

DEGREES OF SEPARATION

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Abstract

Degrees of Separation is a collection of four short stories exploring one character's quest to return home through an unconscious process of refraction and destruction of self. The stories explore themes such as home, selfhood, innocence, love, loss, imagination, and self-destruction. In "Accidental Death," faced with an experience of loss that she is emotionally unable to comprehend, Liz splits herself into three, projecting her fear onto a shadow, and her pain onto a bird which she kills, marking her first exile from self. In "Shadow Play," Liz is trapped in a painful process that all at once mimics and destroys her sense of home. She projects her weakness on a proxy, which becomes a target for her anger against herself, and snaps out of the cycle only when she acknowledges the effect of her destructive power on the proxy, but not on herself. In "Cyrano," Liz continues to search for home, projecting her desire to be saved onto a woman, and unconsciously ignoring her pain to hold onto her at all costs. Liz also projects her innocence onto a child, and experiences something close to love in her effort to protect it from herself. In "Fourth Degree Murder," Liz has repressed her pain by erasing its traces from the visible world. She projects her fear of destruction on a man, which she instrumentalizes to violate herself. In the end, though Liz is literally faced with her own image, she fails to recognize it as the locus of home.

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Dedication

For my parents, E. and K.

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“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Accidental Death

I hate parties. Everyone is always pretending at parties.

"Liz!" says Mama.

Mama is calling me from downstairs. I don't like it when she does that. It hurts my ears and it interrupts my reading and reading is my favorite in the world. Sometimes I pretend I can't hear her. She wants me to go downstairs now and practice my piano song for Nana. It's Nana's birthday today.

"Ok, Peter, in you go," I say.

Peter is blue and white. He's a parakeet. I got him for my birthday. I chose him from all the other birds because he looks happy.

I put my book down and make sure it isn't crooked. I don't like crooked things. I count my steps to the door. One two three four five. I count my steps to the stairs. There are twenty-four steps. I hold my head high and I don't look behind me when I go down the stairs. There is a shadow with no face in the house. If I don't count they will die. If things are crooked they will die. If I look behind me they will die. I have to work very hard to make sure the shadow doesn't come. But so far I am OK because Mama or Papa aren't dead.

Mama is in the kitchen. I can hear the little TV on top of the piano. She is watching Star Trek. I like it when she's home, even if she's too busy to talk to me. Mama is always busy. Sometimes she forgets to pick me up at school. I count the number of

hooks in the place where we hang our coats. There are twenty-eight. I know I'm not supposed to say this because there are real orphans but sometimes I feel like an orphan. Like everybody is gone. When I hear her heels going click click on the floor, I know it's her. She is wearing a business suit and I'm so proud of her.

I love reading almost as much as I love Mama. When the kids at school call me a dirty immigrant she says not to listen to them and I should be proud of where I come from. Mama is always laughing and telling me I'm pretty and smart and good. Sometimes it hurts my ears. But I like it when she is happy. She is the happiest of everyone I know. Mama is my best friend. But I miss her all the time. Sometimes when she comes to pick me up in the car it feels like she is a stranger. Sometimes I smell her clothes when she is not home.

I open the piano. The song I am learning for Nana is written by a man called Bach. It's a Prelude. I asked Mama what Nana would like and Mama said Bach. It's hard but I practiced for two days. First measure, left hand, twenty times. Right hand, twenty times. Both hands, twenty times. Second measure. First and second measure. Third measure. First and second and third measure. There are forty measures. It's hard at the beginning because my fingers don't listen to me. But I make them do it. I really hope Nana likes it.

In the shiny wood of the piano, there is a yellow square. I can see a black shape in the square. It's Mama working in the kitchen behind me. I see my face too. But I don't like looking at my face. I get up and push the piano bench under the piano so it's not crooked.

One two three four five. I put my arms around Mama.

“Can I go back upstairs and read?” I ask Mama.

“Put on the dress first, alright darling?” says Mama.

“Why do I have to wear a dress?” I say.

“Because you’re pretty,” Mama says.

“Can’t I be pretty in this?”

“It’s Nana’s birthday.”

“But why do I have to wear a dress?”

“Elizabeth.”

She just says my name.

I really don’t want to wear the dress. It has big red and purple flowers and poofy shoulders. I don’t understand why Mama wants me to wear it for Nana. I don’t feel pretty when I wear a dress. It’s tight around my waist. And I have to wear white itchy stockings. And black shoes that are shiny and round. And the dress has a white collar that is too tight around my neck. I can’t breathe. I have to comb my hair. I have to wear a plastic headband that scratches my ears. One two three four five. I put on the stockings. One two three four five. I button up the dress. One two three four five. I put on the shoes. One two three four five. I brush my hair. One two three four five. I look at myself in the mirror. I don’t like how I look in the mirror. I sigh.

“Come on, Peter, at least we can read until they come,” I say.

I'm almost eight. Papa says I can read any book in the library. There are millions of books. Millions. On all the walls. Right now I'm reading the Wizard of Earthsea. It's about a boy called Ged. Mama says Ursula Le Guin is a woman but it sounds like a boy's name. I like to read all the book titles and imagine what is inside the books. *Don Quixote*. *Cyrano de Bergerac*. *Lolita*. *The Idiot*. *Crime and Punishment*. Sometimes I take a book and I open it to see if I can understand. Mama says some books are not for children. She said not to read the Metamorphosis yet. But I looked inside and it wasn't scary at all. It's just about a sad beetle.

Reading is like playing the piano. I can make myself understand if I try. It's like when I taught myself to read English. I read the black marks over and over and over until I heard a sound in my head. Sometimes I hear words wrong in my head. English is not my first language. Sometimes I find out much later they were wrong. Like when I was at school and the teacher laughed because I said lunatic wrong. I said lu-NA-tic. It's supposed to be LU-na-tik. I thought it was funny too. I wish I could read all the time. It's like I'm dreaming but I'm awake. Sometimes I feel so good I want to kiss the book. Sometimes I kiss the book.

There is only one book I don't like. It has pictures of piles of dead babies and women with their breasts cut off. And people who look like they don't have anything to eat. Like skeletons. I couldn't sleep after. They looked like me and Mama and Papa. Exactly like us. I can't tell anyone what I saw. I think Mama would be sad. Nana sometimes tells me stories. Scary stories that happened to her family a long time ago. I wish she would stop telling me the stories. I don't tell Mama about that either.

It's not Nana. I go to the staircase and look down from the top. It's Grandma Ness and Grandpa Otto. Papa's office door opens. I wonder if he will be happy or mad. He pats me on the head and goes down the stairