanked behind him. Morning sounds—the customer bell attached to the door, a register's clink, obscured employee chatter—started up in the store below.

Left by herself, she stuck one leg over the edge of the bed and resisted moving. She wondered if Flounder would be hungry, as he'd left without eating. Through the haze of flannel sheets and gray light she could see stray beer bottles.

Julia also wore glasses—smart, cat-eye tortoise shells to match her spiky brown and red highlighted hair. She found her camera next to the bed, a Nikon M90F she'd bought off a professor three years ago, focused the lens dial, and snapped a shot of the jam that collected overnight in the crevices of her toes from Flounder's oatmeal colored wool socks. She remembered the line of negatives in the drawer and felt sick. The day before she woke up happy and in love, and in the course of 24 hours, the world had lost its luster.

I will never again go see him, she told herself, never dial to tell him when a commercial recalls his penchant for Japanese action movies or that the grocery store has restocked his favorite chewing gum he thought had gone off the market.

She would call in sick to work. She needed the money, but the routine was starting to gnaw her, the fear that the world is going to end in nine minutes and you will be polishing off a list for the market or refilling your bottle of detergent, composing future children's names who are ten years away from being born. She needed a day to recharge, she decided, while crawling back in bed with the cordless phone. She considered her fingernail polish, a chipped maroon.

When she'd called Luis, the manager, he was yelling at one of the other cooks in Spanish, and then gave her a mouth-full-of-sauerkraut, "alright, sweetheart, feel better," as she hung up the phone and pulled on a pair of black pants and a cardigan. She looked good wearing the second hand clothes from The Crowded Closet. She liked to imagine who had worn these sweaters, these hula skirts, these army boots and fake pearls before her, as if she were donning a new personality with each new outfit.

At the El-stop she lit a cigarette and watched a man with a guitar sitting by the tracks. He played Leonard Cohen, and it fell flat as people collected around her with newspapers, with paper coffee cups, with cell phones.

She was headed for the city, not a decision she'd made so much as a concession, excited by his proximity without actually seeing him. Like how people on a diet make smell satiate. She didn't even know where he was, only the bar where he used to work. Maybe she'd parcel glass beads for the bracelets she sold twice a year to her mother's colleagues, buy curry powder for their stir-fry later or leaf through the Diane Arbus coffee-table book downtown. She'd kicked the habit, she told herself.

The car rattled and went under a tunnel, velocity like if you've ever sat on a washing machine as it jumps into being. She'd had sex with Seth once when she was still in high school in a 24-hour Laundromat late at night. His big green trench coat wrapped around her back as the washer whirled against her, growing louder as the shaking rattled her spine, her nose buried in the hollow of his clavicle, his shirt smelling like a field of sun-soaked grain. Afterwards he pulled out a fresh pair of boxers from the drier and they waited in the bar across the street for the last load to dry. That had felt exciting, once—the smell of fabric softener and the lights so steeped in neon, the blackness outside daring somebody to come in.

The voice on the subway car told her this was Adams. The car jolted to a stop, and as Julia descended, her legs still felt the tracks running beneath them. Your memory will keep you in certain trains, the sensations still running, a cartography of feeling. You still sense the motion, the laundry machines and subway cars and roller coasters in some crevice of your mind, humming between your ears, even though the ground beneath your feet is now sturdy. So how do you locate yourself, Julia wondered, with reality on one track and the mind skiing upwards, a separate slope on the graph. She touched the camera strap looped around her shoulder, touched her face with a gloved hand; the air was filmy, neither harsh nor mild.

The Art Institute of Chicago had been her favorite field trip in elementary school, and she decided this would be her first stop. Her mother let her take public

transportation after she turned twelve, and she'd listen as the streets tripped by in the voice of the bus driver. All the Great Lakes in his sing-songy call, "Hur-ron, Huron is Nnnn-ext." Ontario. Eerie. On they went as the bus lurched its way down Michigan Avenue. Michigan Avenue with the glassy storefronts of Marshall Fields and Water Tower Place. The Cheesecake Factory where her mother took her and her sister for thirteenth birthday after they'd gone ice-skating on State Street. The grand stone lions of the museum. The great steps under bold-colored banners flapping in the eternal Chicago wind.

The atrium was airy. Tables cluttered with brightly painted bookmarks, Van Gogh tote bags, Goya framed posters, Matisse glass mugs destined to leave water rings on someone's office desk. When she was younger she would visit the Impressionist gallery on the second floor, her shoes creaking the shiny wood, the best sound in the world. A smell like the dust of antiquity, of the facets of emeralds belonging to lost empires. She would take the elevator to the basement and peer into the miniature doll-house rooms, enclosed in glass, a French parlor from the time of Louis XIV, a British bathroom, tiny eye glasses on a tub which stood on pigeon toes. She could insert herself in those rooms for hours, finding some lost detail she'd never noticed before.

And now, as she stood in front of Picasso's *Old Guitarist*, that wash of blue, the gold glaze of his guitar, she could not recapture that sense of awe. The old man in the painting's anguished look fell to the side. Seth would berate her, when they would come here together, when she was nineteen, frustrated in the modern section because clumps of papier macher on a wall or blocks of color refused to speak to her, told her nothing about herself. He would tell her that everything was not always about her. *It's not about identifying with everyone in the Goddamn world,* he would chide, ever her teacher, in art, books, fucking. *You have to distance yourself. It's not about you.*

Locate their palate, their subject, their process, what's been left out. And you get to stay whole that way. Jesus.

She just wanted to feel wonder again.

So, Seth, here I am. As dispassionate as I never thought I could be. Would he have been impressed?

A guard sat stiffly on the stool as school groups marched through. One boy scratched his crotch; two girls passed a folded triangle of lined notebook paper and then separated. An old couple was comparing the light in two of Monet's *Haystacks.* Their accents were thick, and it sounded as if they were saying "Moan-eaye's haysteeax." Julia left a few minutes later.

She wanted to go for herself, not for him. She wanted a better ending for the story, a closing scene she could replay and love as she had once loved him.

Weaving through the street, she wished she could afford cabs. A long, wind-battered walk along the lake. With the fish smell rising up from the docks she thought of Flounder, of course, of the way he could settle her with Scrabble games, foot rubs, their one very dirty camping trip, green felt army blankets, and long talks about the places they would one day visit—Venice, Africa, some remote mountain top they would ascend and then rename after themselves.

She loved him best when he wasn't aware of her, when he was cross-hatching marks over teeny squares, squares within squares, and transforming spliced paper, protractors, lead shavings and dried out ink into temples, cathedrals, theatres, palaces. He took her to superhero movies when they went to the movies. He had played fantasy card games as a child. He dreamed of powers and forces larger than his own.

This was just a catch-up visit, she told herself, to let Seth gawk at her and the seven pounds she had dropped since she had been left; and at the end of the day she knew she would be going home.

She spiked up her hair as the windows for Leon's stood before her. An old haunt in a derelict neighborhood frequented by old men who played Spades and the random yuppie posing as a struggling journalist. Julia didn't know if Seth still worked there, and some part of her was hoping he didn't as she pushed open the heavy glass door and took a stool at the edge of the bar.

"Gin n' tonic, please," she told the bartender. Sam, his nametag said, as he wiped down the last bits of peanut crumbs left from some other drinker. Julia wondered what that person's picture would be and if cracked peanut shell still clung to some fiber of his clothing.

"Is it still winter out there?" Sam asked without looking at her, only the marble surface beneath the rag.

"It ain't spring," she responded, trying to iron out any audible sign of apprehension.

He looked up, and she smiled. Sam was tall and broad with ear-length dreadlocks and a shiny-white grin. Then he turned his back and fixed her drink. The ice-cubes clinked before her. Taking a sip and setting it back down, she summoned up a question. She could be anyone at all asking a question, she told herself.

"Does Seth still work here?" She swallowed some more from the glass, her fingers colder now.

"Seth? Uh, yeah, he's in the back. You want me to grab him for you?"

She waited. "If he's not too busy."

"He had to take the dog out to pee. Hold on a sec."

She was here because she wanted to be here. And now the fear that stirred inside her was that she would leave the bar unchanged.

Seth had left her because he had simply gotten bored. Seth lost interest in things fast. Still, you went to bed more lit up at the end of the day.

"Jules," he paused, wiping the knuckles of his hands against his apron pockets. And there he was, too alive for her to notice particulars because he was no longer sluicing through the shadows of her mind but kicking around in the 8 million atoms that made up his actual presence. Julia remembered how he relished someone who could knock him off guard, shake things up. His favorite emotion was when someone took him by surprise—"little lost, ain't we, darlin'?"

His hair was short now—all dark, his cheekbones sharp against those black, black eyes. *Arresting* was the word Julia's mind had formed when she'd first noticed them as a freshman in high school. And when they'd pass in the halls, before she followed him into the dark room that first time, his eyes would fasten themselves to hers, locked there.

She gave the best she could at unaffected. A low smile, the half-cast shrug.

"Eh—I don't really get lost. You're the one who can't read a map, if I remember right."

He leaned both elbows on the bar to look at her, the reflection of his back surfacing on the mirror behind rows of pint glasses.

"Maps, maps. Nobody uses maps any more. Don't need one. I follow my gut."

"You follow your liver."

"Ah, the liver never lies."

His face was skeletal, new to her. He fiddled with a coaster, as was his habit, his familiar nervous twitches which she came to understand, the head nods and neck

rubs which she delighted in for their unchanging meaning. Jamming his words together, he then looked up sheepishly out of those dark, cavernous eyes.

She hadn't seen him in almost two years and it was something like a first meeting, but already with the comfort that trails intimacy. And yet there was something awkward in it too. Julia felt dizzy—she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this coursed up, this aware of every vein in her retinas and what burned behind them.

He had taught her how to dodge and burn. How to cover up, how to confuse with motion so as not to expose the places too vulnerable to light. And then he would sink her hands in the fixer while he stroked her elbows with his thumbs. She felt herself slowly paling as a neglected print in liquid folds, his stomach pressing into her back, immersed in the drug that bathed her, too in love to care if the acid peeled off layers of her skin.

He taught her how to remove distractions by burning in extensively when printing, the hand of God technique. A halo would appear, and you had absolute control.

"So," she began, and then offered up the first question she'd been fantasizing about asking, "You still shooting?"

"Shooting?" he asked, "Heroin or photographs?"

"Clay pigeons, you craphead," she replied. "Photos."

He'd been joking, of course, but she knew he'd done hard drugs from time to time.

"I see, I see. Ah, do I still shoot pictures?" He liked to frame questions like he'd frame shots, pretending to examine something as if he really cared and then

chuckling in his apathy. That was part of the thrill. Julia felt the pitch to be *more* around Seth, more heightened, cutting, raw. And yet less invested, less impressed.

"Yeah, you know, sometimes I still piss around with the camera. Every now and then, when I hear the coyotes wailing in my brain, the fourth Tuesdays of odd months, solstice days, Polish liberation marches, you know, same kinda crap." She knew he was making fun of her, and she didn't mind.

"Alright, Jackass, I was just curious." Julia could never figure out why she was being mocked, other than just being younger, and two shades more idealistic. Maybe six.

He reached across the bar and slid his finger beneath her camera strap on her shoulder to indicate its presence.

"How 'bout you, there, Jules, is that why you came here, you wanna take my portrait?"

"Yeah, if I wouldn't turn to stone after." Somehow on her the sarcasm got messier, and you couldn't draw the line so well.

"Fire away, kid."

Hell, she thought, why not?

"Portrait of the Bar-tist as a Young Man."

"Smart me once, smart me twice, Julia."

What the hell did that even mean, anyway? As she unstrapped her camera case and adjusted the lens, she rolled her eyes, and then remembered Flounder's voice as he turned to her, his fingers still punching the pen into calculator keys: "Hey, Egg, I'm ready for my close-up, baby. Where you at?" She had humored him into setting the automatic to roll shots of the two of them in bed, not pornographic-like, pajama-like, beneath the blankets with mugs of chicory coffee and a crossword resting on the nightstand beside them. But the pictures hadn't totally turned out. They put a couple

on their fridge, but the light was under-developed, and Julia's face was too aware of being staged.

She remembered the last freelance work she'd taken for the *Chicago Athlete*: the rocky Evanston course along the Lake, how the sprays of water had sheened the limestone with an effulgence she'd been proud of, even with the goofy runner on the cover. She wanted Seth to see them, for them to term some glib observations together about the endangered spandex in these waters.

Seth started going at the bottles, *Cocktail* style for two girls who had come in and ordered Long Islands.

There had been a thousand wrongs, his lapsing interest, jagged insults, a missed exhibition of hers she'd spent a semester working on, and days at a time where he refused to tell her where he went. She felt herself diminishing, only needing him to come back all the more, to come back again. In time she thought this was what made her special—her ability to withstand and fight back and take him back when he finally conceded, and she would only love him more.

He had left her during final exams. There was a mess of things she'd neglected: two different portfolios and a research paper, $150 of Christmas bracelets she'd promised an Evanston gift shop and hadn't made good on, the grimy bathroom tub and a sink full of dishes. She decided to go to the dark room and work through the night. For one night she did not think of him, of their second-to-last-fight, how she shouted at the ceiling as he had carelessly tried to back out the door. But as she gripped the counter and gazed out the window and attempted the first dish, he had come up behind her, brought his lips to her neck, and whispered, "You're one of the real ones, you know that?"

Why should she have believed that this really did signal the last time? And it was only when the beads were strung, the corners glued, the tub achingly white and the dishes stacked away that she first burst into tears.

Flounder had seen her some months later at the gyros place, tucked in the corner, where sunlight from the window shed her image into shadow, a beautiful girl at a table.

He placed a couple drinks in front of men that had replaced the two girls and drew a shot of whisky for himself. Sam came over and slapped a hand on his shoulder, said the new shipment was set for Tuesday, and then went over to the register to ring in receipts. Seth eyed his way back towards her. It was dark outside now, the cold air settling around night posts and upending wind-slapped flags. He set down his drink and freshened hers.

"Hey," she said.

"What?" he grinned.

She would ignore the fact that he had just poured her more gin.

"What happened to your eye?" she asked.

"Oh, this? Yeah. I was in the hospital about two months ago. A little mishap with a parked dumpster one night out by this construction site. It's healing well."

He did not ask about her. He did not care if she was with anyone, or what her job was like, if she still slept with her stuffed rabbit or was recently selected as a finalist for *The Real World.* Inside their present space, mirrors threw lacey shadows of the glasses.

This was what it was not to care, she thought.

"I'm seeing somebody," she blurted out.

"Cheers," he said, clicking his short glass to hers, "that's great."

"Thanks. Yeah, it is." She smiled and looked around the bar. He did not look away.

"Oh, I forgot." Eyes like an elevator rising up her frame. He said, "You look fantastic, by the way."

The glasses emptied and the butted cigarettes stubbed out. The early fears of uncomfortable silence peeled back into remembered ease. You can sidle up to your past and slide into that idle talk, into the flirting—time customized by you alone and you together, the absurdities around which we come to take comfort. Seth was saying, "I have to take a shower at night now rather than the morning. No, man, how else can you get in bed, all turfed out and shit? I also will only sleep in a made bed. You remember that, right? Even if it's 4:30 in the morning I will still make my bed so you get that fresh, hotel-y, feeling" and Julia was saying, "No, I don't care, Chicago-style pizza really does beat out Chicago-style hot-dogs. There's no argument, and it has to do with the yeast elasticity in the crust and pear and plum tomatoes."

"I see, I see."

Shifting his weight, he slid out of his apron, disappeared to the back. When he reemerged, he asked did she want a tour of the place. He led her to the back. She nodded at Sam as they went out to the alley.

"And this," he concluded, "Is where we throw away the garbage."

"You don't recycle?" she asked, her words sliding into one another. The cocker-spaniel watchdog gnawed a car-window scraper.

"Oh, we recycle."

And it was then, as she let her ring and middle finger trail over the new scar, that she felt the old train jolt motion again, careening her insides and making her stomach ache. He averted his eyes but let her hands cup his neck before pressing her

against the brick side of the building, tipping back her chin. She gave little resistance, turned her face. She wanted to say she'd gone somewhere he couldn't. She wanted him to care, to chart her down and meet her in a desperate kind of space. He couldn't just have her any old time and place he wanted. She wanted him to know that she wasn't always going to be some insignificant little kid pining after him. She wanted him to ache for her, to be impressed by her ability to elicit that kind of ache. She wanted to prolong this last moment, this centrifuge of molecules spinning outward and away from her. Because after it was over, the novelty of her would wane. She could have disintegrated right there into his smoky t-shirt sleeve.

But the kiss bent down and caught her mouth anyway. That kiss was long and tasted of whisky. It was wobbly in the beginning. It was ankles in ice-skates. But the kiss persisted and pulled, found its legs and grew more bold. It laced up gloves and landed right hooks. It packed heat. That kiss ripped open healed wounds and sent white lilies to funerals.

In her conscience, she could only whisper "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She could feel herself slipping back. And what of it? What of the advice-column clichés, murmuring of her own self-destruction, and what of the progress she had made since the last time, the time that had, in fact, crushed her?

In the tumult of nausea and alley smells and fingering the core of what it was to betray, she closed her eyes, and it was by turns terrible and beautiful.

Souvenir

Exiting the customs line, her parents looked the same. Large and jolly, her mother's only defect was a silly striped beret. Her father's walk reflected slim, mild-mannered ways. Sophia waved, pointing her parents out to her son, and the moment slowed down, like it had already unfurled somewhere else. As they stood close, her father reached to kiss her cheek, and she felt the scruff of his whiskers as if she were a little girl. She went to kiss his other side, taking him by surprise, and only then realized that this habit was cultural and hadn't always been there.

When does emotion acclimate, she wondered later, the jetlag of your previous home burn off like a sleepy migraine? Her mother was cooing at her son, Christophe, as tears welled her smiling eyes. They were finally here. She'd wanted Simon to take off work, but he insisted this would be impossible.

It wouldn't look right, she'd countered, and it didn't.

Sophia and Christophe led the grandparents through the disorganized French maze to the baggage carousel. She thought they'd be tired, as she had been on her initial trip over, but if they were, they didn't stop talking. To the stories of their California farm yammered as her father pushed the coin-rented cart with a newly minted Euro, and to life in America, and to what his Mommy was like when *she* was a little girl as they descended to the rail tracks, Christophe responded as he would have to particularly friendly ostriches at the zoo.

The suitcase circled into view stuffed and lumpy on the conveyer belt, but it looked like it had survived the trip in good condition, having been rarely used before.

"Où sont mes grandsparents?" Christophe asked her, her little French fils, holding her hand as the escalator slid them off.

"They're right here," Sophia told him, bending down and couching his belly in her hands. They found the track number on a giant board that flipped numbers and letters. When they located the correct one, she pulled him to her and looked up at her parents. They waited for the train. It was too early.

"Hi, little Lamb," said her mother, and Sophia pretended the address was for her.

"Mes grandparents aux Étas-Unis?"

She thought she'd prepared him better. "No, sweetie, *these* are your grandparents."

Maybe he'd been predicting deep-sea creatures or Martians from a spaceship to walk off the plane. In one of the picture books there were members of a family, and the grandparents were the same drawings of the parents but with gray hair. She produced this from the yellow and blue quilted bag as the platform grew crowded. Christophe went for a coloring book.

"Mom, take off that ridiculous beret," Sophia said. Her mother obliged, revealing her gray coif.

"Grandmère!" Christophe squealed. Was he kidding? Was this an elaborate trick to get over shyness?

"You got it," she said. "And this," she said, rising to stand next to her father, placing a hand on his shoulder, "is your *grandpère.*" Her father's hair had thinned but was still a dirty blond, still not really even receded.

Sophia would have gladly driven the half hour from Aix-en-Provence to meet them at the airport in Marseille, but her parents had insisted they wanted to do it "the European way," by train. They'd never seen her street, her apartment, their son's bedroom, but they didn't need to get there all at once. Toes dipped in strange waters.

The first time Simon brought her through Marseille, she wasn't supposed to like it. The noise and the crumbling architecture and the dirty reputation. Simon scoffed at her admiration, that French pursed exhalation of air, as if she'd told him she wanted to buy a summer house in Newark. No, she insisted, ugly was subjective. She could see that the city was decaying beneath the once-white sheetrock, and sooty beards obscured the faces of buildings. Crime darted through the racy, run-down latticework of streets and transactions transpired on its cobalt sea. But there was motion here, deep colors and steep hills. From a rickety dock, Sophia located the Château d'If, and she pictured Dantès imprisoned there on the scraggly island, his story entombed in the literary cannon.

She asked could they stay for the afternoon, and beneath an orange bistro umbrella with a clay pot of bouillabaisse before them, she sipped the chilled rose poured from a blown-glass decanter. Maybe she just always liked the thrill of cities, which were far from the quiet of her parents' farm.

"My wife, the romantic," Simon diagnosed her, "decides she loves things as only as they're dying."

Her father would've accused her of only ordering off the menu by color—the yellow rice and pink wine—but they would have felt proud of her, she was sure. *Her* in this exotic place, speaking these melodious sounds. They would overlook her act of leaving them for a workaholic foreigner. They would overlook the fact that she hadn't wanted them to come before. Her parents, it seemed now, as they read to Christophe while the train hustled through countryside, on the topic of Marseille, had no opinion either way.

They were too excited to sleep. In Sophia's apartment, they took up their bags and admired the clean white walls and deeply stained woods of the apartment and then pronounced themselves ready to see town.

In the ville where Sophia had followed her husband, the trickle of water seemed to begin every sound. It was a small city of students, shops, and fountains. You could hear the slipping drips at the roundabout for le cours Mirabeau, which was the first site she took her parents when they began their walk. The sound gurgled in the middle of the central square that flanked the post office, and echoed against the walls of narrow streets. It lurched behind the restaurants' alleys, announcing the courtyards of apartment buildings, and followed up the hill that spilled stores, books, cheese cellars, and crepe stands.

The church had an international music festival every summer. It opened up before them, and a bride stepped out, wearing satin and heavy makeup, as Sophia remembered the wedding attended only by Simon's brother in a vineyard far away. She avoided the faces of her parents watching the bride. *Félicitations.*

Sophia used to think translation was merely the shoring of words. She'd taught at Berkeley, and the French in America had relied on her, she recalled with pride, to communicate. But once here, trying to pick up tutoring jobs, she was no longer seen as someone important for knowing idioms and *faux amis.* She'd had to flip sides—where she'd once been an aide, the conveyer, an interpreter of meaning, she now was converting, at times it felt like fighting, to be understood.

Her father listened to classical music. He admired the organ of the church with a soft whistle, as if the pipes were a can-can of bare legs. All around them, strong small men whisked away flowers and candles from the ceremony.

From the pews, people noticed her parents' English, though her mother had worn black to try and "fit in with the Froggies." The striped beret sat lopsided on her

head from where Christophe had removed and replaced it. They remarked on the fixtures; the stained glass windows and inevitable fountain just inside the hunkering brass double-doors.

Sophia was tall and thin enough by American standards, though she would never look like the French, with their insouciant gaze and petulant gait, a coldness glazing the expressions of women even in their fifties. She had dark blonde hair and brown eyes, plain looking except at her most comfortable, at her least self-conscious. She figured she was always pegged l'étranger.

Her mother linked her arm and stopped one of the men who was clearing out the little brochure cards.

"Can you tell us about the founding of this church?" she asked loudly. Sophia was mortified.

The man spoke no English and blew the poof of air out his lips, French for spare me. She reached for the American green guide tucked under her arm, and flipped through to try and find the history. She started to dissuade her mother from asking anything else, but she stopped herself. Her parents wore open, uncomprehending looks on their faces. They were so out of place you could sense it rising off of them, an outsider smell of which they were completely aware. For the first time in her life, Sophia felt a need to protect them.

Simon first approached her at the language desk of the Berkeley library, ostensibly in search of California agricultural records, and then requesting the services of a proof-reader. He had pursued her with a nonchalant aggression, which she liked in men, as blatant force would be unacceptable and too much laissez-faire brought out her rummaging anxiety. It was his cavalier fatalism she'd found most suggestive, as if some shrug, half-minded, castoff expression was murmuring to her in a language more

articulate than anything he'd stumbled over so far, *May as well, Jolie, it's all ending some time.*

He made love to her first in a rocking chair on her parents porch, a dry, dusty breeze rising from the ground as her mother and father napped loudly in the curtain-flapping bedroom two floors above. The windows were open and the shutters slapped against the siding, the only other rhythm to swallow the restrained creak of the rocker. She bit into his shoulder to stifle her cry, and he finished with a hashing of porch-scratches on the beams, a low-strumming thunder saddling the sound from above.

When she'd first arrived to this country of his, they roamed Paris together. When she'd first come to the South, where he transferred, she pieced out quadrants of maps by herself. The fountains were her touchstones—the four dolphins frozen like clover, their spouted water converging, the Good King whose swirled pools spread out beneath him in velvety folds, the columnar pillar at the park on the way to le Fac. Every day she passed them, and they were both varied and the same, the sheeting tiers spilling down—like wedding cake, like drapery, like memory. A rippling of liquid consciousness.

It was impossible not to notice how many of the women here were pregnant. Unseasonably young women, younger than her, *c'est l'eau*, the maîtresse at the apothecary explained, when Sophia clumsily asked for the pregnancy test, or, *éxamen du bébé*, as she'd garbled. Though she worked in translation, nerves made her blank.

Non, the initial response of the madame behind the counter, before a flash of *si, si, si, si, si, si si! Voilà. Bonne Chance.* Then she had explained the fountains were fertility drink, and Sophia retraced her way back to their apartment overlooking the market, wondering what else was in that water. Either she'd unintentionally wandered into a Canterbury of conception, or the southern-French were drunk on their own old-wives tales. Before going upstairs to unwrap the indicator, she'd walked the cours, this

street of Medieval plane trees. Clustered in clouds she saw the round, staggered heads of families. The cours—whose branches now seemed to dangle prayers sifting down with the chute of occidental breeze. She stopped at the Good King, whose stream-on-stone wishes must have been dipped into by how many fingers, splashed over how many faces, run up arms, kissed on lips. This was the collective hope— sorbet at the sidewalk cafes, a half-finished bottle of Chardonnay in front of the man, café crème untouched next to the woman, the Provençal afternoons slowly sipped of light, their hands locked, she watching dogs, he staring at her.

And so when Sophia had become one, a surprised but not unwilling member of the flocks of women who showed beneath their blouses, she felt unoriginal, cheapened maybe, as she selected baguettes and brioches for her orange and red paisley bread bag, at night a leg of lamb or cut of pork wrapped in wax paper.

Weekdays, in her spells of morning sickness, she cursed l'eau, every last fountain of it. But on weekends Simon had become one of the expecting pères. Taking drives through the lavender fields he could not stop touching her, resting his palm on her stomach or thumbing the line of her jaw while watching the road, squeezing her knee at intersections of traffic lights that still looked impossibly small.

One weekend he rented a boat in Cassis. Dipping the oar in and then pushing back in the boat, Simon rowed. As they drifted from the shore of Easter-mint colored houses, the paddle unspooled a ridge of water. They floated into the hollowed limestone of the calanques, coves that shimmered in the light, crusting algae on slabs of marbled surface, out to where the sea was shedding blue, crystallized shadows on the rocks. Above them old couples took sticks up the path. She felt more sick than before, as her pregnancy seemed to have fulfilled the work she hadn't known was expected of her, and she would lay back in the trill of a lilting current, sprays splashing across her thighs, and wonder again how exactly she ended up here.

Four years in the Provençal sun, and she still freckled and flushed. A thermos of water was a constant in her cotton quilted bag, along with action figures, sunscreen, bug-spray, and the American novels her mother sent in bulk – romance and mystery mostly, the new thriller whose surprise ending Sophia would already know by the time it appeared in translation on the shelves of the local libraries. It gave her satisfaction, being ahead of the pack, though the American movies with which she couldn't stay current, and emailing her mother about a film already forgotten irked her. French movies were no use. The comedies were pure frustration—this country liked seeing people suffer interminably in outless situations no thinking person could possibly stumble into, and the intellectual talkies took themselves too seriously and dropped away with endings that weren't really endings. She kept attending, though, because she *did* like the scenes of people at their most ordinary, loved even—the sounds of chair legs on tile sitting down to eat, heels on cobblestone clopping to work, the drunken sips of tongued sex—the French seemed to listen closer, heavy ceramic on slabs of country wood, the slosh of wine, a rustle of sheets and textured breath, the stream of a shower or hiss of iron, so that sometimes, if you closed your eyes, it sounded like rain. After leaving the cinema, occasionally alone, she could hear her actions and movements more acutely, as if in search of secrets.

Recently she'd begun paying visits to the cyber cafe, just before noon, when Christophe was in pre-school. Sophia would log into her previous life, and slip back into the politics of her old world, the patterns of speech, grand openings of restaurants, winners of the horse race. Occasionally she googled former classmates, and once or twice an old boyfriend. The fat man at the counter knew her, sold her invisible packages of minutes, taught her how to convert the keyboard off its impossibly French scheme and allow her to type from memory, the keys no longer signifying the letters they appeared to be. And she knew by face the regulars there at her hour, though she

never spoke to them; the housewives and university students and wiry-looking florist and white-coated beautician and whistle-sporting soccer coach, on break for the afternoon meal. The cyber café had become something like addiction.

As a California girl, she missed the Oscars. During the awards season, she grazed celebrity gowns and post-show cocktail dresses on pop-culture sites. For a translation exercise, she printed the Most Influential People of the Year and Best and Worst Dressed and gave them to her pupils. Fabric for a different kind of fairy-tale.

At the Michelin-starred Atelier Cézanne, everything was light and silence. No electric bulbs, Sophia noticed, just rays of sun sliced on the peel of floor. Even Christophe was quiet for a moment.

It was her mother who broke the reverie. Already the quirks were starting to grate.

"Oooooh, Fi-fi, lamb, can I point just out that vase?" she pointed at its blue and white pattern, "I'm saying wouldn't that look nice in that all-white kitchen of yours." Her mother said the word vase so it sounded like a throat check-up.

"Maman," Christophe was looking at the artist's pallet, "Où est ma livre?"

"Ah, ha! He agrees with me," said her mother.

Sophia produced his coloring book from her shoulder bag.

"Et des crayons?"

"How do you ask?"

"Please-and-thank you," Christophe flashed a grin.

She flipped through the contents of her bag for the three half-crayons whose labels Christophe had torn off, but she realized he must have left them on the train, and she'd been too preoccupied to check.

"You should be more thoughtful next time," said Sophia.

Christophe scrunched up his face like he might howl, but her father had a fountain pen tucked into the pocket of his shirt and a sucking candy wrapped in shiny silver foil.

Sophia was relieved.

After some scribbles, Christophe picked up a toy train that was set up to look like the model sets Cezanne's children might have played with, but they were behind a blue cord and arranged stylishly on a circular rug. Each train and ball belonged exactly where they were—there was an outline of its shape where the carpet hadn't faded with sunlight. If they were to be removed, one would find a dusty crime scene of dead toys, Sophia thought. Ne Touchez Jamais, read the sign. The guard wagged her finger.

"Put it down, honey," she said.

The guide fired French background noise in spurts, as Sophia translated for her parents. They regarded her with what looked like uncomfortable awe.

"On rainy or really cold days, Cezanne stayed in the middle of these familiar objects, which became the models of his still life paintings."

It was hard to break in on this woman's talk. She was uniformed and bureaucratic looking, and since they were the only ones in his studio at the moment, the rapidity of her speech felt like contempt. After a while Sophia just started making things up, not because she didn't understand but because the woman bored her. About the familiar objects on the table, "some pottery, bottles, vases, paper flowers on fabrics, fruits, mainly apples, as well as some skulls and the little plaster cupid."

From the studio, which was tucked on the hill behind a cove of orange trees, you could see Mt St-Victoire, and from the window it stood granite-colored against the sky, chiseling in relief the spike of a heartbeat.

"That mountain over there," she nodded at it with her chin, "his motif, painted over 80 times in his lifetime," Sophia said to her parents, who were more interested in

Christophe. On the walk to and from the library every day, it could look entirely changed—altered by cloud shadow, by the seasonal green scrub on its skin, by the pink and blue shadows cast at twilight, and she understood then how a mountain possessed mood. She understood, too, how beauty makes you miserable, failing to be altered by basic splendor while everyone else basks in its glow. To herself she said, "His obsession."

Walking back down the hill with her parents, she was struck by the city's strange prettiness again, as if for the first time. It filled her with panic, this rush of uncertainty after having lived here this long, and she clung to the hand of her son, who was pointing to the store fronts and identifying each. You weren't supposed to get depressed in sun-drenched towns like this. The south of France is where you went to get better. From the North, the mountain was capped with fog.

The light was dappled, trickling through the brocade of leaves like the slow slush of permeating sound. She had missed her noon-date with the cyber café and wondered if anyone had noticed. The accents of the French were more nasal here, twangy, the college students a little dirtier and less chic than the ones she'd seen in the Latin Quarter, and friendlier, too. But she missed the gray throng of Parisian melancholy. As a baby she took Christophe to the bi-daily open-air markets in his stroller and made small, approving noises to the kittens in baskets.

They stopped outside the cheese shop.

"Excuse me, honey, do you speak English?" her mother asked. The woman shrugged. Her mother repeated herself and rather than help her choose something local, rather than take the lead in her city of residence, Sophia waited outside. When her mother declared the Roquefort stinky, Sophia was ashamed of her embarrassment.

Her mother was still pinching her nose as they proceeded on their walk, which Christophe aped until Sophia told him to stop it. She told him to walk over by her.

She turned her head and he was gone. At the bottom of the hill, she caught a flash of him, pointing to old men over chessboards outside the Tabac and then disappearing around the curve of a side-street.

For ten minutes they searched, frantic, terrified, embarrassed to be circling the same stupid square. It was the longest ten minutes of Sophia's life.

"Christophe. Christophe!" she called, aware that she was screaming, aware of the spectacle she made.

Sophia's mother found him, resting on a ratty blanket next to the mohawked men and smutty girls who sat outside all day with grimy looking dogs and drank bottles from brown bags. Her mother was out of breath, and she scooped him up in her yeasty arms, wide chest heaving a little, as he wiggled away. Sophia clung to him hard, and her mother snapped, "Your son," before shaking her head at Christophe's mini run-away, "needs some discipline." The dog-people scoffed and swore and she was relieved her parents could not understand. Christophe took a biscuit and fed it to the dog, whose fur gnarled around the spiked collar.

Her father squeezed her on the shoulder once before Sophia wheeled Christophe around to face her and whispered in his ear over the sound of coursing fountains, in English, his official language of scolding, of punishment, "You're in big trouble. Now I need you to behave yourself until we get home."

The dog men and punk girls were laughing and bored. She muttered thanks and threw the change she had in her wallet into a guitar case.

It would be days before her heart rested at a normal pulse again.

For the first time, her parenting skills were coming up for evaluation from someone other than herself, a test being laid. And while she welcomed the company, she could have used some help.

Their babysitter was the daughter of Simon's boss. The girl was fifteen, with bad grades, pouty lips and a smoked-thin frame. She had inconceivably long hair and sneakers paired with brightly- colored tights, earrings up her right ear, in her nose, a tattoo stamping the inner crease of her elbow, the comic-book character Astérix, whose adventures Sophia read to Christophe in French, even though his French was day by day surpassing hers. Though Sophia continued to give tutoring to the Americans and Albanians in their apartment complex, and she'd taught translation for years, she knew her son would one day, one day soon, she predicted, ask her not to speak to him in his father's language any more. Her son would be bilingual, as would be any future children, and she could feel her family divide, already, herself cragged open like a ledge—all the rest of them marching off together, and she left alone, her son able to bridge, switching back and forth the way you channel-surf songs on the radio.

The Astérix-tattooed model was one of her only friends. Sophia made them coffee in the late afternoon and took her with on outings to the beach, grateful for the help, the alone-time the babysitter bought her, and her company.

She'd had one nightmare, however, where her fifteen year old jaune amie had been fucking her husband. And though Simon never looked at her as anything more than efficacy before leaving to pick her up or take her home, when he would be away for days at a time on business, it was her ropy, narrow legs and soupy moans Sophia pictured wrapped around her husband before cringing and forcing the image from her mind. When he was away on business, she needed help the most.

There were other women on the playground, and they had each other over for dessert after a concert, or croissants and coffee after dropping off their children. But Sophia would never feel fully folded into this tapestry of lives—she felt the yarn of herself to be baser, less worldly, and, wonder if she were being privately judged.

Simon would be home later.

Sophia took the Côtes du Rhône she'd selected off the rack and uncorked to give it air. Still recovering from the afternoon's scare, she took a glass from the cabinet and slid onto a kitchen stool. Do my parents even know me, she thought to herself, as she listened to them play with Christophe over the sound of French-dubbed Disney, *Les Aristochats*. Apparently, Disney and Winnie the Pooh were a universal pediatric tranquilizer, even the puns translated, though farm animals make different noises according to the cartoons— miaou for mew, meuh for moo, hiiiii for neigh, groin groin for oink oink.

Life would be different after this, she felt. They would go back to California more regularly. Her future children, she vowed, would recognize their grandparents before the age of four.

For the moment she focused on the kitchen, groaned as she rose back to her feet. Her parents would commend her homemaking skills, she hoped, as she wedged sticks into candleholders, nixing Edith Piaf from the record player, and washed and separated leaves of lettuce. She'd cleaned the drapes and tucked lavender sachets beneath the sheets when she made up the guest room—maybe the second time it had been used. She sliced baguette rounds and arranged them on a plate beside a tub of olive tapenade.

They'd asked if she wanted them to bring anything and she'd said bagels, one of the few things globalization hadn't bequeathed this part of the world. She also

wanted coloring books, animated videos, long sweaters from the homespun shop close to her parents' house, which tied at her waist and she wore with black mules and capris.

With a kerchief tied in her hair she felt vaguely like Audrey Hepburn, though from what movie she couldn't recall. She unpacked the box of SpongeBob for her youngest students and back copies of *Highlights* and *National Geographic*.

Her mother had given her the keepsake kit when she left home. Ink wells and quills, boxes lacquered with natural paper and containing cubes in spaces that varied by size—note-cards, sheets, business envelopes and larger ones, special pens, marble-patterned pencils without erasers, a gilded address book, a locked journal with an iron key, instruments to record memory. She would sometimes remove it from the trove that rested at the foot of their bed (also the vault that catapulted her son first thing in the morning on Saturdays) and take out the boxes that rested in boxes— sit down at her desk as if to write an important letter, but more often than not she just scratched out the day's to-do list on the notepad resting on her night table, or a reminder to check with the pediatrician's office to ensure the shots were injected according to schedule. People were so lax here—she missed the neurotic efficiency and uptight schedules of the American mothers. She feared it was the country she was living in and nothing she could help that would eventually lead to shingles, or lupus, or mumps. Diseases with names from the Middle Ages—families ravished by premature death, and if Christophe contracted one—she wanted to think she'd be tough and brave enough, mashing mortars in a bowl whose powers would reveal themselves to her in some wash of sacred smoke. Aix, a darling of these plagued centuries, had always been thought a site of healing. But she was not a daughter of their rites.

The door opened softly, and Simon deposited his keys in the basket on the stand next to the door. For a moment they just looked at each other in a seal of silence before Christophe burst into the kitchen yelling “Papa!”

Simon picked him up and swung him around. Her parents appeared in the doorway—expectant, shy-looking. Sophia felt her heartbeat quicken. At that moment she found all of them awful, her husband’s aloofness and prim business airs, her father’s sore-loser expression and her mother’s chubby reluctance. Outside, the fountains were purpling in dusk.

From the television, the moving lips of cutely drawn animals dubbed easily out of English without their seeming to notice. The 100-acre wood converted to the metric system. How do you translate loss? How do you convert sentiment? In her cabinet Sophia had a large, glass measuring mug. In scooping mounds of flour or scraping excess almond ground fine for calissons, one side read ounces and the other cups, and a conversion was only a turning of the sides.

On the mantle, her parents had displayed for her a bowl of fruit picked from their farm—apples, lemons, oranges, peaches, and they’d arranged it there over a lace napkin without her seeming to notice. She could smell the orchards stretching back, the sweet citrus and salted air of her home, the colors of the earth that stained her bare feet, and was overtaken for the first time with an unbridled yearning to go back.

Yes, this place—gone, and without her, all was still. She felt so relieved and overcome to have left that it was with a clumsy maturity she realized this could not be, seeking Simon’s double kiss, one on each cheek.

And it was Christophe who chirped in the direction of his father, but maybe to nobody in particular, blasting up and onto the couch, “Voici mes grandparents. Régardez des Américains.”

Assisted Living

We were on a two-week vacation at Nana's retirement home outside Chicago, and I didn't want to go on a set-up date. Parishwood smelled like boiled beets and athletic tape peeled off knees. The dining room was painted peach, and waiters wore waistcoats. There was a menu of bland options; the food arrived dressed up on fancy china.

"You excited for your dinner?" Dad asked.

"Stop it," I muttered.

Josh wasn't the problem—my family had been trying to hook me up with him since we were infants. But it was the summer before I left home for college, and anxiety was humming within me like a small-toothed saw.

"Anybody for dessert?" my mother asked.

"I can't handle the dining hall," I said, since Nana was in the restroom and it wouldn't implicate her. Nana didn't love this place either. My parents looked incredulous. "Like, eating frozen yogurt: innocent enough…" An old man was staring at me—I, who was so clearly not offering assistance to his living— a line of drool down his chin. "But this eating establishment is like an emotional contamination of soft foods."

Dad lifted up his palms, a shrugging pshaw. "Mom wants us to stay with Nana like we did before. I can understand that," he said, and my mom took his hand. "Takes more than one little move to keep us out." He grinned and beat his chest, him Tarzan.

"I'll have the chocolate, please," my mother told the waiter, who nodded and left.

"Anybody for a little lunchtime action?" Dad asked, producing a deck of cards.

As we neared the elevator at the end of the hall, I said “I can’t believe you set me up.”

“I had no idea we’d be asked to leave the dining room,” Dad said, because they needed to clean where we were playing gin rummy.

“You told Josh I was available tonight before even giving me the message.”

He lifted his arms, ceasefire. “No involvement,” Dad said. He claimed no foul but was stifling a smile. “The billiard room’s upstairs. Want me to beat you in a game of pool?”

“You’re enjoying this too much.” I said. “And,” I decided to stick it to him, “sending me off this close to my departure. I would think you and Mom would be commemorating our few remaining meals as nuclear family unit.”

“It’s dinner, kiddo,” Dad said, “Not a dowry.”

And even though it had been my intention to scare him, it was I who was suddenly terrified. Forgotten worry, like lapsed grief, returns with resilience, blooming through your nerves. It was the first time in my life that I couldn’t imagine what mornings would be like when I woke up in a different bed, the window that would open onto somewhere other than the one yard I’d always played in. The upcoming move consumed all of me. In the living room of Nana’s apartment, I spent hours choosing dorm stuff from the catalogue I’d brought from home; sheet sets, towels, planners, trash cans, various heights of chrome mesh desk accessories. Unaware of my family around me—reading the comics, dealing hands of cards, baking lemon knots—I knew every item on every tattered page.

Dad said, “Miss Scarlet in the Billiard Room with the respiratory device. Get it?”

We waited by the elevator.

There were more women than men on the premises, people in line like rush-hour traffic. With nurses or baby-boomer kids, life-insurance salesmen and Rabbis, they gathered toward the lobby, clustered by the mail boxes, made small change with the little bank teller set up in a window, and unpinned rollers at the hairdresser. They watered hanging plants at the library downstairs, where the single computer was soon to have internet connected.

At the check-in desk sat a woman with the most noticeable mustache I'd ever seen. She was always friendly, waving us in without making us sign the guest list.

In the foyer, a glass chandelier hung over the visitor's couch, a sad attempt at grand. Seashell borders ran along the walls in colors painted to look like Miami—salmon, teal, baby blue. From the door panes, a view of the parking lot and the used car dealership. Across the street, a shopping mall flanked the nursing-home ward of the building and this strip of Midwestern suburbia.

There was a brass fountain in the lobby that reminded me of how, in her teeny apartment, I could hear my grandmother peeing at night.

"Why does this place make me feel like I'm the one on life support?" I asked my father, as the elevator light eventually dinged acknowledgement. A lady in sunglasses bent her head and patted my hand for doing a good job at pushing the up-button.

"When you're sleeping, my little ageist," Dad said, "elves come with turkey basters and steal the youth out of your ears." He stuck his finger in his mouth then as if to give me a wet Willy, but I moved away.

The three of us waited in the elevator bank, staring at wall-to wall pastels. The door gave us a lengthy grace period before deliberately sliding shut.

"Twelfth floor, please," said the lady in shades.

The building went up to five.

Nana had been dealing out her jewelry that morning from an embroidered box with multiple tiers, partly because it was fun for her to see our enjoyment, and partly because it was possible that housecleaning was stealing from her.

"What do I need all this schlock for?! I never go out! Haha," Nana had cackled over half a bagel schmeared with whitefish. She had bequeathed me a pair of pearl studs, and I was delighted in spite of myself.

The bathroom had all kinds of amenities. Plastic armrests lifted from poles that were suctioned to the floor, be-throning the toilet. A chair was attached to the shower tile by two gummy cups, the same color as false teeth. Shampoo rested on the ledge, an Australian brand that had been popular in the '80s. The loofa hanging from the gleaming metal basket had no traction left.

My mother was doing her makeup, as if she too were going out tonight. Sympathy primping for my sake, I knew the line. Examining her reflection, she gave a slight turn of her head in both directions, approving the earrings she'd just inherited.

Unsnapping a compact of rouge from the medicine cabinet, she puckered her lips to pop her cheekbones in the mirror.

"Mom, why do you do that? You never make that face in real life."

"The first time I saw that face, I wondered who I married," my father called from the living room, where he and Nana were watching a western.

"Are you nervous to be going out with a boy?" my mother asked.

"Please stop it," I said.

"Aunt Nancy keeps telling me about all these awards Josh won," she prattled, "and how he plays drums in a band. They went and heard him one night at some awful bar in Evanston."

The bathroom cupboard contained industrial-sized vats of Aqua Net, emery boards gone dull and lipstick pushed down to pencil-eraser nubs. I gave a false, scary-looking smile to find the apples of my cheeks and decided I was better off without blush.

"The 'make-up' face, as your father puts it, is one of those things you don't realize you do until you're suddenly married to someone," my mother said, clasping her elbows and addressing me through the mirror, "Funny how we don't notice these things about ourselves."

"I haven't seen him in like three years," I mumbled, smoothing a washcloth over my left leg and lathering up soap from a cake that was thin as a wafer. Despair flashed on my face.

"Oh, come on, honey. Live a little. You haven't left Parishwood since we got here," she said. "You know that expression, 'youth is wasted on the young?'"

I ran the razor up the side of my calf, stopping just before the knee. When my mother was my age, she'd already done it, I was pretty sure, as she'd certainly had a gaggle of boyfriends and a beautiful tan. I'd tried to explain once to my family that in this era, people didn't date one-on-one, that it was more of a group hangout thing until you were ready to commit to one person forever, or until a large commencement, or the end of summer. They would look at me as if I'd been adopted by squirrels or hailed from a very dark box.

From the TV room, my father injected, "You should tell Josh about the time you were three and you bit him." His laugh was jolly— here was me, daughter, inflected with awkwardness for his amusement.

"Totally," I yelled back, "right before I send him an album of our naked baby pictures." More embarrassing though was the trauma of Josh's parents walking in on us playing spin the bottle at his brother's Bar Mitzvah party.

"You left teeth marks," my father called. Gunshots fired from the television.

Nana appeared at the doorway next to my mother, carrying her purse around her neck. She shook her way over to the cabinet and bent down to open it before removing a box of Q-tips. Nana still insisted on reaching low for things. She had a tremor. A small stream of oxygen ran into her nose through a tube that was attached to a portable tank she'd propped on the sink. When she sat at the table to read the paper, the larger one guarded her like a fire extinguisher. The oxygen tank had a rhythm, a suck and sigh that, after ten days in the apartment, I mostly no longer heard except when trying to listen for silence, which was hard to come by in my family. Sometimes Nana pushed a wheelchair around the apartment for support instead of a cane, like how little girls push life-sized baby strollers for their dolls, making the one pushing them look small.

"Hiyuh, Bubby," she said from her crouch by the cabinet. She felt around for a new spray bottle of kitchen-cleaner next to the plumbing. "You want a Velamint?" Nana bought these mints in bulk ever since she'd had her thyroid removed. They were chalky, but because she was the only person who ever had them, and because she offered at every interaction, I took one when she asked.

Nana didn't nag me, though my mom had been on my case to wheel her down to the outdoor sculpture trail, and I had yet to oblige.

I'd had the air mattress, Nana the pink brocade couch in the living room. I hadn't been sleeping. Dad's snoring from the shared wall of the bedroom mingled with the oxygen tank sighs (after the water finished running and the toilet flushed). When I did sleep, the fear of college licked at the corners of my dreams like flame, my childhood nightmare having always been the slow torching of our house.

I could hear my parents talking about me when I woke up. My mother's *Well, she has been sweet on Josh just about her entire life*—what did she know—and my

father, worse—*Well, she's never had an actual boyfriend*— but I'd explained all this before!

Dad farted from the couch and the phone rang like an air raid.

This living arrangement could not have been healthy.

Move-in date was exactly a month away.

"You like?" Nana asked, holding up a gift basket of cheap lotions and bath salts wrapped in gleaming cellophane that she retrieved from under the cabinet.

"Eh," I said.

"Eh," my mother agreed.

Nana cocked an eye at me and wagged a finger, like she knew I was onto her. I followed her to the bedroom. Tucked in a drawer, beneath a rubbery pair of stockings, she took out an ivory and black box. It cradled a half-used bottle of Chanel No 5.

"Thank you, Nana," I said, "Are you sure?" I held my wrist up to her nose. She nodded and scuttled away.

My legs still had patches of shaving cream on them, and the beige clock read 5:45. Who goes out at quarter to six? I wondered. I'm turning into an early bird at seventeen. I used to be a different kind of senior.

Only now I was a rising freshman once again.

I attached the pearl earrings Nana had given me earlier and thought about the insides of oyster shells. As the musky scent filled the room, I was suddenly feminine, old enough to be *out* in perfume and pearls.

On the dresser was a display of assorted tzotchkes. I picked up a ceramic oval frame of Nana and Papa on their wedding day. Here was a young Nana with this man I'd never met, who died when my mother was still a girl. It was hard to feel sad about someone I couldn't picture now. The portrait was airbrushed in color from a black and white original, and Nana was wearing a deep green suit and hat, no white dress in

those days, she'd told me. Her expression was breathless and proud, his drearily relieved. As I clutched the perfume and closed the drawer of stockings, something seemed to vacate the room. I couldn't help feeling guilty, as if it was partially for my benefit that Nana was piece by piece divesting herself of everything that had made her a woman.

It was a quick conversation with Josh on the apartment phone, which had large buttons and large numbers. As I gave him the address, I knew that I was being listened in on by no less than three people, and one of them had a hearing aid. Even though he knew my family, or maybe because of this, I told him not to come up. I said I'd meet him outside.

I put on a pair of jeans, a black tank top and Converse sneakers. As I was leaving the apartment, Nana handed me a door key and a grocery bag full of trash and asked if I would mind dropping it down the chute on my way out.

"Gar*bage*," she said, like it was a French dessert.

As I was passing through the lobby, the woman with the mustache waved, and I put my hand up in a very small way. Two ladies slouched waiting on the sofa, looking particularly stewed. I got in Josh's car, which was idling in the roundabout outside the sliding doors of Parishwood and hugged him a little harder than I should have. His sandy brown hair had gotten slightly less blonde; the color of his eyes reminded me of polo shirts in spring catalogues, of sail boats and golf swings.

"Hey," he said. We both stared straight ahead, and I was envious because he'd already been through this upheaval, everything was normal for him once again. And even though he was now a rising college junior, his manner appeared unchanged.

"Hey," I said. This was someone who knew me in diapers.

"Hey," he repeated. Josh was also wearing jeans and sneakers, and I prided myself inwardly for picking the right outfit.

"Nice place," he said, eyeing two nurses smoking next to a flowerpot and one of the she-vegetables being wheeled toward us and the parking lot, being taken for a Sunday supper maybe.

"I'm jealous of her wheels," I said. "They should get fuzzy dice for those things."

He laughed, and I looked away, suddenly appalled at myself. Taking potshots at invalids to impress a boy.

"So," he said again, sliding his hand from his curly hair to the back of his neck. We had yet to move an inch. I could feel my parents passing popcorn from the window. "So, where do you want to go?"

"I don't really care," I said, addressing the windshield, "I don't live here."

"I know." His voice was a nudge to the ribcage. "But you've been here like a million times. What do you think you want to see?"

Without understanding the words as they left my mouth, I said, "You think we could just go somewhere where I don't have to think about anything?"

He nodded, turning the key in the ignition that was already running, and a screeching noise belched out from the car. He shifted gears with the arm of the steering wheel. I rolled down the window and took in the warm air.

The used car dealership across the street was closed on Sundays. The evening was sweet on my face when I opened the passenger door, and I was inexplicably sad, the way moonlight turns nostalgic before anything good has even happened under it. We trailed the path along the sculpture garden and wandered the maze of pre-owned

Buicks, neon prices stuck to their windshields and a warranty banner flapping overhead. Josh asked why I was worried about leaving.

I shrugged. Josh had always been predictably cute, but I feared that any second he would strike me as vulnerably hideous, and he would realize I was nothing to write home about. I was not the kind of girl who got crushes or sang in a band or ran naked through cemeteries. Fantasies were not my currency.

"I don't get it," he said, "You'll be great at school."

"Scary new people."

He nodded. "Like my brother's Bar Mitzvah party?" He turned to face me. I wanted to die, suddenly ten years old, the mortification unbearable. His parents searching the rec room to find Josh and me kneeling on the rug pressing mouths together, his brother counting out three seconds above our heads, a circle of strangers on hand, dressed up in scratchy clothes. I wouldn't go near his family for a full year. His bringing it up now embarrassed me. His smiling face seemed both dorky and cruel.

I kept walking. He pulled back my elbow. "Too close to home?" he said, and I must have looked incredulous, humiliated, though I wanted badly to appear indifferent. In a field of automobiles, there was no getaway car. "Hey, don't sweat it," he said, and his observation of my discomfort made it more inflamed.

His hand was still on my elbow, and I wanted it off, but when I squeezed his fingers, he didn't let go.

"So," he said, kissing the edge of my ear before I could stop him, "what's wrong with Illinois schools? Too good for 'em?"

"I liked the—" I started to answer, but his mouth muffled my reply.

Eyes closed, the sun slouching behind the trees, his hands slipped up my ribs. Maybe I could allow this, I thought, see where it goes.

When I tried to break kiss, he would ask me something that an hour ago would've given me an ulcer, and then kiss away my answer: *what's the name of your dorm, where's your roommate from, will your parents come to visit? Football tickets?* Each question took more edge off as one by one he undressed my replies.

He took both my hands and led me back to his car, parked at the edge of the dealership, beneath floodlights gone dead and blinking surveillance cameras. Light lingered in the sky. The dregs of weekend traffic slid down the boulevard as we returned to Parishwood. I imagined the cars fleeing nothing in particular or everything at once.

When Josh didn't say anything, I asked if he wanted my college email address. He laughed again, too loudly this time, and realized I was serious.

"Well, yeah, Jesus."

I wrote it out on a Kleenex from his glove compartment and snapped it back in place. At that particular moment, nobody had it but him.

Back at the home, we stood in the doorway of a second-floor recovery room. All was dark but the greenish glow from the hall. An adjustable mattress lay hooked up to trays and buttons. I shut the door behind us. Josh switched on a bedside lamp. The air-conditioner hummed, blasting currents of chills.

I was aware of my circulation.

"I feel recovered already," he said. Giggling nerves, I struggled over the guard rail and landed heavily. Straddling his lap, I shivered.

"Hey," he said, "We don't have to do anything. You all right?"

I tried to nod. "Just cold."

Holding the back of my thighs, he rubbed my jeans. "You know I've liked you since preschool?"

"I know…" I sank my weight down and he took a sharp breath. I had no idea.

"You afraid?"

Of becoming unrecognizable? I thought. I nodded.

"Of…"

"Losing contact with the ground," I said.

He shifted me next to him, so we were facing on our sides. There was a paper lining on the bare mattress that crinkled as I lay down. I lifted off his shirt, struggled to kick off my tennis shoes. He slid his hands beneath my tank top and kissed my stomach, this sleepy shock of skin sounding off like a horn. *Composure,* I thought, brushing fingers through his curly hair, I tried not to lose it.

He unzipped my jeans. The places his lips touched left my skin tingling as he moved further down. Mouthing *God* at the stippled ceiling, I didn't want him to stop.

"Let me," he repeated, looping his arms under my back. I set my chin on the grain of his collarbone.

"What?" I said, as I felt him push in.

"Ground you," he said, and I was unsure if he was trying to be funny.

He quivered with slowness. I clenched, and checked his face through the beam of syrupy light. I wanted to cry. At what point did he tap into this block of over-feeling? Over the slope of his back, I could see a framed print of Egyptian deserts and an illustrated guide to the Heimlich maneuver.

Josh groaned. His brow was furrowed with intent. His eyes glazed upwards. Would it be done quickly? At least I'm getting it over with with Josh and not some horrid frat boy at a party, I thought.

Dear God, where was the person who had last been in this bed?

I'd lost my mind.

What was I doing here—the whole day; my parents' teasing and Nana's gifts and all the getting-ready crap. And what about him? Had he been after sex all along? I'd barely moved. Did he expect me to moan? Would he be sad if he knew my thought train? The paper beneath me rustled. Our skin slapped—a klutzy, naked accident.

Then he closed his eyes, craning back and forth. His face was at peace, amazed even with his eyes shut, as if he'd blindly landed on a new great planet. I shuddered, astonished that I could bring about his particular expression, that I possessed that kind of force. I loosened, shifting him further in. I raised my hips, knees folding out to the side. He began to move quicker, wedging open the tiny space to seal it back. Reaching behind me, I switched off the lamp. His hands slid up my spine, gripping down the top of my shoulders.

Beginning to smile, again and again I felt his belly kissing mine.

When I unlocked the door to the apartment, Nana was still awake. She had made up the air mattress with clean pillowcases and fresh sheets. Before she padded over to me in her slippers, I wondered if she could sense anything, smell my altered scent.

"Did you have a good time?" Nana asked me. "Want a Velamint?"

I nodded. She was still dressed, wearing brown slacks and my dad's plaid button-down, her cleaning gear. I thought it made her look younger. Modern. Almost edgy, except for her bright eyes and orange lips. Her hair was cut round as a bowling ball, the color and perm like scoops of sherbert.

How long had it been since I'd left the apartment? Everything looked strange, the objects on her end tables like something out of a funhouse. Focus, I thought.

I had a secret, and it spun inside my chest like a painted glass globe.

"Did you order pizza?" I asked.

Nana licked her lips. “There’s leftovers in the freezer.”

“Did you put today’s date on the wax-paper?”

“Of *course*.” She made a face like only underground mole people don’t date their frozen carryout. I’d skipped dinner but couldn’t eat.

“Nana, what is the oldest slice of pizza currently dated in your freezer?”

She paused and glanced at the ceiling. Her hands shook but her voice was confident. “March.”

“Ah,” I said. The kitchen was spotless except for the cardboard pizza box. “Want me to take that to the chute?” Salmon/teal walls: new refuge.

“Sure!” she said, and handed me a baggie full of garbage that I balanced on the empty box. “Get me the chair and my tank,” she said. “I’ll come, too.”

After we dumped the trash, Nana remembered that she’d forgotten the day’s mail. We rode the elevator down to the mailroom, where it dawned on both of us that it was still Sunday. I wondered if retirement was like spring break, the weekend indistinguishable from the week. They both had a share of Florida.

“I don’t think I checked yesterday, either,” she said, fishing a mailbox key from her purse that she carried everywhere, wrapped around her neck when she was wheeled around, even to the bathroom.

She posted one bill, one birthday card, one sweepstakes giveaway. The thought reclaimed me that when I reached school, I would no longer share my parents’ mail.

“My address book is depressing,” Nana said, lifting it from her ecru sac. “Every page has somebody who died.”

“Oh,” I said, and felt a stab of what it must be like to lose a husband. How could you recover from that kind of loss? I’d had sex twenty minutes ago and was already re-yearning to be touched.

I'd had sex!

"So, you know what I did?" Nana asked.

"What did you do?"

She tapped her temple with a crooked finger. "I bought a new address book."

In her box: one issue of the *People* magazine subscription we'd bought her for her birthday, one edition of *The Jewish Times*, one bill, and one collection of coupons.

My high was evaporating, like the yellow dots that fly around your head when you stand up too fast.

As we rolled by the library, the banner was printed in color, INTERNET NOW.

I needed to hear from him all of a sudden, obtain proof of what took place. The faint soreness in my hips, my woozy walk, it wasn't enough.

"Is it okay if I stop in there?" I pointed at the library and then rested my hands on the back of her chair. "You can go on up if you want."

"No, I can wait. *I* don't have any hot dates later."

I let go of the handles, trying to let the blush drain from my cheeks. "You're not tired?" I asked.

"Nope."

I was exhausted. Upstairs with the lights out later, tucked under the sheets, I wanted to relive the last few hours of my life.

We pulled up in front of the computer desk, and I asked her, "So, are you going to get an email address now that you're all wired and hooked up down here?"

"Hell, no," she said, stamping her fist.

"Well, the school just gave me one," I said. "Do you mind if I send a message real fast?"

"All right…" she said, eyeing the computer. The machine was foreign to her, its monitor a hostile E.T.

I pushed the power button, firing it up.

My underwear felt sticky. My skin glowed. I tried to check my reflection on the monitor, searching for traces of change, but the blackness switched to blue.

"That Bill Gates," Nana said, as the Windows icon flashed, "30 *billion*. Can you believe?"

"Here," I said, and put her hand over the mouse. I assigned her the arrow and rummaged through her purse for a compact mirror. She hit me on the back of my palm. I put her hand back. She made a circle with the mouse and then lost the pointer, throwing her hands up with an "Aw, phooey."

I clicked on Explorer, typed in Google's website. "Here we go," I said, "Internet 101: This website is where you can look for anything. Anything at all. Like, you could…check email, do the crossword, listen to the radio online—"

"Join J-Date," she quipped.

"Discover another recipe for noodle kugel," I went on.

"Why would I want a different recipe?"

From the school's web center, I entered my student login and password. The screen loaded. Boxed in black with white letters, there was a message from Josh. The typed letters of his name looked startled in my inbox, louche.

The subject heading read "Sexy Girl," and I minimized the window as fast as I could.

Nana pretended to flip through the *People* magazine, but her tremor was also a laugh.

Crouching over the screen so only I could see, I clicked on his message and tried to suppress any noticeable reaction.

It read: I'm missing you already, college-woman. Glad we've outgrown the three-second rule.

I covered my mouth with my hands.

I hit reply: Jell-O tomorrow in the dining room? (I winked at him with electronic punctuation.)

"You know," Nana told me, "I used to play Spin the Bottle, too."

"They had that in your day?"

She grinned, "What'd you think we did? School wasn't that enthralling."

"And you *liked* it?"

"Kissing never grows old."

I found a new server and set up an address for my grandmother: nanasvelamints@yahoo.com.

"Here," I said, "Type me a message." After I had the compose screen ready, she told me all right, but she didn't want me reading over her shoulder. When she was finished, I told her to send it by clicking on the send button. She was a good typist but the screen and mouse unnerved her. The message was lost. She deleted it. She'd lost the cursor arrow.

"Feh!" Nana said, her voice shrill with frustration. "It's not worth it. I'm an old bird."

I went back to my login screen and sent her an email. It read: Nana, Keep trying. I don't like moving any more than you do.

"That's what phones are for, nudnik," she said, tapping me upside the head.

From the hallway we heard a woman cry out, and then a thud hit the floor. I ran to see what had happened. It was the woman in shades, and her body was shaking with what looked like a seizure. On her back, her head shook violently, a vehement, *no no no no.* I wanted to stop her jerking but was frozen. Her body convulsed, short-

circuiting, the fuse of her seemed to blow out in thumps. I didn't know what to do. Seconds passed before I jolted and tried to run after a nurse, but he had already sprung down the hall. Turning back, I was petrified at the sight of her, at how little I could do. I watched, helpless. Nana hobbled over, pushing her wheelchair and then resting in it. People appeared from all sides—on-call staff, sleep-starved residents, the night lady from the front desk, paramedics. They slid a stretcher beneath her, secured her head and strapped in her chin. They closed her legs together and strapped them to the splint. They removed her shades.

In the days before we said goodbye, Nana faltered when I made her use the mouse: its blinking cursor was not an obvious cue, and a screen of lost thought not quickly recovered. Scrolling up and re-finding boldface text was like a child's shock upon cresting a tall staircase. To her, Google was an elusive weasel. Every popup confirmed her expectation that she'd broken the damned thing. When prompted with warnings in red boxes, she paused a long time before clicking "okay."

Nana hated being weak in the face of something she couldn't talk her way out of.

I remembered when my mother's computer got a virus and fritzed out. It had to be reprogrammed, its hard drive erased, all memory lost, a computer with amnesia. Wiped clean of our screensaver, games, folder files and vacation snapshots, it showed no trace of our ever having touched it.

And in the computer's artificial glow, my grandmother mourned the arrival of yet another new address. The technology made her frightful, a demonic reminder of all she didn't understand, of all that had surpassed her. In this network of snarled wires, forked pins, and miniscule chips, was a world of invisibilities: unseen wealth,

boundless space, letters dashed off then deleted, newspapers and invitations you couldn't hold. Everything would vanish.

It didn't make sense for me to incite her aggravation further that night. There were too many things she would never learn, too many things she would unlearn. But sitting at the desk as the hours grew later, hand over hers, I tried to show her what I could. And even if I had to direct her very last click, even as she stumbled through the motions, she would get her message across the currents of words; she would skate the lines of connection like the circuitry of a frozen pond. She would find her way to me.

The Ninth Step

Erica peered into the thick glass of the window and braced herself to see Kohl again. She checked her watch— still almost two hours before her art history course at MoMA. Through the pane of the Second-Avenue pub, she could see the organ-pipe outlines of liquor bottles. The silt of a New York August was dusking through the window.

She sometimes came to this place for Sunday brunch with her roommate; it was one of the new urban habits she'd picked up since she left school and had gotten a real job. Close to her apartment, the beer served in steins, college pennants tacked to the wall.

Kohl's hair, once so strikingly black, had gray piecing into it now—even though he was only twenty-four, an intensity silvered through. He was always the most beautiful of the three of them. She'd never been pretty or sad enough to be a rebel's cause.

She'd moved into their apartment senior year, and she stayed because she did. It had been three years since their graduation. Sean and Kohl had skipped commencement: *Pomp and Circumstance* was for joiners.

He hugged her hello in seeming disbelief, as if she belonged to another country of his life.

Kohl was newly in New York and newly in AA, and all he'd said on the phone was that he wanted to talk to her. She wondered now if a bar was a cruel place to meet.

Other than his hair, he looked mostly the same. Memory adjusts for age. The previous blur of what she remembered evaporated in his actual presence. He wore a suit, straight from the law firm where he was now a paralegal. She was reminded of the space he took up, the slicing charm employed when he felt like it, the cut of his

profile. She'd never seen him in anything but a t-shirt and jeans before. She wondered if this was what it meant to be older.

To the waiter Erica said, "Scotch and soda." Remembering his two-liters in the fridge, she ordered for Kohl, "and a Dr. Pepper, please."

"How's Sean?" she asked, turning away from Kohl's glower, so unlike his roommate. Before Sean, Erica thought red-heads were too All-American to be sexy. But Sean bought first edition Russian novels and records on vinyl, mourned that he'd been too young to catch *Pavement* at their peak, and after staying out late on Saturday nights, he stole the Sunday *Times* off lawns. Before Sean, Erica had never had sex. He was always well informed.

"In Russia," Kohl replied, but she already knew that.

"So, stranger," Kohl said, breaking eye contact, "thanks for meeting me."

"You're in AA?" asked Erica, straightening up and crossing her legs as if preparing for a work diatribe. She had written the name Kohl on her napkin in eye-liner. There was still time to make her class, and this week was going to be good. Lights glinting off amber wood, Erica took solace in the Boogie-Woogie Mondrian and Hesse's fiberglass, bucket-like sculptures on the floor. The group was reservedly friendly as the weeks progressed, casually interested in art though not overly knowledgeable. Many were retired; she was the youngest one there, and the previous week a man in his thirties had asked her to dinner.

"I am," Kohl said. "Started about four months ago."

Didn't everybody drink in college? Wasn't he being a bit precocious now? She felt tipsy.

"I've been taking stock of my life, you know," Kohl said. "It's part of the program. I take inventory. I made a list of everyone in my past that I was bad to," he

paused, “you’re the second call I made. Lisa has a baby now with this married guy she met at work.”

“Wow, thanks, I guess,” she said, “like being first runner-up.”

His face fell blank. “We both know I was awful, and I’m sorry if I hurt you, since that was partly my intention.” When she first moved in, Kohl pretended like she wasn’t there. He and Sean would get wasted and toss references over her head like a game of catch. Uttered dead pan, Sean’s allusions were sheets she yearned to slip between. She wanted him to verse her in his irony.

Erica imagined she wasn’t supposed to react as strongly as she sometimes did, genuine emotion being the opposite of Sean’s aesthetic, but she didn’t care. Knowing she could never catch up to his wit, she gambled on breaking him with naïveté. She laughed loudly and came hard.

But Kohl kept an icy distance. She figured it was because she wore cable knit and read Michael Cunningham. Though they never went to class, *a waste of time*, *for joiners,* they said, Sean and Kohl did their homework.

“Listen,” she said now, “you and Sean and me underlining course packs and sinking beers,” her voice was reedy, “flipping records, smoking Camels, watching sports—I’m not some kind of victim here.”

She pulled through her straw and then from the rim of the glass. It left a taste in her mouth that wasn’t familiar; cold, rubbery. Who would this apology make feel better? Was his being mean, drunk and without boundary that different from showing contrition sober, if it meant revealing you out loud as someone who was willing to take it?

“Look,” he said, “You’re too good to have been treated badly.”

“Thanks,” she said, pressing her forehead. “Three years ago that would have meant a lot to me.”

"Three years is a long time, baby," he said, flattening his wrist over the table top. "Long strange trip it's been, and we've seen each other's worst—"

"My worst didn't hurt anyone," she said, and her voice rose a little. "You, being too deep for common courtesy and all…" She wished her sarcasm pierced deeper. If nothing else, she had absorbed from Sean how to exact meanness.

He took a drink from the soda as he eyed her, *like refreshments at a tragedy*, she thought. In college, she was supposed to deflect their scorn, unfeeling, but now if she didn't tell him off it would make her look slow to the uptake. She didn't need him to reveal that he'd been shitty; she'd witnessed it herself. What she needed him to tell her was why.

"You think that just because I didn't think suicide was sexy or quote *Absalom, Absalom!,*" her voice shook slightly, "that before, you could rail on me, but now I get to be a member of your 'house of darkness'?"

"Hey, hey, I'm not trying to drudge up a sordid past here because I'm proud of it," he smiled, his lips quotation marks around teeth, amused at this language of melodrama.

"Well, thanks. Do you still think my cardigan fits too small? Or that my essays could have been great if someone else wrote them for me? Are you saying that now I have permission to get over it? That now I can make peace? Yes, thank you, because I sorta had already done all that until about an hour ago."

At MoMA each week, the more she looked, the more she saw, the more they were hers. The Giacometti sculptures were stringy bodies of beaten and stretched metal. The giant Picasso whores made her gape. She bought postcards and taped them to the fridge. Her roommate thought they were ugly, but what she reached for now, standing before a painting or watching the office elevator doors slide together, was not beauty but astonishment.

She was going to be late if she didn't leave soon.

"Permit me this," Kohl said. "I spent eight years of my life enslaved to the bottle, and I did some horrible things. I didn't come here to make myself feel better. I called—I don't know—" He glanced outside, as if wishing he were the cabdriver idling the engine, sipping from a brown paper bag, "In part to make direct amends, in part just to see how you're doing."

"I'm fine."

"So, post-college: how's reality?" he asked. "Biting yet?"

"You know, yours was probably the only "fraternity" that had an equal ratio of *New York Review of Books* to *Playboys* waiting in the mailbox," she said and swallowed more scotch.

"What about you?" he asked. "You living in this neighborhood?"

"Yeah," she said, "let's talk real estate. Maybe the weather if we're lucky." She reclined in the booth, crossing her arms, "Sweet Jesus, Kohl, does AA make you swear off wit, too?"

"It isn't easy for me," he said.

"All this apology crap you could call in on the phone." She filed through her bag for her wallet.

"Alcohol lets you get away with some crazy-ass shit," he said, "And after sending enough of it through your system, you start living in a constant state of depravity. Booze makes you hate. It makes you violent and confrontational and embarrass yourself and then you know what takes the edge off your embarrassment?"

"Another fucking drink."

He didn't say anything, like the attorney he was training to become, resting after a good witness. He was giving her the party line, she knew, though he was

genuine, and it reminded her of the difference between Sean and Kohl. Sean would have been clever in his contrition.

Well, she'd had enough. She hadn't wanted to reject his sincerity at first, since she'd never thought him capable of it. But there was this chance, now, this chance to finally say it. She would feel bad later maybe, wonder if she'd gone too far, but maybe that had its own appeal. She downed the glass.

"Well. You're free of your embarrassment—"

"Wait a second."

"You can sleep easy now—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa."

"Go fuck yourself."

For the better part of a year she should have said that and not to him alone. At that moment, she should have been victorious, soaring. And. Yet.

"Erica."

"What?"

"You're crying."

"Now you're mister sensitivity."

"You feel sick?"

"Unhealthy. Sick is the time I had a two-week stomach virus and my mom would hold my hair back in the middle of the night. I haven't thought about you or Sean for so long," she lied, "and now you're in the city and you're in AA and you go around making these mawkish apologies."

*

Kohl didn't bother to look up when they walked through the door of the old Queen-Anne style house, where Bob Dylan was on the speakers and streamers of smoke stained the ceiling. *Don't think twice it's all right. It's all over now, Baby Blue*:

a certifiable celebration of leaving women. Lisa was on Kohl's lap, and he moved a lint roller over her back. The television played mutely to no one.

"What up, Kohl," Erica said. Lisa twisted around to straddle him. He started rolling the back of her sweater, watching her apple-shaped face. Their brazenness made Erica stare. A braided feeling wove through her—repulsed, turned-on, a little jealous.

"Sean, your dad called," Kohl said, ignoring the greeting.

Sean smirked at his friend's rudeness. Lisa closed her eyes.

"Oh, but you'll want to talk to me one day," Erica said to Kohl in the lightest tone she could muster, flipping her hair, "And by then you'll have lost your chance. Poor you."

"Yeah. *Maybe*." Their response for everything, meaning anything but.

Erica rolled her eyes at all of them and went to get a drink.

The kitchen was different from the one she shared with her roommate, which they disinfected with bleach and mopped every Friday. Beer cans lay knocked over on counters. Bags of trash piled on linoleum, pizza boxes, shot glasses, ash trays. She retrieved a Milwaukee's Best from the browning fridge, gathered up Lolita, Sean's cat, who had come purring to greet her at her dish. Who Erica loved in no small part because it meant the garbage would never lead to mice.

Sean's cell rang from the living room. Despite Erica's objections, Sean continued to call Rachel. From the bottom of the stairs she could hear him talking to her and smoking, murmuring suggestions that Erica couldn't pick up. Insulting her in his smoothest whisper. They *had* been together for three years, he'd explained.

Later they played Trivial Pursuit. The temperature was dropping outside, and Sean wore gray flannel pants and an orange t-shirt with a wicked jack-o-lantern smile.

As she jiggled her beer can, Erica mused: new clothes in the fall was one of the good things.

Lisa told Erica the two of them should make out, girl to girl, and Erica stammered until Lisa said she was cute. Kohl agreed that she was cute. Sean touched her leg. For a moment she thought about saying yes to Lisa but feared this would turn out to be a prank. What used to be the boring fallback, staying home was her new thrill.

Either accidentally or with malice, Kohl slipped then and called Erica "Rachel," and Sean got quiet after that.

Kohl and Lisa started addressing only each other, as if they were the sole people in the room, maybe in the world. There were small intervals between small kisses and no intervals between deep ones.

After the others went upstairs, Erica and Sean gave up the board game and then Sean told her to leave. He told her he was very sorry but he was also very tired of seeing her.

"That isn't funny," she said, but he assured her that he was through in all seriousness.

When he waited for something, for her to leave she guessed, she reminded herself of his drunken absurdities, that he never remembered half the things he'd done the night before when he woke up in the morning, and that this thought would pass. He'd easily had ten beers. He asked what the fuck was the matter with her, to get the fuck out.

Where would she go? Her heart sped. She threw the remote at the television screen. The batteries popped out.

"Such a crazy cunt," he said, as if the thought made him tired.

"Fucking psychopath," she yelled. "So full of pompous horseshit you can't read the writing on the wall."

"Could you use more clichés, please?"

"What a pussy you turned out to be," she sputtered, "Why don't you just go back to *her* since that's what you want so bad—"

"I would if I could," he said, "You can believe it."

"Go ahead," she motioned, *c'mere* fingers to palm, "Tell me the reasons why."

"She's much better looking than you, for starters, and smarter," he paused, "and less of a doormat."

With the keys from the counter, she took his car, skidding across lanes, and cried against the dried noodles at the grocery store.

Slamming the car door in the driveway, she unloaded a carton of eggs onto his windshield and trunk. Each time the sound broke new and cold: yolk weeping down the glass. Shells caught in the pads of her fingers.

"Hey, can I get in on that?" Sean asked. She turned around. She didn't know how long he'd been watching, leaning cross-armed against the siding of the house without a coat. Still wearing his pumpkin t-shirt and flannel pants, he asked if she would go for another drive with him, over-easy.

They didn't speak as she maneuvered the quiet, ice-slicked streets, radio on, egg stuck to the glass. It froze that way on the window and would not be washed for months.

Back inside, they put away the game. She was on the couch, and he kneeled on the floor. He took her hands, examining the lines of her palm. He touched his cheek with her knuckles, sweet scruff, and drew them to his mouth, kissing her wrists as if asking for mercy.

Pushed back against the wall of the landing, his flannel pants were friction on her fingers, before they could even make it up to bed.

Unlike what she'd first imagined, he took sex lying down, her on top. As he was cradling her hips and pushing them back and forth, she clutched her hair and did not stammer. Falling forward on his chest, she heard him emit rapid sounds of pleasure, stripped of all cynicism.

That night in the dark he told her she could use some work on her blowjobs.

She exhaled smoke and didn't disagree.

And by the way, he told her, rolling away to his half of the single bed, he loved her, and she knew that, right?

*

Of the 20th-century paintings, Erica favored the surrealists. A jumble in the alphabet of unconscious, she worked to decode their cues—columns of ancient facades, a pink glove, a curtained stage, a knight in love with his mannequin, how the only fabric that wove through was the soiled silk of memory.

Her class had begun five minutes ago thirty blocks downtown, but despite her tirade she hadn't left the pub. Being across the table from Kohl evoked a way of speaking, a repartee, a language she'd forgotten she once knew. The air between them carried the tenor of many other nights she wanted back; coming home from parties with the two of them, the cold on their backs, and Sean slicing jalapenos for chili supper and drunk kisses that made her lips burn. She was reminded she used to feel scared and happy, about to be devastated or fresh off recovery from it, but raw and ready right where she was, not wanting to be anywhere else. She ordered an Amstel.

Kohl eyed her from over the top of a pint of chocolate milk. He stirred it in thick circles with his straw.

"Sean and I once had sex in the living room while you were sleeping. Did you ever know that?"

"Dirty girl," he said, with a raised eyebrow and a tilt of the head.

Erica drew an E with her finger from the condensation droplets on the bottle. "Sean was sweet-drunk that night. You learn the different faces of it. The piss-in-the-bed-I'm sleeping in kind or the horny, gropey kind or the kind that drives us into the lumberyard going sixty down an icy street, or the stone-faced means… I was wearing Sean's *Washing Machine* t-shirt; Lolita was on your chest."

"I wasn't sleeping for all of it," he said.

She swallowed and put down the bottle. "You heard us."

He didn't say anything.

"You don't seem appalled," she said, sipping again, cheeky, "so neither will I be." She unwrapped a plastic straw the waiter had brought with a glass of water. "The thing was, I was always trying to get you to like me. You were an extension of Sean you know, always telling me that I didn't get an opinion in whatever intellectual masturbation the two of you were jerking off about."

"You know, you never really got how good you are," he said, shrugging. "Kind, attractive…"

"Oh, don't do that. Don't suck up now so God will pass you on the AA test. That was one of the things I liked about you. If someone thinks you're only average, they never actually tell you that, but you two actually would."

"Take a goddamn compliment."

"You know, for someone invested in the Lord, you swear a lot."

"For someone who once claimed to be love's ambassador, you hate yourself a lot." Kohl cracked his neck. "You put a lot of stock in cruelty."

" 'Face: B/B-," she quoted.

"And what the fuck did it matter? I was destroying myself. I stopped eating as some kind of test, to see how bony I could get. I wouldn't have known beauty from Adam."

"You told me I wasn't beautiful. I vowed it would be the last time I spoke to you, but you said, no, not to feel bad; that I had stellar breasts. A grade. To this day I can't figure how even a compliment from you could still sound insulting. As if breasts were the only worthy part about me. You said I was a very good lay. But you would never have known."

"No."

"Some nights me and Sean could hear you and Lisa."

"Same." He waited a beat, and then asked: "Why?"

"Walls were thin, I guess."

"Why did you stay with Sean?"

"Aw, not you, too. I thought this was about absolving *you.* Why did you take so much pleasure in making people feel bad? In making *me* feel bad? You can't apologize for something if you don't know why you did it."

"Booze. Loyalty. Fear. Envy. I don't know."

"That's it?" her voice was quiet now, and whatever Kohl was bringing back for her, it had taken a turn and was no longer good. "That's so easy." She waited, ordered a shot. "You have no right to do this to me, not now when there's nothing left to fix. I was fine before—"

"I don't believe you."

"And this little exercise in atonement is worse than any other stunt you've pulled."

"What would you've rathered," he asked, and for the first time he looked pissed and exasperated in a way that was familiar, "that I go through life thinking I behaved basically all right?"

"Oh, that's cute. Even on calling you out as a dipshit you get to beat me to the punch line."

He grinned at her.

"Selfish, always," she said, taking the whisky in one gulp.

She'd told the thirty-something man at MoMA, *why don't we play it by ear*, maybe they could grab a bite after class. She'd been surprised at how easily she could offer this, how pleasantly casual you could be to someone for whom you felt nothing. In her cubicle earlier that day, she typed with less boredom knowing that night she'd be eating well, sharing tapas and sangria with someone who knew little about her except that she was the youngest in a 20th-century art history class. Someone who didn't think she looked bad in cardigans or scold her for low self esteem while simultaneously eroding it further.

The plans were all screwed up now, and it was his fault.

She left the bar without another word. To her surprise, Kohl followed her out.

"Are you going to talk to Sean any time soon," she asked, woozy.

"Sean's in Russia," he repeated.

She wanted all night to ask the question, knew she shouldn't, but there was no resistance left in her mind. "Is he with someone? Does he still talk to Rachel?" She noticed the swish of cars blurring into light, the grocers stacking tubs, spraying fruit, laying sheets of plastic over tables.

"Yeah, I'm not going to answer that," he said, "I won't be your international lifeline to him. You want to go out again sometime, talk on the phone maybe, hang out

with friends, well, I'd like that," he said, and as he spoke, there was this option laid out before her, and she could see it, would have been flattered before tonight.

"No thanks," she said. "You were better as a drunk."

Walking up the avenue, Erica teetered over grates and prayed the scuttling of motion by the dumpsters were clusters of leaves and not small rodents. The air was warm and smelled like the wet odor of uncovered manholes.

It was too late to make the end of class. She'd blown it for dinner, and she hated Kohl for reinstating her as the village idiot, but she was also somewhat relieved. This older guy, whoever he was, had none of what she sought. Kohl had made her light-headed, and Sean was everywhere again, the gait of his walk, the displays in the windows of record shops. Now that he was back in the same city, she wanted Kohl to keep this sensation going, and she missed him already. She wanted him because in spite of all she knew, there had been nothing in the past three years that had offered her the same kind of feeling as what the last few hours had recalled.

It hadn't ended badly with Sean because for Erica, it never really ended.

"It's unhealthy for you, besides," Kohl continued, suddenly at her side again, without retaliation to her earlier remark. He was walking her home now, apparently.

"Now you're the fucking surgeon general."

"See. Friend-like," he said, taking her hand and curling her fingers around a gifted cigarette.

She bent her head and lit it. "Yeah," she exhaled, "Maybe."

The likeness was so good Kohl couldn't help laughing.

On the parapet to the park she asked: "What step is this, anyway?"

After a moment, he replied, "The ninth."

They were shaded by chestnuts, this fit of leaves in a city of streetlamps. She was dizzy and wondered if her roommate would be worried. She took out her phone. Ignoring the missed calls, she texted: home soon.

"The ninth, huh."

"What?"

"It's just so instructional—"

"You think this is barrels and monkeys?" he asked. They got up again to walk. Her head swam.

"—There's a method to it," she said, "structure. Schemas." She stumbled beneath a colonnade of oaks. "I wish I had some organizing system like that. Maybe it would explain how I got here."

"It's not meant to be applied at random."

"Like instead of a twelve steps to sobriety, maybe what they should focus on are the twelve steps to addiction."

"We talk about that in meetings," he said, brushing away a branch, "It's more than twelve things. And less. In many ways it's just about one. You can't stop drinking. You don't walk away. Once an alcoholic, you can never function as a quote-unquote regular drinker again."

"—And recovery, that's just as constructed. In talking to me like this, you're doing a lot more than one step—and you're also doing less, since this step isn't completed 'till you've called everyone you fucked over, right? Calling more than one person, you're calling lots, and by calling me, it sets off all these steps in *my* life, so the actual number of connections, bridges, it's infinite. Inexact. Messy. Why would you want to limit it to twelve?"

The booze was making her talky. Honest but ridiculous.

"What would yours have looked like?" Kohl asked.

"What?"

"Your steps."

"Mine." She exhaled and thought for a second. "Maybe like my studio project you and Sean impaled so astutely. She slid her hands against the air as if clearing an imaginary slate of marble: "Firsts: Autobiography of a Relationship."

"Okay, but come on," he said, "Know thy audience."

"I get it."

She hadn't wanted them to see it, remembering the time she'd said an O'Keefe had *changed her life,* and how for the rest of the year they went around the apartment, asking the other if the dill pickles in the fridge had *changed your life*, or closer, the bones from a carryout order of hot wings. But they'd insisted.

Her project, a collage: neon diner light circling a clock clipped from a magazine, the props of first conversations; cutouts of menus, concert stubs, the fabric pills from the couch, the winning card of trivial pursuit, cubes of sugar for the first coffee of the morning, corners of sheet music, favorite postcards—floating goats, the Eiffel Tower, sun-baked bones of animal skulls—mastheads of a stolen Sunday paper, and a reproduction of Sean's Pollack of pee on the ice when he was too wasted to make it inside.

What the collage couldn't display was the world within, the shoe boxes that contain our pipes, pearls, globes and gloves. The stuff you shove under the bed.

From the steps of her building, she got up, took his hand, squeezed it, and started to head inside when he pulled her back. Searching her expression, he didn't do anything at first. He looked so different than Sean—weathered, frightening, more conventionally handsome. She wanted something from him but couldn't figure out what it was. He'd already said he was sorry; he clearly wasn't going to lead her back

to Sean. What do we apologize for and when is it enough? And for those who don't get to make it up with sex, where does that reserve go? How do you start new without cycling through the old and all over again?

There's attraction in somebody needing to right you after you've been wronged, she remembered. There's sympathy. There's resistance. There's malady and remedy silently shifting sides.

And as he kissed her forehead, she remembered the living room in their old house—the plaid couch and the exiled minivan chair in the middle of the living room and the way the winter sun pierced through the grimy kitchen windows first thing in the morning, showering sparkles onto slabs of wet snow melting out back by the cars.

It started like that. He kissed her forehead. And though she thought she didn't feel it yet, the draw, no, what she had then ran closer to compassion, the understanding rolled down her spine that she would start to, fast, and afterward there would be no return. She kissed his forehead back—this soft reckoning of risk. He glared at her before he kissed her mouth, and she hated him again, hated him more. She was still wearing her skirt and blouse from work, and stumbling into the courtyard wedged between her building and its opposite, beneath the Z's of fire-escape stairways and the black iron of stacked balconies, he slipped two fingers inside her, twisted and opened them as she drew a sharp breath. He pulled back, a sliding scale of notes he knew how to play.

"I need to throw up," she said after a while.

"All right."

She held the wooden bench, heaving. She couldn't see him. The alcohol was working its way backwards, starting with the whisky. She figured he left at some point during the middle of the scotch. Her back convulsed, and she heaved again as yet more liquid splattered cement. And then, with the screen of intoxication pulled back, she

didn't care that he was gone. He was just a proxy-high to Sean. And Kohl probably would have started ignoring her again, turning him back into the person that he was now apologizing for.

A pretty sight, she thought, tears streaming down her face. She'd never been able to throw up without crying, even as an adult. She remembered her mother's hand on her back in the middle of the night—tears, lines of sweat from blankets she'd so recently been shivering beneath, the strain swelling in her head and pounding from the impact, spit collecting around the corners of her mouth. *That's right*, she could hear her mother saying, *all right, get it out. Get it all out. That's good. Don't want that inside you anymore.* And then there were only the tears, streaming down who knows why, the bad stuff was done. She'd made it through. In place of the sickness that spread through her stomach and up her throat, the sickness that had so recently catapulted her out of bed and through the bathroom door, there was now a beautiful emptiness, the adrenaline that streamlines through veins and fills the absence of illness. She shouldn't be crying, she thought, because it feels so good after. But the tears come late; the first step is just getting through. The first step is in the motions. Sound. Impact. Only when you come up on the other side does it register. And when the tears do appear, running down with everything else, the words drift softly. *It's gonna be all right. There, there.*

Feeling around the dry grass for her bag, she located its nylon shell and unzipped, hoping for a Kleenex and a piece of gum. Her wet cheeks were cooling in the outdoor air. She thought she'd be okay to get up, but as if her body had replied *nope, no, not going anywhere just yet*, she settled back on the ground. She closed her eyes and laid her head on the seat of a bench as she draped her arms around and tried to ignore the smell. She wanted to will herself up, but she felt unable to lift even the keys that dangled off her fingers. Sleep came fast, a gritty avalanche. Something so

heavy she worried it wouldn't allow her to fight up from under. She heard a rustle behind her and thought, *so help me God if that's a rat.* And then, she could hear herself mumble even though she wanted to shout.

"No, no, stop, let go of me," she said.

"Shhh."

Her eyes were closed. She felt hands tightly lifting her by the waist, sitting her up. She writhed around, kicked her foot and punched at air. She could not seem to open her eyes.

"Hey. I went to get you some water from the corner, but nothing was open. I had to go inside one of those 24-hour pizzerias. Shh. Stop." He lowered her fists.

"Kohl." She leaned back into his chest, a lazy boy.

"Yes." He placed the bottled water in her hand and closed her fingers around it.

With her eyes still closed, she unscrewed the top and washed the liquid in her mouth. It was cool down her throat. "Kohl," she said, "It was never me who was sick."

He hesitated. "I can't say on that one."

"Kohl." She opened her eyes, let her focus come back, and there he was behind her, the hazy vision of his haggard profile. His undershirt was rumpled, worn. "I shouldn't have let you, both of you, in *college.*" And as she said it, the word was an embargoed country whose heat she still craved. Love was the muddled crush of mean and sweet.

"Cruelty isn't honesty," he said.

"I shouldn't have let you," she said, looking away from him, "*man,* I cannot believe how much shit I ate. Eating and grinning the whole time." She sunk the heels of her hands to her eye-sockets.

"Yeah. *Maybe,*" he said.

Her yawn finished as a small smile. “Kohl.”

“Erica.”

“How do you deal? What’s the fix?”

He’d lit a cigarette, exhaled the smoke, and she took it from him without dragging, just rolling it between her fingers. They sat now, her back against his chest against the bench. The night was paling around the edges where the sky met the buildings, though it was hours before dawn. He took the cigarette back, smoked it down and flicked it away. It landed near a flowerpot, rolling out of sight.

Sean.

She felt the abrupt stab of change, the rubble of it folding in, taking pieces of her chest. Always she had tried to fix things in place, mourning loss in all its tiny forms. She wondered now if she could ever view the whorl of what comes next as something seductive and not devastating, not the end. She wondered if getting older was learning how to leave. She wondered if it could be acquired—this taste for an emptied room, its unmade bed. Maybe to abandon is the only way to grace.

Untethering

At the corner, they waited for the city bus. *I'm a teenger*, Abby pretended, wandering a little ways down the curb from her mother and brother, cool and alone. She bent down to tie her shoe. She carried a white clutch, formerly her grandmother's. Now, on its first voyage, the bag contained: pink plastic sunglasses with stars on the arms, sparkling lip-gloss, a pencil with frogs on it, a flip-top notebook like Lois Lane, and a long, skinny camera that no longer took pictures but still made satisfying snap and winding sounds. She placed the shades on her head. Abby was going to record everything about Chicago.

"Abby, come stand over here by me, sweetheart," her mother said. She was nine, she wasn't a baby. David was only six. They were going to the aquarium while her father went to meetings. It was their spring vacation. She obeyed. Her brother walked over to her and his brace sounded like a broom snapping a birthday piñata. David wore a brace on his leg all the time—one leg worked and one leg didn't. If there were further specifics her parents didn't elaborate, and Abby didn't ask. She imagined David's condition was like trying to use right-handed scissors when you're actually a leftie. Sometimes she tried to walk using only one leg, dragging the other so that it would draw a line in the sandbox. Her mother took Abby's hand.

The aquarium was large and stony with tall pillars and stacks of steps, a White House for fish. It was bigger than any building Abby had seen. Brightly colored flags dropped down in the spaces between pillars. The banner of cloth in the middle read "Welcome" written in cursive from top to bottom.

In the rotunda, sunlight poured in through crosshatched beams, an upside down colander of a ceiling. The rooms fanned out from the center, spokes on a wheel, and unlike the rotunda, they were dark and dreamy, dappled shadows on the floor.

"Now, stay close to me," Abby's mom said, her arms stiff at her sides, a smaller hand clutched tight in each of hers.

Her mother wore a printed skirt, a white blouse and practical shoes. They stood in line, and Abby snapped a make-believe picture of the family ahead of them—two girls a little older than her linked arm in arm, pretending to call each other with their free hands on matching purple-glittered cell phones. Or maybe they actually were calling each other, though Abby didn't much see the point in that. They wore bangles on their wrists and whispered loudly how lame this place was. Abby wished she had a friend with her and that both of them were wearing bracelets. She watched the girls' laughs and gestures, the sophistication of the braces on their teeth, the way they wore more than one t-shirt under a puffy vest layered over pleated miniskirts.

"Hey!" David said, tugging on her star-printed sweatshirt, which now felt somehow horrible.

"Stop," she said, freeing her elbow. It would have been easy to bop him on the head, but she remembered her father's promise for dinner at a fancy restaurant, sighed, and resisted. No fighting, he'd said.

"Kids," her mother said from above their heads, but Abby wasn't listening. "We can look in the rooms up here, and then head down to see divers feed the whales. There's a presentation at noon." The parents of the two girls paid, and as they left the atrium the girls rolled their eyes.

After handing the ticket-lady bills from her wallet, Abby's mother bent an admissions button on David's collar.

"Lemme," Abby said, pinching it on her earlobe, a makeshift jewel.

Her mother smiled, and for the first time since they'd left Michigan the worried expression she'd worn was gone.

"You thinking of pierced ears, Missy? her mother asked. "Maybe sometime soon?"

Abby's eyes widened.

"Could I?"

"How about for your next birthday, when you turn ten?"

"Okay!"

She took her mother's hand again—their special understanding, this time liking the closeness of it, something she didn't know she'd momentarily missed, even if it made her feel young.

The glass in the dampened room speckled white water-light. All around her, the lull of trickling shifted. With each new pocket of fish the sound rushed and ebbed, bubbled, rippled, and fell still. Abby read the names from the plaques, scribbled and snapped fake pictures. On the carpet, blue shadows fell like Swiss cheese. Silver tarpon shot past reef. Parrotfish munched coral. In Around the World in 80 Tanks, trout sturgeon and river otters represented the state of Illinois. The sea stars were spongy, their centers like a bruised knee. The California Sea-Cucumbers were rubber, Technicolor sausage oozing through mud. Abby's favorite were the seahorses: fragile, mystical, banded red or yellow.

As Abby wandered the tanks, her mother and brother stopped to search for the missing fins on a shark. At the center of the room, huddled beside a cluster of algae and sprays of orange guppies, were the two girls from the line. They were comparing watch tans on their wrists, even though it was only March.

The purse clutched to her side, she approached the glass on the other side of the girls. Through the water the shapes of their clothes blurred, a faulty television

screen fizzing diagonal. Abby snapped open the clasp, felt for the camera, clicked an imaginary photo, and dropped it back in the handbag. She stuck her finger in the pot of lip-gloss and smoothed some on her mouth. She felt sorry for the fish, sifted from their homes like underwater diamonds. Once free, now stuck in the same flow day after day.

A surfperch fanned its fins, its scales a muted rainbow. She tapped the glass and watched it blow rings. Abby made a fish face back. She was hidden a little, and she felt the search of maternal eyes. Peeking out, her mother had rounded the wrong side of the room, rapidly checking tanks without looking at the fish. David was at her side. "Abby?" she called, her voice tinged with worry, not quite panic. Abby took a few steps out, waved, flashed an "okay" sign, and her mother's forehead smoothed. She waved back and blew her a kiss, their glamour move. Abby nodded and returned to the tank. The girls were no longer across the way. From the hallway leading to the next room, though, she saw two heads watching her. How long had they been staring? What were they doing with their arms? Were they motioning her over? She couldn't believe it.

She shrugged and checked her shoulder, walked toward the hallway where the room arched outward. She could still see her mother and brother, though their backs were turned away from her.

"Um. We were just wondering where you're from?" the first girl asked.

"Where are you from?"

"Grosse Point."

"Grosse Point," the second one echoed.

"Lansing."

"Hey, we're like, all from Michigan."

"Yeah, that's cool." Abby was nodding. How come their parents weren't in the

same room? How come they got to be lucky and off by themselves? Abby was a little frightened of them. Her mother would want her close by.

"Have you read all the Harry Potters?" the first one asked her.

"Um. All but the last. It was huge—too heavy." They were talking to her! She tucked her hair behind her ear, imitating a move she'd watched a girl at the park do.

"I know, right? Us, too!"

"Isn't this place lame city?" The second had her hand on a cocked hip.

"Sure."

"Where'd you get the glasses?" first girl said. Abby had forgotten they were perched on her head, stars on the arms. Her face reddened.

"I forget."

"Wanna go see the gift shop? I told Amy she should try and steal one thing, but she's too chicken."

Abby's eyes widened. She no longer wished to talk to these older girls any more, but she was in awe and a little terrified. She felt a tug on her sweatshirt.

"Mommy wants you to come back now." The two girls looked down at David, who had appeared next to them without her realizing. Abby could feel their eyes traveling to his brace. "Mommy says the whale feeding starts in eight minutes." She ignored him for a moment, willing the whole scene to disappear. "We gotta go…" He tugged again. His eyes were bright with neediness and glee.

"David, go away…" she faltered. "If you even can, I mean. Walk much?" The girls giggled at her remark, impossible and mean. She didn't feel bad then but she had the feeling she would later.

"What?" his face fell. "Come on. Why aren't you coming?"

"Because." She cocked a hip like she'd seen the second girl do. The first whispered something behind a cupped hand.

"Okay, well, see ya later," they said and scampered away. Oh, to be given the freedom to roam around unchecked. To go places by yourself. Abby longed for this untethering. A hunger rested in her stomach that was almost like dread.

At home, her mother fussed over him every morning, adjusting the length of the brace or telling him how tall he was getting. She kept track with a ruler and the column of their kitchen, and once when she thought nobody could see, Abby saw her mother wipe her eyes with a Kleenex after inking the line on the wall. Abby tried really hard for the rest of the afternoon and evening not to fight with David.

At home, Abby didn't like her brother. He always copied her, sticking sparkled pins in his hair which looked ridiculous or wanting his nails painted pink just because hers were. He pretended to do fake homework so he could get the same star stickers from their parents, and he acted like he actually knew the pop-stars on the radio Abby danced to in front of the mirror, often barging in and dancing his retarded mambo. He said *spaghetti* all wrong. His brace made their footsteps louder in libraries or children's museums. Because her mother often whispered, "please include him, Abby," or "there are things you have that he doesn't," it was like there was this special confidence the two of them shared. She felt like he belonged to her but wished he didn't, and then felt guilty for the wish.

She never played across the street in the park without him tagging along. After the grown-ups walked them over and waved goodbye, the neighborhood kids divided into teams. David and Abby were stuck together, a Kangaroo-pick since the other kids decided you couldn't have Abby without David. Manning the same T-ball position or jumping for a Frisbee toss, they were a three-legged race contestant who usually finished last. Waiting to get chosen, she was aware of herself next to him, imagining how weak, how unsure he must look. She understood how little time she would give

some annoying kid like him if he were not her brother. But when boys said cruel things at school, she had to protect David from the hurt. And her being mean once in a while was okay because her parents always said deep down she loved him, too.

A day didn't pass without Abby wanting to or actually hitting David, but seeing his face crumple because of someone like Willy the bully on the school playground, that she could not take. It made her feel sick. She stomped his toes to get Willy away. When the bully eventually skulked off elsewhere, calling things toward David about needing a *girl* to help, she'd go back to a picnic table to work on the potholder from a plastic loom the teachers let her bring outside. Abby didn't have that many friends herself, and her cousin Megan, who Abby genuinely liked, was a full grade below and didn't share the same recess. At dinner that night, neither Abby nor her brother would say anything about the playground, an unspoken pact. Sometimes Abby wanted to tell her parents all of it, the worst from the schoolyard, released in the air like circus doves, but she worried her mother would be sad, more sad than Abby and David, so it was easier just to stay quiet.

At home, her mother tried to be excited when they'd go to the shoe store, telling David he could pick any pair he wanted. The last time they went, Abby wandered the racks, sticking her foot into a turquoise sneaker on display and then posing in front of the ankle-mirror before sliding it off and opting for a silver latticed-leather sandal that needed someone taller to take it down from the wall. Abby's mother wasn't paying attention to her. From the other side of the store, David was holding a light-up high-top and was inflating air from a pump in the shoe-tongue.

"Could you please still go ahead and measure them both, though, like it's normal to sell two pairs at once?" her mother whispered to the salesman behind the register, probably thinking Abby was out of earshot. "It would be so good of you to play along, here."

The salesman rolled his eyes.

Her mother wrung her hands as she seated herself next to David in the cushiony chairs. Abby joined them. David swung his good leg, and then slipped his bare foot onto the metal sizer and stood up.

Once David had gotten both shoes, one from each box, her mother kept repeating how wonderful they looked. David believed her, checking himself out in the full-length mirror until he limp-ran around the four corners of the store like a hyperactive, from mirror to mirror, impressing himself with his illuminated soles.

David got a balloon when they paid but her mother got shot down.

"I'm sorry, Madam," the salesman said, looking inpatient, "there's absolutely no way you can not pay for both pairs." Her mother closed her eyes as if she could not hear him that way. "The remaining shoes would be unsellable," he laughed. "I mean—yeah, well, you understand."

Abby wondered when it would be her turn. She wondered what happened to the extra left and right shoe they didn't end up using once they got home, if there were a special room in the sky for the rejected shoes, where they were welcome in all their mismatched glory.

Her mother hemmed all of the left legs of his pants herself after bringing them home from the department store so they always fit just right. Even when she accidentally stuck herself with the needle, she insisted the sewing made her happy. She washed his sneakers in the washer when they got muddy and then polished them with a kit. After dabbing white shoe polish with a rag, her mother spat onto the sneaker. She then scrubbed the leather like it had done something to offend her. Looking up and finding Abby standing in the doorway, her mother said it was the only time ladies were allowed to spit.

In the basement of the aquarium, Abby wouldn't speak to her brother. He kept hitting her shoulder and pointing out the belugas, but she ignored him. Her father had promised the special treat, the fancy restaurant, if they didn't fight. Her father was always the one with the best plans. Flicking through the coral ridges of her mind, she floated away. She wanted to block out those girls, and her brother, and the horrible thing she had just said.

Her mother sat on one of the benches that circled the amphitheater of whales, making small talk with a woman and her stroller.

"Abby, talk to ME," David whined. When she still didn't say anything, he grabbed her white purse and ran for the exit, the slow leg dragging behind. Stunned, she knew there was no way he'd get very far, but he was still headed for the stairwell and going pretty fast.

She chased him up to the rotunda in the main lobby, hating him all the way. His happy eyes and his tugging arms and the way he was always, always imitating her. She hated how easy it would be to have his worship, just by being nice. He was too easily crushed by her, too easily impressed by her, and she hated that too. With his slow leg and his crinkled body, he made her lame too. At the center kiosk, she tripped on her untied shoelace, falling to the floor. Her brother had turned around and she could hear his brace seesawing its way back to her. She could feel the lobby turn and look, and she felt like she was underwater being stared at from all sides. Somewhere in the mess, the gazes of the two girls, too. *Abby! David!* Her mother's distant cry, or maybe Abby was just imagining that. She could feel the well-trained part of herself try and buoy back the rage.

But it was too much. With her mother most surely frantic and searching, Abby jumped up, kicked back her foot and landed it on her brother's good leg. It made a satisfying thud. His wide eyes crumpled into his face. She punched her big fist in his

skinny gut, and after a sharp gasp of lost air, he started to cry. Abby felt relief running through her veins, and then the familiar rush of adrenaline and guilt after having struck hard. A moment ruptured into many moments. Her mother found them and crouched to look Abby in the eye. David stumbled on the good leg, began to wail, and she shook Abby by the arm screaming, *What did you do? What did you do to him? Why did you do this!* Scared for his sister, David screamed louder, this time at his mother, repeating Mommy over and over despite her repeated tries to get him to stop. After the failed soothing and then the meaningless strict tone, she gave in to her complete loss of composure, yelled "Shut up! Both of you!" and hung her head in her hands.

A guard approached, and her mother's apologetic face surfaced as she rose to say she was sorry for the outburst, for the disruption. She looked like she was trying very hard to hold it together. David sniffled and his cries softened. Abby noticed the white handbag on the ground and scrambled to pick it up, drying the tears that had streamed down her face. Wiping her nose, she sat down, right there in the lobby. After a few minutes they left.

There was no restaurant. After his meetings, Abby's father's face was tired and ruddy, his tie loose. When he heard her mother relay the story, he was outraged, his brow scary, his voice booming, and after making Abby gravely apologize to both her mother and David, he gave her a serious timeout. She hated him too then, and hated her mother for letting everything fly so far out of control, for needing her father before punishment could be doled out. Abby's mother was weak, and she hated herself for suddenly knowing it.

Her mother had gone out to the tiny grocery store beneath the skyscrapers and bought a loaf of bread, a package each of ham and cheese and a bottle of mustard. Back in the room, she made four sandwiches, assembly-line style on top of the dresser,

and that was dinner. Abby wondered why her parents were punishing themselves also, why they wouldn't have eaten something else. Instead they'd made a picnic on the raspberry- colored carpet, uncorked a bottle of red wine and poured it into two clear plastic cups from the bathroom. Her father switched on the evening news. She kept expecting her brother to whine about the loss of his precious treat, or to be mad at her, hate her, make her feel bad for what she said, complain about his aching leg and stomach, but he was chipper as ever. Her mother produced a deck of Old Maid from the suitcase, and the two of them played, and then David took out his handheld electronic baseball game. He pushed the thumb buttons, and it tweeted and chirped, like a small bird was stuck in the battery and would trumpet the stadium notes before a canned "Charge!" Abby was too tired to tell him to shut the sound off.

Her mother's brochure was still in Abby's purse. Her sunglasses were on the floor beside a baggie of spilled hair-ties. The rubber bands looked like connected tire-ladders on a jungle gym; she'd never been up to the top rung. Back at school, she usually didn't fight the hordes of other kids swarming up its lattice, though she would have liked to, would have liked to weave her potholder perched high on top of one of the tires—the loom hook disappearing in then out, over under, over under, rows of stitches. A warm color-group of reds and oranges. She wouldn't even need to ask for help in tying off the edges.

Once Abby had tried to go to the park without telling her mother, picking dandelions for fifteen minutes as she drifted through the tall grass. Two boys were measuring who had jumped the farthest off the swings by examining scuffed turf. Their babysitter knit close by. Shadows of clouds passed over, cooling her tiny section of the green, and Abby felt full of the peace in the sky. She knew she needed to get back home so her mother wouldn't wonder what had happened. When she was

halfway up the driveway, the door flew open. Her mother ran toward her in bare feet, pricked by the fallen gumballs strewn on the driveway without seeming to notice. She shrieked about the cars, about how panicked she was when she didn't know where Abby was, across the street without supervision.

"You scared me! I don't want you outside without telling me where you're going. You could have been hit by a car… or worse. I didn't know where you were…" Abby felt the pretty feeling she'd so recently worn descend into a flush of foolishness. "And you *scared* me, Abby." She was out of breath. David appeared and held the doorframe from inside. The babysitter in the park and the boys would hear her mother's crazy screaming and know now that she was in trouble.

There were no cars in sight, and the street was quiet. She'd felt so good about her little experiment in grownup. A small flight of romantic fancy that now embarrassed her for the reaction it had brought about. Abby burst into tears and shoved David aside, running into the house so nobody could see her face.

A different afternoon. Her mother picked her up from piano. "The trouble with left-handed fingering…" Abby was saying. Her mother nodded and didn't respond, which was odd for her, so Abby told her about how she'd gotten to Queen in Four-Square, and then about the multiplication clocks she had to practice for Math that night. Her mother absently turned off the radio. She almost missed a turn. After a minute or two, Abby turned from the window where she'd been counting telephone poles and looked at her mother's face, so pretty in profile, her hair swept up in a bun, her skin smooth as she held the wheel and stared at the road.

When there was still no response she said, "Mommy, I've talked the whole car ride home. Now you talk."

Her mother covered her mouth and nose with her hand, the way you do before you laugh or sneeze or cry. She turned to her daughter, her face a wince. "Oh, Missy,"

she said, tucking a strand behind Abby's ear. She kissed her fingers and touched Abby's cheek, her red eyes leaving the road to take in Abby's face for what felt like too long since it was rush hour. Then she began to chatter. "Way-ell …" Abby looked out the window again and began to feel better.

Abby must have fallen asleep that way, in her clothes in the hotel room. Her parents hadn't woken her to wash up. Maybe because they were on vacation, maybe because she'd been bad, but for whatever reason she was still in her starry sweatshirt and black cotton pants. Someone had removed her shoes, the lights were out, and David was next to her in the double bed snoring loudly on his back.

The door to the bathroom opened, cutting a swath of light from the carpet. The wedge switched off and the door shut, and she could hear footsteps back to her parents' bed. She lay still and shut her eyes, pretending to be asleep. She wondered if they were going to talk about her.

"What is it?" her father asked. There was no softness in his voice, none of the playful tone that would jab her mother under her chin. Abby heard a rustle of sheets, a sniffle. "What's the matter?" he whispered, though whispers are louder than words.

"It's just, well, today," she said, "when I couldn't find them, it made me so …"

"It's okay, but you did find them, maybe you wish you didn't…" he joked.

"—scared. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see the doorway. I lost which way was up."

"But you found up. And they're fine." His voice was insistent. "Maybe we should have you checked for vertigo."

"No, it's not even that. I know. I'm not even talking about today. It's more this— feeling—and then— just now, when I thought I was asleep, I had this vision of

me—or some version of myself, a copy of me, my soul I guess—jumping out the window."

"What are you talking about?" There was anger in it now.

"Me, I could feel it. Some part of me just jumped off that 30-story ledge."

Then there was quiet, a few held breaths.

"What are we going to do with you?" he finally asked, and Abby was relieved that he didn't sound as grave as her mother had a few moments ago. Then she wondered if he was missing something.

Abby could not lie stiff any longer. She rolled over in bed and kicked the sheets. She'd already heard too much. The bed frame backed against the wall, then silence again.

"Oh, God." her mother whimpered. "You think—?"

"They're asleep," he said. "Honey, I don't understand; this is supposed to be some rest for you, a vacation."

"I'm not well," she said.

"Jesus, I'm sick of your whining."

He was right, Abby knew, though she'd never heard her parents speak to each other this way, and she was glad that someone would tell her mother to shut up for once. She was like her father, she thought, and wanted immediately to be sided with the strong. But some part of her gave way and ached to climb in bed with the one who still called her Missy.

She listened for their breathing. She knew she could not repeat what she'd overheard, not to David, or anyone, that she must keep it clutched inside. She had to shake her head three times to erase ever having listened, wash it away, pretend she'd been asleep. She remembered being in the car that time, after piano, and because she'd

had a bad dream the night before she asked her mother if grownups ever got nightmares, if they ever still got scared.

"I get scared of losing you," she replied, rubbing Abby's cheek with the knuckle of her pointer finger. Abby's face must have shown frustration at this non-answer, because her mother caught the look and corrected herself, smoothing her hair, "Which is why you should always wear your seatbelt." Abby nodded, understanding that much. Her mother smiled at her and pulled into the driveway of their house.

Now, hot in her sweatshirt beneath the hotel-tight blankets, Abby was too afraid to move and reveal herself awake the whole time. A cold sweat coated her back. She listened to the rumble of the monster air-conditioner—over under in then out. In her mind, she was back in that car. There, she'd whispered,

"I've talked the whole time. Now you talk."

Fish flecked across the back of her lids, and then other images, unknown scribbles of color that swam through the darkness.

She could feel her mother's feet, or the heels of her mother's feet, that version of her mother, dancing on the ledge high above the world black like night, lights twinkling below, and Abby was petrified. In a desperate haze she whispered from inside, through the window, low and steady,

"No. Come back, Mommy. Don't worry. Don't be scared—it's all right. You won't lose me." Abby shook her head, repeating to herself: "I'm not going anywhere."

Trunks

Some mornings it spread out before me in my dream—the road to camp. A sloping hill on one side, Sound of Music Hill we called it, where we had summer solstice. The tall grasses brushed our ankles, shins, and we wore streamers in our hair and painted fairies on our cheeks. That one night a year, we watched the orange sun drop behind the mountains, the ancient pines, and the crepe-paper sky crinkled with pink and purple clouds. It was the longest day of the year, and we were allowed to stay out late and take it all in.

As a kid, the hairpin turns used to make me queasy when my dad drove me up from Atlanta. On the drive to North Carolina I listened to country, and camp was the only place I sang real loud. The craving would set in long before the turn onto 276 as the road switch-backed sharply, rising through woods and leaves and sun.

Before Dad said goodbye he'd help me lay cardboard-scratchy sheets across my bunk. He'd hand me some ginger root to chew on for my stomach, from the drive up and nerves for the next six weeks.

This time, though it wasn't just carsickness. Less than five hours after I had an abortion, I was headed to work at my old summer camp. I'd thought it would be smart to go straight to Brevard from the clinic so my dad wouldn't see me aching around the house and ask what had happened, but now I wasn't so sure. Garth Brooks played on the radio, and my stomach lurched. In the mirror, my face looked pallid, and the sun on the windshield made me sweaty. My heart raced.

Sprays of tiger lilies ran along the road as the car hobbled over gravel. A hand-carved sign read 7 ½ mph. Horses grazed in the pasture. They wore masks over their eyes for reasons I never understood—it made them look like criminals. A thicket of

trees eclipsed a stream and slatted bridge where Mara, Jerry and I as junior counselors used to roll joints and I'd sneak cell-phone calls to my boyfriend.

When I opened the car door, the smell was crushed pine needles and smoky air—childhood. I would not weep. Across the pasture stood the Blue Ridge Mountains, and their blueness struck me anew even though I'd seen them every day for entire sessions. The first time was when I was nine: the ash-blue of the granite next to the silvery green of trees and the wheat-yellow of grass. I had felt it sacred even as a girl; felt a loyalty to what I'd heard referred to as "the land," even though I'd never been at all possessive toward our small bungalow back home. This place, though—the musty smell in clusters of cabins, the clattering meals around circular tables in the dining hall, the green where we played twilight games and the lodge where I sang loud, the mountains and skies—I'd wanted to protect it. I felt it could protect me.

From the packet I'd been mailed, I knew that these first days of orientation were filled with sessions. We were supposed to learn: the layout of the 200-acre property, the policies and history of the camp, CPR, First Aid and wilderness skills certifications, and familiarize ourselves with the waterfront, stables, crafts and farm stations so as to become a cluster leader. We would participate in ice-breakers so we'd know how to lead them and make campers feel comfortable. There was an entire session on home-sickness.

I wondered if other counselors had checked in. I couldn't see around as far as the dining hall, but everything was still. Emptied of children, the grounds were quiet. Other than the rustle of branches and the lap of the lake against the dock, the absence of people on the paths was strange and unsettling. I missed being eleven. As staff, we were going to be living these next five days as if we were campers, every daylight

hour scheduled with activity. For the first week at least, we were the youngest ones there.

Graham, the director, smiled warmly at the gate, and took my hand in both of his with a "Good to have you back, Natalie." His hands were dry and wrinkly. Though his hair had grayed and thinned, he still possessed the tan, lean tautness of an outdoorsman, and his face was the same one that could scare any punk into obedience, sure as the shit you shovel in the barn.

I searched for something to say, a reason for my being here, perhaps, or for not having come back since I was a junior counselor, not any of my summers home from college, even for a visit, but I didn't have a reason other than Devin, and thinking about him made me mute. My parents had met at camp and knew Graham as a kid, before he inherited the property and became director. After my mother's funeral, Graham had come to the house with a pan of farm-grown zucchini bread.

"Good to be back," I said. The drive had me careening. My stomach pains had spread to my back, my nipples were still sore, and I moved gingerly. My eyes wandered to a painted canoe that had been sawed in half and placed on the steps to the office with the camp's name printed across the bow. A bulletin board displayed different scenes of children outdoors with large grins on their faces; one in an inner-tube, one cradling a baby goat, a third leaning on a walking stick. What was I doing here?

"You can put your trunk on this wheelbarrow and maintenance will drive it over in the Gator," Graham said, "You remember how all this works?"

"Of course," I nodded. *I'll be fine*, I told myself. Staggering back a few steps down the gravel, I wondered if I'd even be strong enough to lift my Wal-mart trunk, much less a camper. Graham was eying me.

"You a little carsick?" Graham called from the steps. He crossed his arms and was squinting at me, at how I must have looked. He jotted something on a clipboard with a pen that was tied to the metal part by friendship-bracelet string.

"My appendix burst yesterday," I said, floundering.

"Shouldn't you be in a hospital then?" He looked at me with a mixture of skepticism and disappointment.

"You want to know what's really wrong with me?" I asked, a dare, a challenge. I stepped forward.

"Nope," he said, scratching one foot with the toe of another, "You bite your lip when you lie. Have since you were a kid."

"It won't interfere with the job I do, I promise."

"As long as you're here and ready to work, you could have the Avian flu."

"Is there a lot on the itinerary for today?" I asked, shading my eyes with a flattened hand. I leaned against the car to stand up. I felt the pad shift in my underwear and wondered when I would stop bleeding.

"Nattie," I heard Graham say, as a wave of blackness rose from my stomach up my arms. I heard him cross the lot with crunching steps. I wondered what would happen when the feeling reached my head. "Let's get you lying down."

When we were twelve, my friend Mara got her period for the first time during B-session. We were on a creek-hike two miles or so off main camp, finishing at Sliding Rock. Water swirled around our ankles, and the sun picked up flinted flecks of mica and rose quartz. Gazing down, the glassy surface encased smooth black stones. Mara just *knew.* Without having to go to the bathroom or anything. As her closest summer confidante, I didn't know exactly what I was supposed to do next. Show my support? Ask to see evidence? Run the other way screaming? Pray for mine to appear

so she wouldn't be alone and I wouldn't be left out? I told her she should tell our counselor, but Mara didn't want to short-change the creek-hike.

A boys' cabin appeared, stomping down the trail toward the water. We waved at Jerry and pretended not to see the others so they'd think we were cool. Jerry had fair skin and a baseball hat curved at the brim, broken in just the right amount.

"You gonna tell?" I asked, locating our counselor who was surveying the shrieking girls sliding down the rock. She wore a whistle around her neck and an emergency radio clipped to her Gortex shorts in a baggie.

"Yeah, eventually," Mara said, "she's got the supplies." She was wearing a green cap, and the time we spent out in the sun bleached her hair and freckled her skin. Mara picked up a smooth stone. She skipped it three times—I'd never been able to do that. Instead, I extracted a rough-looking rock from the mossy bank that would never skip. It left an empty eye-socket in the soil, and I placed it in her hand.

"Here," I said, half teasing, "a memento on your big day." She smiled, like I was worthy of her telling. We were all wearing shoes—cheap neon river slippers or thick-soled sandals, which felt odd in the rushing water, sand and pebbles between our toes. Jerry and his buddy were going down the sliding rock feet first, their swim trunks gathering high up around their thighs. We were getting to be too big for the rock.

"Well, look who decided they were too cool to join the fun," Jerry said, slapping the water as he clopped over so that we turned our shoulders away from him before sending a splash back.

"Party can start now," I said, "Where's the action?"

"People were talking about climbing that cliff over there." Jerry pointed to the part of the trail that rose maybe forty feet above the water. "A couple of guys and me thought it'd be fun."

"Jumping off?" Mara said, her eyes growing big.

"Well yeah, but …" his voice trailed away.

"We're in," I said, before I could consider if we even wanted to be.

From the top of the cliff, five of us, two guys, Jerry, Mara and I, stared down at the drop below. You couldn't just stand and jump; you'd have to run off to clear the rocks jutting out from the cliff, and we weren't completely sure how deep it was at the bottom.

"Who's going first?' I asked. I thought if I had to die, this would be a good place to go, but I didn't want to go down first. There was a legend about an Indian woman and a white man who were secretly in love. When they couldn't be together because of their families, they jumped off the falls hand in hand from a spot not far from here. I thought it was romantic in a way only sad things could be.

They don't tell you about the sad things that aren't romantic. And why was it only the woman whose options were either obscuring one's history or plummeting into rock?

Jerry fisted his palm for rock- paper- scissors. If one person could make it over the rocks and down into the water, the rest of us would have to follow suit. Then at least we'd know it was survivable. I wondered if we could all just admit it was too high. I wasn't in love yet and wasn't ready to die tragic. Part of me hoped our counselor would see us and make us come back that instant, but she was chatting with the guys' counselor.

"Okay, on three," Jerry said to figure out who between the boys would go first. "Scissors, Paper—"

"Rock," Mara yelled, as she tore off in her rubber sandals before we could fully realize what she was doing—a long scissor-kick leap propelling her off the edge of the cliff and then her arms and fingers reaching out into the air, arching her chest and then tipping forward, diving straight as a pencil into the water, head first, ruffling

a big splash, a shrieking whistle blast, and a burst of applause from the others below. We were screaming, all of us watching the ripples where she hit. When she surfaced a few seconds later, streaming droplets from her face and hair, the remaining four of us clamored off feet-first all at the same time. There was no point in trying to impress now. Mara had gotten it all, and we were still scared in our pulses and amazed by her jump and anxious to slap her in congratulations, trying to get a piece of her as our counselors started yelling that we were all about to get busted big, and there wasn't enough time to reach the bottom.

For a time it felt like I was regressing. Evolutionarily, I mean. After the initial exam and required counselor's session, the day my dad thought I was headed to Brevard instead I first drove downtown to the clinic. I filled out many, many interrogating forms. I'd opted for the pills and not the surgical vacuum because it was cheaper. Then, a procedure: a tablet, a second tablet, and you sit on a toilet for a couple hours. I imagined if this were communal: a row of us sitting in a hospital room with our panties around our ankles, like fifties secretaries who stumbled into a bad acid trip, letting our insides rush out. Like cramps. But where cramps hint at pain, coiling inward, these were full blows—a splitting open, a divide, a parting, a loss. I never thought of it as a baby; not once, except that it made me wonder if labor was anything like this. I thought of Devin, who pretended to care for the last months when we were just fooling around. The realization, the reality of where I was, of what was happening, would sharpen in white flashes. But the good thing about physical strain is it keeps you from getting too philosophical. The minute your mind starts to leave your body, some corporal component—your stomach, its corresponding cells and organs, the innards and outwards, and those places too soft, even for this push of fluid, this leak of obscured tree sap—would collectively clamp and then shatter.

I awoke in the infirmary and my mouth was dry. The cramps had thickened now, churning. Camp had a water mill whose force was used to grind the corn we picked for cornbread. After shucking, you fed in the ears and it spat out meal. I thought of the pebbly paste and wondered if this was what was happening to my insides. I wanted to bite into the fresh raw corn the way we did sometimes on a walk back from tubing, hot plastic rubber resting on our heads as we carried the rafts, the corn high; you could pick it and peel it and eat it like an apple, and it tasted just as good on the walk back from rafting as when you cooked it with butter.

Devin had been a big pot-head, and in addition to the occasional party, I'd taken some of his weed whenever I got the flu. Suddenly a joint was all I could think about, but I'd just arrived at Sesame Street. I was officially the worst camp counselor ever.

By the lake, I threw up in a tangle of algae. There was nobody around, and I was relieved. I guessed they were out on their hiking session, learning how to keep connected in the woods.

Why hadn't Mara come back? Though we hadn't spoken for years, being here carried the expectation of her presence. Walking the grounds, she felt so close it stung.

In the kitchen, I found Jerry and a few other maintenance guys. They were busy loading the dishwasher from the staff lunch I'd slept through—the odor of steam mixed with table scraps rising from the drains.

"Heyya, Baby-Doll," Jerry said, taking me in his sweaty arms. I felt his belly on mine. We always said hugging and singing has to come from your gut. In this case, I felt mine sink and lurch.

We unstacked a bench from the table and I sat trying to slow down the dizziness as Jerry worked the mop and told me about his life. With one hand I caught

the can of pilfered soda he threw at me and sipped little sips. I pretended to be collecting spoons for the cabin supply kits and looked out the screens, by turns at the trash buckets, the basketball court, and the canoe stand next to the gravel patch of parked vans. When the other guys went out to shoot hoops, I asked him if he could help me out—I didn't need a bag or anything, nothing that could be incriminating, just a bowl or a joint I could sneak off with later. He could come with if he wanted. *For my appendix pain*, I threw in, for good measure. Well, it wasn't a total lie. I figured my appendix, like the rest of my abdomen, wasn't taking to any of this real well.

It was empty then, the camp's lack of noise growing stranger with each hour. Jerry rolled over a mop pail. His stomach hung over his jeans and his black baseball cap had faded to gray. He'd also quit school, but I at least had returned to a lesser college closer to home. Jerry was going to die the part of a yearlong camp maintenance fogy, a crazy old guy kids would marvel at in fifty years. *What a mess we've become*, I thought.

"Nattie," he said, and then hesitated, sloshing the mop in dinginess, "I'm around," he continued. I waited for the condition on which he'd deliver me my goods. Was he going to ask for payment up front? It'd be four weeks before I saw a paycheck.

"Yeah …"

"So, don't forget about your friends in low places once you get to be a big ol' counselor over there."

I blinked without understanding.

"Just like, say 'hi' and shit after meals in the dining hall, you know?"

"Hey," I said, "you're not just hired help," even though to some he was. "You're also living history, herbal cluster-dealer. My kids are gonna make pictures of you and stuff." I scanned the dining room, ran my hand over the table, "I should have

asked to work kitchen," I said, thinking how fun it could have been, having water fights with the spray-guns and going out late after work. And then I had a brief shiver of what Jerry's life would consist of, day after day, and how I had somehow escaped this, but I brushed the thought away. "Do you think they're crazy, handing a cabin of kids over to *me*?"

"You'll be Mary Poppins compared to some of the freaks they let wear the counselor badge. My break's in twenty minutes," he said, "meet me out back."

But I didn't share his certainty. "Jer?"

"Yeah."

"Hi and shit."

"Get outta here," he said, and threw a rag at me.

I stepped out of the dining hall, maybe I'd go watch the Knockout rounds on the basketball court, but out of nowhere, Graham was standing right in front of me. There was no way he could have heard me outfit myself for medicinal marijuana not three hours after he'd let me off the bad-staff hook once already.

"You know, Natalie," Graham said, arms crossed, outside the kitchen. I couldn't look at his face, "you know, if we find any drugs on your person or in your belongings you will be asked to leave and not to return," he said. I had not officially done wrong yet, but Graham had gone looking for me when I wasn't in the infirmary, and the other counselors were starting to trickle by. I didn't recognize any.

"Yes, sir."

"Come now," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose, "It's different for you. Jerry doesn't sleep on the premises. What he does during his off time is his business." I knew Jerry could hear the whole damn conversation, as the screens didn't shut out very much, and Graham was proof of that, and I was mortified Jerry, along with everybody else, was getting an earful of my scolding. I felt my face heat up.

"I know it."

"Nattie," he concluded, "Those girls are gonna need a counselor Saturday morning.'" He paused, "and in light of recent events, your taking ill and all, if I were you, I'd respect the boundaries of handbook policy and cancel that order you just made."

Fuck this, I wanted to scream, and walk right out of there. Using my illness. Nobody blackballs me. But that was impossible. The beginnings of tears pricked the back of my eyes. I just wanted to feel better enough not to be sidelined any more. Or maybe I was trying to turn camp into a hideout until I was well enough to go home, or some kind of rehab from my crumbling love life and fraying education. I don't know why I'd ever thought it would be easy. A 24/7 job is supposed to be hard, a job you actually believe in, and I was flailing.

I focused my thoughts around the word *Gather. Gather it. Keep it. Keep it together*, I thought to myself, before nodding and turning around. Somebody had lit a fire in the lodge and smoke lifted towards a bank of clouds, a summer smell, like split hotdogs, but one that anticipated fall.

"I'll be down in the supplies room," Graham said, "Come join me when you're done. We'll put you to work, since you're feeling better and all."

I put my fingers around the handle of the door, heard the squawk of it opening and the clank of it shut. Pride swallowed, I walked back into the kitchen, where Jerry was leaning against the sink with his arms crossed, holding opposite elbows, trying real hard not to laugh.

"Jerry," I said loudly, loud enough to be heard in the supplies room.

"Yo," he said.

"Jerry," I said again.

"Whatcha need, baby?" he waited, not making this any easier. I didn't want to say it. Then his face changed, and his face undid me.

"Jerry, cancel my fucking order!" I yelled, and heard a crash of metal pots from below. I was lucky there were no kids around or I would have been sacked right then and there. A tower of camp stoves, spatulas, and my next four hours of dishes I reckoned, waited for me in the sink. The air was so broken right then, so tiered with tension, I had to sit down, but a laugh sputtered forth from Jerry that replaced the look I could not handle. The laugh was warm and had an old soul in it, like things could go back to normal soon.

The look he'd given me was this: it was a height register; of me at eight and again at ten and then fourteen, and now at twenty-two, all knocked up then knocked down again, though he didn't know that, and his not-knowing hurt my chest. I used to watch my dad's shoes as he pushed the pedals on the car, and I asked him how old you had to be to drive—picturing my little feet in his big black oxfords, my legs not long enough to reach the gas. I'd picture growing up as something all at once, like the accelerated bloom and wilt of flowers and seasons on the Discovery Channel. I envisioned a time-lapsed instant; lines of permanent marker ticking up a wall, feet too large, filling men's shoes, and legs shooting down to hit the brakes. Jerry's eyes said only, *I know this girl*, *have for years,* but it was the look that took me closest to slipping over the rail of my composure, and I didn't want to lose it now.

I'd fallen out of an inner tube on a day trip once when I was eleven. The French Broad was high and fast that year from thunderstorms that blew through once a day, during rest hour, where the drumming of rain on the tin roofs of cabins could lull even the most hyper kid into sleep. I flailed around, fighting the current, losing my hold on the reedy saplings by the river before my group banked to the side and a counselor swam hard to come grab me. As I treaded; the river elapsed, and cold fear

mixed with hot embarrassment gripped the shoulders of my life jacket. But what scared me most was not my heartbeat, but an almost-surrender wherever the river wanted me to go. That push to keep struggling wears on you, shortens your breath, and sometimes release is more seductive than the clutch of gasped air. So then, on top of everything else, you have to resist the desire to stop resisting.

The last summer I was a camper, only girls had signed up. Jerry had been forced to come a session early to help out his parents during the rest of the summer, and we missed him and all the first-flirting he brought. We were old enough to get away with more by then, as we weren't supervised all the time, but there were no boys so we didn't try as hard to get in trouble. Instead we forgot to check our hair and sang louder and worse than we had before. Digging for potatoes turned into war—rotten, dimpled ones fired from baskets as ammo. There were unsupervised hours every afternoon, when the younger kids had rest hour. They were spent playing Spoons and Never Have I Ever in the loft over the barn and singing Dave Matthews on guitar.

The night of the sweat lodge night, stars cut the sky like thorns in a blackberry patch. We'd all promised to keep in touch, to return as counselors as soon as we could. But I would meet Devin later that school year, and he would replace everything that had come before him. This was before email, and over the course of the fall, letters arrived for me in colored penmanship and were brightened with stickers. They looked strange sitting in my mail box, when I was so far away, when I couldn't think about anything except this boy and this fall and this winter. I felt like writing back would cheapen the experience, or so I told myself. Maybe I'd outgrown it, or ought to have.

I loved the idea of a sweat lodge, this rite of passage neatly extracted from another culture's system of rites. The irony was lost on me.

We were around a fire next to the puddle, which was the lake's shallower counterpart across the road. It was always muddy, on the bottom and around the edges of the banks. The squishiness meant everyone who was too late to grab the water noodle kept a lazy tread going, even though the puddle was barely five feet deep. It was the last session of the season, D session, and from wrinkling embers, nights carried the husky scent of fall. Leaves shriveled until only the ribs and spines of them were left. In the fire pit, heaps of ashes ground down like lost memory. The fields before us rose into hills. Across the road, the younger kids were being serenaded in their bunks.

We moved into the sweat lodge from the campfire, where the glowing stones burned down to coal. Inside the little dome, on towels and in bathing suits, we sat bare-kneed and cross-legged around the pit, the August night pushed out by thick layers of blankets. Graham ladled water over the granite, and there was a loud fizzle of sound. Clouds of sage wafted through the warmth. Graham told us stories, how a Cherokee boy would go through this ritual before a long journey, and the elders would pray for him until he got back. Then we stopped talking. There was the pulse of silence and steam. We took down our bathing suits—it was too dark to see anything—and felt our skin slicken until you couldn't separate what was coming off you from the thick air that held it.

When at last the flaps were lifted, he told us to go into the world as if we were being reborn—and we did, running straight for the puddle. Stars floated like tea lights on the surface. There was the shock of cold and water and sky, submerged from the sheets of sweat to the prickle of goose bumps. Emerging from the puddle with our hair pressed back, we kicked our legs behind us like frogs, teeth white as the moon.

I didn't know then that my first boyfriend would chew tobacco and would take me on long drives in his truck. I didn't know the French kiss from the French Broad,

and I didn't know that that was okay. I didn't know that beer on someone's breath was both sweet and rancid, like lust exhaled. I didn't know the weight of a high school book bag, the lineup of classes on my first day, or what the Coke machine would sound like when coins were dropped in, caffeine, your own money, the sound of growing up. I didn't know how learning how to drive would make you older, out on your own.

I knew then how to push kids on the swing-set, how to make a splint with a t-shirt and sticks. I knew my goals were to make the basketball team and the honor roll but not the chorus any more (chorus was for losers). I knew I looked best in navy blue. I knew I had a mole on my back, where my bra clasped together, and that I was a philosophical shower singer who always forgot to sing in the shower. I knew the tumble of tea-kettle clouds breathed deep could make your face soft and your voice new again. I knew as I stripped off my bathing suit, that in the drying paste of sweat, puddle water and mud, that I was something like perfect, and that I wanted a shower.

Crouching under the tiny dome built earlier that day, ten soon-to-be counselors and two maintenance crawled into a circle clockwise around the pit. Only adults this time. A second sweat lodge. The scent of sage seeped into everything.

Graham was reading us Chief Seattle's speech on the weeping earth, on the impulsiveness of youth. The erosion of men and the poisoning of earth—so much demise. It was dark out. I'd spent much of these days in the infirmary. Is that what I was now, infirmed? I thought I knew otherwise. I was strong and lean. I turned gold in the sun. I had no scars on my belly, but I felt a peach-pit where the fetus used to live, kicked out of its house. I used to be the type who would step on a mound of fire ants. And even though I felt guilty about evicting so many tenants, there was something satisfying in seeing chaos play out, beautiful even. To see the small white dunes

pocked with red like so many clogged pores, swollen with ants, ants in anger, ants in panic. My uterus felt like a sand-shack depleted of this fire.

Graham told us we were flushing our body of toxins. He told us the sweat lodge was a womb.

The balminess was trickling now. In the folds of blackness you could not see your hand, inches from your face. Steam hissed and heat welled up from the stones.

Sweat dropped between my breasts in metronomed increments. I could feel it beneath my arms and between my legs. It dripped faster. I was back with Devin.

My knees began to shake. I heard sound escape me, something like a yelp, and I tried to dull it. I covered my mouth though no one could see. I was shaking harder trying not to shake. I was dizzy again, trying to wave away the feeling.

Graham's voice emerged from two heads over. "No, no, that's all right. Stay with it."

I did not want to stay with it. I did not want to be there. My tremor was spreading. My breathing was audible. Did Jerry know? My shoulders started to convulse.

And then I didn't care. I let myself empty. I was back with Devin, the party where we first met, the push and press of it. A cousin of my friend, we were telling stories on the couch until dawn. Scenes sped out before me, signs I was passing from the road. Our first dance, his truck on the day of my graduation, camping at outdoor music festivals, leaving college, not sure when I would be back. The sweat poured down. I was crying loud into the musky web, and one by one I recognized teachers, choir directors and basketball coaches and my high school math instructor who died four weeks before graduation. And when I got to the alien city and bare library cubicles, my scholarship hovered as an ante on the table, stakes to lose. I never connected the same way I had before, the way I had at home, where I would lie in bed

reciting equations to myself in the hours before sleep: invisible integers, the Pythagorean theorem. The photosynthetic formula to convert light into food. Limbs attached to a diagrammed sentence, the syllables stressed in iambic pentameter. A cloud of dust from smacked erasers. A message board mapping the play to break a full-court press.

Hey, they said, it's okay. You're okay. People I didn't even know. Like so much pain could open up a circle, letting it breathe even as I felt choked of air. My procedure, school, the first boy I loved: finished and unfinished. What is the ceremony for conclusion? Is expelling the feeling enough, and once out there, where does it go?

In the darkness, my breath glowed. Someone's back was against mine, propping me up.

And then I was back at camp, with Mara and Jerry and counselors and directors, the ghost of my mother, steamrolling in sleeping bags and rapping Fresh Prince lyrics in the woods, beading anklets, throwing pots on a wheel, the smell of sun on cedar. This place of four sessions a year, of countless ceremonies to welcome and send off, this place where the melody and words repeat every session, every year the same songs, though the voices get older, and the tenor of the notes sound different having known them when you were young. And how change is part of its makeup, predictable as the leaves or the clouds you walk under, but whose reality is still hard to accept. You want to freeze the air you breathe here, the water you slide out of, the mountain you roll down, because change is what makes it awful. And the fixtures, rain drops clinging from weathered eaves, rows of corn high in a maze, a pair of hiking boots strewn on the steps of a cabin emptied of kids out exploring, dropped crabapples softening into dirt, a red barn rusting in the sun, these are what bring solace, this is what stays, enduring even as it slowly erodes. And it is the spirit of this place, an old and generous grandparent, a cautious child, suggestive and fleeting teenager, that

offers itself up again for you, again and again even after you've left it, even after you imagine you've forgotten it, a clearing wide and shimmering, upon return.

But rituals alone aren't enough—the repetition of what you love is not the same as its discovery. You can never recreate the find.

The night before campers arrive, all staff shuttle to a barn house, a contra dance, live mountain music; a caller, steppers. I am not dancing. Still sore, I am scared of the children who will soon arrive to be under my care. I am sure I will forget which one is allergic to peanuts and send her into anaphylactic shock. Embarrassed about my breakdown the night before, I watch the dance floor from the archway with Graham. We take in all the stomping and yelling, the air blowing in cool and sweet from outside. I wear a long skirt, and I tousle it to keep beat. And then breaking from the outer ring of circle, Jerry walks over, with the blossom of a mountain laurel, twirling it around. I place it behind my ear; he takes my elbow, leads me to the circle, and we link into the group lifting wrists and crossing feet: girls in the center, boys ready back, swing to the left, round and round, swing to the right. Now find your partner, holler out. Now make a bridge. Everybody under. Now everybody back.

History Rumble

"My high school history teacher had sex with my mom," I repeated what Clara had just told me, incredulous.

"Well, it's not like this was recently," Clara said, her arms on the arms of the chair. Cars shot by on Ponce. "We're sharing a table tonight, right?" she asked, like this was a normal thing for a son to learn about his mother. "Our families?"

"My *teacher* had sex with my mom."

It was the afternoon before the big senior dinner. I should have been riding the high that ends high school, a summer to burn. We were off-campus at lunchtime, and I was headed somewhere good in the fall. On the patio table was a half-eaten pan of Felini's pizza, two giant plastic cups of Coke, and my girlfriend who was much hotter than me, chair facing the sun so she could tan her chest.

"What are you going to wear?" she asked, toeing me with her flip-flop.

"I don't care. I—you knew this? How long? Did everybody know this?"

"Relax, Easy. My mom and I were talking last night and I said something about how cool it was that they all stayed friends, their whole high school group, and that *we* ended up together," she touched my hand but I brushed her off. "And then she said that since the year is basically over," she watched cars, colder now, "how they were all, like—all—in love with Craig, not just your mom, mine too, and probably half the rest the class, who knows. I just thought you'd find it funny, is all."

"But my mom, it was her who he had chosen."

"It's kind of impressive in a way… how come you didn't get the cool genes?" she winked at me, but if my mother was the one Craig had chosen, my mother was the one Craig had left. My mother never walked out on anything.

"This school is incestual. It's a cult, this place. We're a bunch of fucking inbreds." I shut my eyes real hard to see if it would wake me up.

"All right, Dr. Freud, hear me out—this would have been weirder if we knew all along. I mean now what difference does it make… you have, what, two classes left with the guy? And you don't go around wondering about any of your mom's other boyfriends before she met your dad."

"Um, my mom was a nun before she met my dad."

"Yeah, tell yourself that. But it's two separate people, the Craig your mom dated and the one we know now."

"I don't care; he's been over to the house—he was my coach for four years—I played soccer for the man for God knows how many seasons now and he never thought this would come up? That I had a right to know? I *trusted* him. He fucking gave me girl advice; but now when I think about how he knew what he knew or who he was envisioning when, ew—"

"It worked, didn't it?" she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "I like thinking about my parents as our age once. Makes their lives less depressing to contemplate now—I like thinking they once had pot-farms and love-ins and protests to get all hot about."

"I think it's time we break up."

"After you give me a ride back," she yawned. She stood up and stretched, flipping her sunglasses down from the top of her head.

Sixth period loomed, the last part of the day—that was when we had Craig's discussion to contend with. I was a train wreck.

Students here grow up to be teachers and send their kids back to be students, making them at one point the wearer of every possible hat short of headmaster, and maybe he had the goods on me, too. He would have known my mom and Craig back in the seventies when the place was still a freak show, operating on a shoestring budget out of a converted house. I vowed to send any future prodigy of mine to public school.

Clara's eyes were glued to me as if I were about to crack. Craig passed out some truffles one of the girls in the class had whipped up for our Friday afternoon rumbles. One person had started it the first week and the rest of us kept it going, this little cooking ritual. It supposedly made studying for the AP go down easier. When it had been my turn, I brought in unbaked cookie-dough since that's the best part any way.

I stared at Craig, with his curly hair, his blue-eyed bullshit—how he could talk about David Beckham or he could talk about Gloria Steinem and it never sounded forced. How he could be forty-something and unmarried, which made him somehow cooler, still like us. And I knew then he had this gravity—he could trick your ass into admitting stuff, and he could use the word "nut-bag" when talking about Westmoreland, and he could sit on top of the desk, on the edge all leaning rather than

in the chair like every other goddamn teacher, and he could wait for noise to settle down when people were being loud or smelly or hadn't read in weeks, and he was the type who bull-shit and waters just cleared for, as if they knew. He commanded that kind of curiosity and that kind of silence.

Holy Christ, I thought to myself. My mother married the wrong man.

"Ezekiel," his voice rang smug and gravelly. My dad first called me Easy as a shortening for my full name, because my father was a failed musician, and when I was born I believed he had hopes of me frequenting down and out watering holes with a cigarette tucked behind my ear and the name Easy to help me score.

You could sometimes still smell remnants of cigarettes on Craig's clothes, mixing with Polo. He had the clean shave that made you doubt his ability to ever grow a beard or hit a golden birthday. "You want to read O'Brien out loud from the course pack?"

We were studying the sixties.

I could not stop looking the man in the face, knowing he'd known all along. Knowing at one point in his life, even if they'd only screwed around a little, knowing I could've ended up as his. I had no clue who left who, but there seemed this false memory of my mother as someone young and slighted, of this douche as shady and afraid, and I didn't trust any of them. This pussy.

"Uh-no, actually I really don't," I replied.

Hannah, the star girl's basketball player, who liked to examine the whiteness of her sneakers, leaned back and snickered.

"Conscientious objection to O'Brien?" Craig's voice got higher, as he chewed his ring finger (a bit of chalk still on it I imagine). Then he dropped his elbows and looped his thumbs to the pockets of his shorts. "I'm not asking you anything special, kiddo."

I stared, hoping to ice him. From my backpack I produced a bag of Cheetos. The bag was a loud suck of plastic when I opened it, and I chomped till my fingers were orange. Then I wiped them on my pants. Clara was rapt in a sketch of Master Shake tormenting Meat Wad.

Craig spat out a nail. Shrugging, he smirked, "It's not neuroscience, Easy."

What did he care if it was me who read or somebody else? There was a room full of people… "I. Just. Don't. Fucking. Want. To."

Even in a place as loose at Renaissance, you weren't given quite this much reign. Something was unhinging.

"All right, Easy, all right," he said softly. He waited a moment, gathering the silence around him. I was high with fear and fury. Giddiness in a way I'd never known, twisted from itself.

"You got a problem?" his voice escalated. "You go right now to the headmaster—tell him about what you fu—about what you want to do or do not want to do. But you may not—may *not*—ever speak to me in that way again, or you're outta here." He cocked his head to the door. "Kapeesh?"

Oh, to kick him in the face. And what did I care if he tossed me? I had his class for one more day and then I'd never have to see him again. But I could not move or speak.

Annabelle, who had baked the chocolate truffles for our Friday afternoon rumble, looked mortified. Taylor, who had chocolate on her face and smiled too much, snorted out a laugh because too much dissent from the norm made her nervous.

I had never been anything but a no-better-than-decent student and a starting soccer player, a sleepy-looking kid with a pretty girlfriend much more mature than him. But now I didn't know what the fuck I was. Or whose. I mean, I knew my father was biologically related to me, but my father was also a desperately-polite drunk, a series of almost-connections, a walking dictionary of the could-have-saids, a tune that ran out of sheet music.

A guy named Oliver ogled the professional Frisbee girls stuck to the inside of his binder.

I wanted Craig to fight me. To come over and start screaming in my face so I could tell him off and make him hurt. The one thought my mind kept starting to form, *I should have been his.*

Craig turned his back to me and faced the other side of the room. The kind of indifference that makes you powerful because you get to choose when you want to care.

The classroom walls strung his trademarks, the familiar Che Guevera poster, a framed program from *The Band,* African masks.

"All right. Anybody else wish to grace us with their oratory skills?" He made a round of the circled desks with his eyes. Behind him, light made beams of dust particles in the hot spring morning.

Then he spotted Clara in the corner, slunk in her chair in a forest green sweatshirt and khaki shorts that made me hate being eighteen and not twenty, her legs pink shiny knobs, folded. Clara didn't have to try hard to look hot. She had ease in her shoulders and she had four sisters and she knew who she was and she didn't need to announce it on shrunken t-shirts or hipster bumper stickers.

"Clara, care to help us out here?" Craig was a broad man. He still wore t-shirts and shorts to class, soccer shoes. As he looked at her I saw her face flush, "Or has illiteracy replaced the senior slump as the newest form of transgression?"

A few nods. I think a couple of the guys, especially the two that were getting C's, they looked smugly at him, and shifted their loose fitting jeans in their desks, as if to say, "about fucking time somebody brought this teacher-fuck down." These guys could sense fear easily and preyed off it. Their irreverence used to confuse me.

But now I couldn't believe this guy I had once respected. What a tactic, that pussy, trying to get my girlfriend to restore his integrity by falling into line and reading the goddamn passage. She'd never comply; she'd stonewall. Maybe this was what it felt like to my parents and Craig's generation, this rebellion that had previously eluded me like the doorway to a hidden club or a fake i.d. to get inside one. Its buzz smoked me at the edge of my desk—a long, slow drag.

Then I knew I'd gone apeshit. I used to like the guy. He'd never been anything but nice to me, pitching liners to drill through the net for I don't know how many hours these past four years as afternoons wore into evening on the field, as storms broke and rain watered into mud, as the grassy, sweaty smell you can't quite shake attaches itself to jerseys, and guys you come to know circle and pace the field, burn

push-ups and pass around Maxims. Before the car-ride home, before the collective lump of duffel bags and water-bottles dismantled itself to its respective owners, there was that space. I could not look at those hours the same way anymore, at how he had always treated me extra nice. They were fucking guilt passes.

And my mother. What of her? My mother with her long floral skirts. Her morning swims and psychedelic swirl-and-cube scratchings on a notepad by the phone. How she bought berries and fat bunches of eucalyptus at the outdoor market on Saturday mornings. An Alfred Hitchcock movie and a mug of tea and her reading glasses and a fraying quilt as she read through my college essay, her feet tucked under her. Who one time took me on a walk by the Chattahoochee River, which had brown water and brown banks, but a kind of harsh power anyways. Who said then that it made her sad to be by rivers but that was why she liked them.

She, who was a wise-ass and a pragmatist around my father, as cool as she was. Whose beeper would signal her departure to show another house, a different house to potential buyers. And how she took a certain home-ness with her when she would leave to every new barren, blank-walled space as she sold real estate. She was good like that. And she was a good liar. I sometimes feared as a kid she would fall in love with some other family in some brand new condo and not make her way back. Or maybe she already had and was just a convincing actress, humoring us. And you could tell my father found that attractive about her, a grace that didn't need to be reminded of itself.

When I was little she was quick to punish me. Now I am certain it was because it got her more time to watch the news or flip through *Vanity Fair*, hang dried flowers

or iron her suits with a glass of wine resting on the windowsill. Who, later, could weasel things out of me about drinking, girls, a caught cigarette and less than perfect grades. She'd ask with a laundry hamper tucked on her hip or a cable bill between her teeth, a contractor's binder spread across her lap, so you think you're not really getting interrogated because she's too occupied, you are comforted by these seemingly mundane props until you've spilled it all, whatever small bit you were trying to hide.

But once on the Chattahoochee she said rivers could make you crazy because when you're young you believe all your life will be like that, riverbanks and tinged crimson leaves on the brink of bleakness but burning in the sky anyways, of sunlight on shoulder-blades, "but sometimes when you come back, that elapsed time just deepens the fact that you had filled in more color for your life than it was gonna have. Sometimes you are only reminded of the fact that life didn't quite reach it, life never bowled you over with the force you once believed would have made rivers look meek."

I prayed for Clara to back me on this one. *Come on C., you hate the cowardice of heartbreakers. You knew how I admired the guy, and this whole time he had this thing on me.* I saw my mother at soccer games pacing the sidelines, all wish-suspended in the cooling fall nights. I saw his handwriting on my papers and wondered if it lay anywhere else in our house, stashed in boxes of preserved love letters, the script of his cursive slowly spreading through the moldings, eating through the foundation of our home. The only home I'd had.

Just don't fucking read out loud.

Clara half-smiled apologetically at Craig. Her face shaded to compliance. It looked relieved in deferring to his self-assurance—his authority in spite of, or maybe even because of this vulnerability. The same cocky vulnerability I grossly imagine my mother to have once softened to beneath his knowing fingers.

I shuddered.

I could not imagine the talk I was going to have when she got home that night, how I would manage a senior dinner with all of them dressed nice and in the same room together, candle-lit and in gracious praise of me, of leaving, of the school that made us who we are. I wondered if I would even have the balls to ask her, how to begin to ask the questions.

"*The Things They Carried*," she began.

A Rush Toward Collision

One more Atonement Day has come.
All pretense gone,
naked heart revealed to the hiding self,
we stand on holy ground,
between the day that was
and the one that must be.
-Prayer for The Days of Awe

Each year, I pray for sex during silent prayer.

Well, not *just* sex. A boy before benediction.

God, I know I go through my part of overwrought collegiate conversations questioning your very existence, but I'm a senior, and who knows where I'll be a year from now, and so I am asking you yet again if you would please send me a boyfriend. (They really shouldn't give you all this quiet time if they don't want sex to start creeping in somewhere. If you are a twenty-one year old virgin, this thought certainly gets top billing over, say, the state of affairs in Afghanistan.) I know I only come to temple for the High Holy Days, and every autumn I can trace the boy I was in love with. This is how I come to remember past services—not through the parables of sermons or broken atonements, but by making out with an imaginary beloved during personal reflection in the boiler room of the mind. A backlog of expired potential. Each year at this time, in clothes I wear only for services and shoes that pinch my feet, when the leaves blush and the air gets smoky and baseball turns post-season, I remember the season by the tag I've created, the tag I've come to love.

This is the Day of Judgment! For even the hosts of heaven are judged, as all who dwell on earth stand arrayed before you.

I have an affliction of crushes.

Reciprocity, that pimpled boy in the back, has yet to take me under, though the inevitable fact is at some point I'll succumb. I only know that this is the time I take inventory, ask forgiveness, affirm that it is all a choice, recall this prayer, and each year I am the same, even as each year we vow to be better.

Please give me the resolution to go to the gym.

Please don't let me die in a nuclear war. It would be so sad to die a virgin.

And I still haven't seen the Grand Canyon.

*

"*En garde!"*

I lunge and engage.

It's a drizzly night in March, junior year of college, and I am dueling Track-Brian in the hall of the dorm with brightly-colored foam lances. We call him that because there are two Brians on our hall, and this one is a track star. His girlfriend lives a state away, and he's cheating on her with a yearbook editor across the courtyard.

"I'll never be able to run faster than a seven-minute mile," I say off-handedly, recalling my four-mile jogs through the arb.

He stop-thrusts, disengaging. "Don't say can't, and don't say never."

"Bossy, bossy."

Hit.

"It's all just mind over matter," he replies, ever the track star.

"Easy for some," I say. What does he know about the mushiness of mind?

Hit.

Now I've done it. He's had enough, orders me to suit up and follow him; it's become his personal mission.

Penalty hit. Touché.

The midnight sky is filmed over with remnants of rain, and our sneakers squeak along the asphalt. At the entrance to the track, a white bunny darts away, and I wonder if this is a trippy dream and not the intramural field whose fences we've just hopped.

"All right, now I just want you to keep pace with me, okay? Don't look up or down or think. Just follow my steps. When I step, you step. Got it?"

The first time around, I lag behind, as the white chalk glows on the burnt sienna track, the grass black behind us; and droplets of rain cling to the bleachers on our side. The lanes curve and straighten themselves before me, and I'm tailing him, fast, faster. I call out *Rocky* jokes. We don't make it. Our time: seven minutes, forty-five seconds. He tells me we're not leaving till it's done. I tell him he's fucking nuts. If I didn't make it once I sure as hell am not gonna after a *Rocky* impression.

"I am not one who runs under-seven-minute miles," I proclaim.

"We just need a faster start," he paces, "a quicker clip." Advancing, he leans his neck down toward me, "You're just one who's never been coached proper."

The second time around I do not call things out. I do not hear anything but our breath: his, then mine; his, then mine. I see his calves, the points of his elbows. *Come on,* I'm thinking, *the chase*. The last lap.

"All right, pick it up" he hisses over his shoulder at me, "At this point all it takes is balls, and don't tell me you don't have any because you're a girl."

I push my legs, my arms, my chest harder against all that resistance as his feet quicken, as he takes off for the end.

Eleven steps after the line I collapse. Lying on my back, wanting to puke, shit or die, he tells me to guess my time—I groan and roll on my stomach, resting my head on my hands, eyes closed, and tell him I don't even care, crap-head, I want to ralph all over him.

"Six-fifty-five, baby," he screams, like a proud parent.

I am too tired to get up, so I stay there in my well of cramped limbs and heaving lungs, in those heady, expanding moments of adrenaline and proving yourself larger than you thought. When someone else believing in you feels like news, kicking your ass into better than you gave yourself credit for.

Love must feel something like that, I reckon.

It's the miles alone that make you wonder.

What running can teach you: the course ahead is a shifting, illusionary stage on which you place yourself but never reach, watching the day's scenes play out. You enact tomorrow's scenes as well, the Act III's, the stage kiss that catches everyone off-guard.

*

At nineteen, I enroll in an intro course with a twenty-five year old grad student instructor. He is a poet who uses the word "delicious" to describe Gwendolyn Brooks' ice-cool rhythm. Who allows the Bob Dylan concert to count as one of our required readings. Who likes to open up class with a reference to the *New York Times* crossword, and then ask if anyone else wonders what it must be like for the scientists who deliver marijuana to pent up monkeys, examining the side effects with clinical curiosity.

It's ten a.m. on the first day and I've gotten two hours of sleep. The boy from the party had left frustrated in the morning's paling moments, around the time tequila

loses taste. He was expecting something different, I know. Never kissed before, my lips feel purple, bruised.

The grad student's name is Sanjay—with a wide grin and blonde-tipped spiked hair and parents in Rhode Island. I've never met anyone from Rhode Island. He is cocky and enthused, he knows Hindi and Latin and occasionally references getting loaded. Once he admits a hangover during office hours. His unshaved cheek, the way he rubs his forehead before confiding this to me, this makes me like him more.

At his own reading, he accents certain syllables, affects rhythm, gasps at unforeseeable pauses for dramatic emphasis, like how I imagine my first time in bed. In one poem he says the Hindu "d" is pronounced more like "th," more like a first kiss. He recalls a "sometimes-lover/sometimes-friend;" the distance between their houses which he measured in traffic lights.

At his mid-semester conferences, I am the final one. We share a cigarette outside—me and my teacher. Teacher, I remind myself. A homeless man negotiates the rapidly-whitening steps and asks to bum one. I find it odd when bums use the verb "bum" in asking for a Marlboro. Sanjay says "sure, man," as the first blizzard of the season shakes itself from the chalky sky like so much ammunition. The homeless man looks at us, my dreamy teacher and me, (what must we look like?) and asks if we're related, and even though he and I don't appear a bit similar, we awkwardly take stock of each other's face. Sanjay replies to the man, no, but hey, any liking to me is an unequivocal compliment; and when I try to give blood at the Bleed Ohio State Dry Blood Drive later that afternoon, it is his figure on the steps smoking that I see last before my vision floods to white.

In the basement computer lab, cotton wrung to the vein in my elbow, I imagine what our poetry babies would look like were we to have children. Their first sentences would be in iambic pentameter.

Instant messages chime late-night electronic dialogue, and you can hear other people's keys going as I work on poems, as the hours spin a sleeping vacuum around us. Night this late is a type of fix. I check the clock on the monitor—numbers with unknown character, and things seem funny now, edged on absurdity. Writing over the last line, and then backtracking, a cycle sinks and takes hold, and I feel held there, enclosed in something like him, in something he might like.

A semester wraps up. You go home in a kind of flush, remembering the push of work, the race for time, a beer that tastes better because you should be in the library, the cold of packed snow. And how when you got here all was dry, turning. The muddy tracks slushing the halls trace a kind of map.

What poems can teach you: the symbol suggests more than its abstraction. One remembers the blade of grass more than the love associated with it: a computer-room steeped in neon, the fireplace at his reading, humming lyrics of the Dylan concert. A crossword slowly reveals itself like black-magic pastels made in school and scratched through with design. All slide through the same filter, what's been learned from him and the recasting of what was known before—as if the moon were something of his authoring.

When you return, you try and remember what it was like before last semester. When you wouldn't have known him, at the beginning, and you were fine then. You see him sitting at a reading with a girl his age, holding hands, her chin on his shoulder. You will be fine again, you tell yourself.

New classes always feel something like loss.

*

At first it really is about baseball.

Sitting cross-legged, I call, "Go, Braves!" as he passes me in the hallway, and the Mets hat wheels around mid-stride. I am a giddy, adversarial freshman imp.

"Aw, no way, man. Not a chance. This is the year, go Mets."

He takes a close look at me and at my roommate, who is walking her legs up the wall in a carpet shoulder-stand, and the weight of her body is shifting more and more toward her neck. Blood rushes her face. We've known each other three weeks, but we're just barely in college, and we are indispensable. I place a box on top of our pyramid of sugar cereals stolen late at night from the cafeteria. We watch his back. With dark eyes and black hair cut in a '50s matinee, he is the most attractive Mets fan I have ever seen.

Five minutes later he appears at the stairwell on the far end of the floor. My roommate's legs walk themselves down and off the wall as he advances.

When the Mets fan sees me, he says, "Aw, no, not this one. Again?"

I wave, a Southern smartass.

"—hey, just got off the phone," he says. " 'Heading back to Shea next weekend to watch your weak-assed Braves *choke*, choke in September and then choke in the playoffs, just like they always do."

I raise my brow: oh, yeah? If it weren't for the wildcard, the Mets wouldn't even be in contention. I miss the purity of the old days: two divisions, two leagues, and I am apt to tell him this, but he's already gone. I will be ready the next time.

For nine seasons, I've been in love with baseball, since that first summer, when the bottom-dwellers of the standings became the rollers of The Show. As a chaser, my second season culminated in the greatest comeback in the history of the NLCS.

The following morning, as he works the hall, I chant, "Well, look who it is." He turns up his hands as if to say, who else. "Ya know your team is hitting .180 against us," I continue, "Mets can't hit Braves' sand if they fell off a freaking camel."

He stops, crosses his arms. A smirk divides his face.

"What?" I ask. "The Braves' rotation is the Tiffany's of baseball." This line I steal from the sports page online that my brother and I grew up fighting over in person.

I am far from home.

He shakes his head and keeps going. Without looking back at me he says, "When ya gonna learn, little Braves fan, when ya gonna learn."

After Biology 101, my roommate rummages for keys outside our door, but there has been a disruption. On the newly attached whiteboard—my scripted *Go Braves* has been replaced by a scribbled METS ALL THE WAY!

The exclamation point is particularly obnoxious. The next week, when he gets back from New York, the scrawling gets more specific: Leiter's ERA, the distance of Piazza's last long shot.

He receives an anonymous postcard of Turner Field in the mail. I find it pasted as puzzle pieces taped to his notebook.

I am eighteen and leave the door unlocked for myself when I go for a run. I lose my keys frequently; people let me back in the building with a sometimes glare, sometimes wave. *We're at dinner,* my roommate's folded index-card reads in watercolor, C*ome too*. I survey our room—the made beds, baseball clippings, a frame of her boyfriend, my stuffed frog, an anthology of poems, a New-Age CD. I kick off my running shoes and reach for the mouse to check email only to find my Glavine screen-saver replaced with the Mets' shortstop hurling a double-play ball in mid-air. (This was before Glavine became a Met, the tragedy).

He has touched my computer keys. I touch my computer keys.

He knows I own Enya and sleep with a frog.

Before the 3rd-floor costume party on the eve of the pennant, I pretend to need water by his part of the hall. I lean forward and sip. From where he's downloading

songs at his desk, he tells me to enjoy it while it lasts, that the Braves have won their last game this year, and when I turn around he stares at my Super Girl insignia. His bed is unmade, a wild card. Jimi Hendrix leans in the poster hanging on his wall.

I tell him not to wake up, I tell him to keep dreaming.

With each game of post-season, we bicker in the hall. Pre-game, post-game. It's collegiate *Around the Horn,* with honors. It is Montague and Capulet reinvented for co-eds on the eve of the millennium. The kind of rapport only stirred by enemies.

In the eleventh inning of Game Six with the bases loaded, the Braves walk home the winning run. I should be ecstatic, but after the rush, there is this fatal let-down. Never in the past has baseball not been enough. And after the pennant, I am left wishing there were more games to play, even as the World Series awaits in all its starry, cool-enough-to be-October breath.

A line from my favorite movie: "I tried 'em all, I really have, but the only church that really feeds the soul, day in and day out, is the church of baseball."

By Christmas, the Mets fan swaggers the hall with a girlfriend, a pretty girl who I spy some nights in the bathroom wearing his oversized red fleece and nothing else. I wonder why she isn't me, if in my understanding of passion, I am somehow too zealous, too clumsy in unsaid declaration. Her presence does not make me like him less. She probably finds me odd for the way I plant myself in the study lounge next to his room, when there's a perfectly good one closer to mine.

For a long time, I thought baseball was my religion too, or maybe poetry, maybe the poetry of baseball. But real faith lay in some temple I couldn't name.

What tree rings can tell you: the climate of landscape, the conditions lived through, such as forest fires, drought, insect attack, floods, or slopes. Thick or thin, one tree ring a year. Circling out from the core, rings signal growth. In cross-sections,

however, cracks splinter patterns through the middle, obscuring the layers of cells, making them hard to read.

*

In high school his name is Strummer, and he is a poet. He is a jock. Blonde with bottle-green eyes. Baseball and poetry. He writes like Dylan, of course, and of slow Southern summers with paint peeling off porches. A writer, a hobby as musical as his name, like we are all harps to be played. He walks with an outstretched chest. A fastball pitcher all about the chase. He remembers my bunt the day after I advance a runner in the girls' softball game. He calls me Clutch.

"Just a *baby*," his remark when I tell him I am a year younger than he thought.

At lunch, I ask if I can sip his soda. Of course, he says, and I wish I could drive, his hand brushing mine as I pass him back the wax-paper cup, this relic delivered from off-campus freedom. Sixteen a place he could lead me down.

He drives me home from school in his beat up SUV. Almost missing my street, I am too shy to stop him until after he's past, and tires brand the road with his turn, barreling into the driveway five houses later.

"Jesus Christ, are you trying to kill me?"

He grins, "Easy, easy, Clutch."

And I tell him I'm sure he's ruptured my spleen. He tells me he'll give me fifty dollars if I can point to my spleen and instead I scrunch up my face and act mad but then smile half-sided, and he does not drive off until I am all the way in my house. I make sure he's sped away before I leap about the living room, re-catching his wink over my shoulder just a few steps up the driveway.

Love must be something like that, I suppose—a squeal of tires, a near-missed hard left. The way your heart flops sideways, wondering if it might have been left out on the corner next to a rusting chair.

Across the hall from my chemistry class, I am filling out a make-up exam when he comes up behind me. He's left study hall early, and I'm in a separate lab while class continues in the regular space. He's not allowed to speak to me. Squeezing my shoulder, he whispers,

"Is that you?"

"Was me," I say without looking up, "This test may be my undoing."

The elements blur in the periodic table, the atomic number for hydrogen and water and oxygen; compounds are substances made of two or more elements.

Particles toss themselves up in the dark hollow when I close my eyes—like confetti, an equation I can't place as he squeezes a little lower down my back. In the presence of heat, what is solid loses form.

I try and recall what little I studied in my sedation the day before, a mixture of cough syrup, soap operas, and how matter changes shape. When you're sick, you're filled with the distorted perspective absence brings. In the still of an afternoon seen through lowered blinds, the sun shadows cut up like paper snowflakes on the floor, the whole business of your life going on without you feels like less of a big deal than you've been making it out to be.

He tells me, "Hang in there, Clutch."

The take-home essay assignment is to conjecture how energy is taken from seawater in reactors, duplicating the process that occurs in the cores of stars.

Remembering his whisper, I grow light with medicine and touch down in thin-lidded dreams.

When asked about the spring dance I jump ahead and assume we're going together. I'd been told as much by a friend of a friend. But my lie spawns new rumors, and the phone call never comes, and I write one of those letters you only write once before you realize why nobody ever writes them.

I say no to the boy who asks; it is all humiliation. On the night of the dance I watch the Braves' season opener.

And maybe it's sealed right then. Maybe anything that follows liking can only end in worse.

I don't know why I'd thought he'd want me anyway; it's that moment before you realize that you're fully at your best. Eyes following you inside, when you're walking away.

Crushes are a kind of alchemy—somehow only what burns you turns you on. Possibility reacts into splendor. Splendor flashes into pain. Pain dilutes to dullness, spreading into a cloudy, reliable stability whose presence you almost start to need.

People begin to worry about you.

Your parents don't quite get it. Friends one by one take boyfriends and marshal up sex and sentiment, segmenting the lunch room until not many remain on your side of the pool. And you remind yourself it's a choice, that you could opt for something else, something telling and awkward, but you don't want what don't bring heat.

What atoms can teach you: it is all a rush toward collision. After penetration, they repel one another, but that distance between centers fusing—that's as close as you can get.

The alchemists never figured out how to change the elements into gold, but they uncovered a wealth of practical information in the process of searching.

*

At fourteen, I work behind the snack bar. My favorite lifeguard wears a navy Notre-Dame t-shirt and navy trunks. He is seventeen. His light blue eyes absorb light blue pool water. When they are shaded his silver whistle twirls in the black reflection and loops over his fingers. His hair is blondish and his legs and chest are a deep-summer tan. Chest hair—a new idea. I gaze out of the concessions window as he

approaches; I know when his break ends. A *Good Humor* sign sits on the ledge to tempt the regular pool-rats and the whispery girls wearing the kind of bathing suit you have to order from a catalogue. In the women's locker room, their shoulders all bear the same tan lines.

As he passes, he throws ice at me from an oversized plastic mug before climbing up the lifeguard chair.

Forty-seven minutes later, when my shift's done and he's on break again, I splash around the deep end as the girls sun their stomachs with baby oil. He grabs my legs and pulls me under all the way to the shallow. What love must be like, I figure: your head going down only at the end, the mind last to submerge, and your nostrils fill with uncomfortable shooting spurts. His hands at my ankles. The spray of his water gun. Flirting and fighting link legs in my mind. The feats of his back flips off the diving board in the dying rays of evening. Smelling like sunscreen and the line left in leaves from slipping toes along the gutters.

At the entrance to the parking lot, the sign for the pool signals heart speed. I love the pool in the morning. Going through the list with him: testing acidity, alkalinity, calcium hardness, dumping the swimming baskets, skimming out debris.

The youngest, and not an actual lifeguard, I take out the trash, assemble sandwiches and peanut butter crackers without making them pay, and pretend not to feel left out when they smoke cigarettes in the supplies closet. He is the only one who notices me. We take the water temperature before early lap swim, stack chairs and unpin umbrellas before close, play scrabble with the other guards when it rains, order cheese and rice burritos, throw bags of garbage over the dumpster's edge—the shared work a kind of ongoing conversation, its repetition a kind of comfort.

When he's not there, the days drag like a child's towel. The field behind the pool carries soccer shouts. The hours after dinner glow golden on the water. I know

then that I don't like the boys my age whose folded notes hinge on me circling an answer. What I don't know then: it's not a boyfriend I want so much as that space which grows longing, shadows lengthening on pavement, that collapsed room in my chest where I can picture him best, even when he's not really there.

What maintenance can teach you: catalysts change color when mixed in small spaces, and once dipped and read they're tossed over the side. I watch the darkened water diffuse, spreading outward like stretched thread, until you can't separate the gage from what it's gauging. Before taken back to be recorded, though, the array of colored vials sparkle in the kit like glass gems.

*

This is the Day of Decision.

God: here are the tags, I'm handing them over; a chemistry kit, the blade of grass, the rusty chair, a colored lance, the playoff scorecard. So, false as that may be, and for this I'm sorry—for the ones I've forsaken, or the ones who might've wanted back, or for loving the mirage maybe even more than the water—I know it's the wrong current, but I don't know how to break it.

For failures of truth, we ask forgiveness.

And stilted as this cycle is, maybe you have to work your way through to work your way out. Right now it's the redheaded boy in my Faulkner class. Oh, please get me to speak to him. I need to be over this last one. This last one needs to be through with me. I've exhausted the daydream, run it down and sucked the air out. Crushes are like balloons—containers to be filled—and when too big they require the spontaneity of release, the ability to forget. They either soar or pop.

Crushes are country cousins with obsession.

For failures of love, we ask forgiveness.

God, this is my plea. A new year. The music is starting, and in matters of love, we don't have all the time in the world. Please give me courage, strength and confidence, and please take care of my family and do not deliver them Anthrax letters. I don't know how to alter this sequence, how to break the inevitable. Real people don't know how to monologue like Crash Davis. But I know now, or I think I know only because it's been too long, that monologues are only half the dance.

Teach us to forgive ourselves for all these sins, and help us overcome them.

I've been alone.

Alone, but not lonely. And not without beginnings. Not without secrets. And whether it's what they've left me or all that I've created, I'm grateful for this assembly of persons—gratitude and grace, these agents of amazement.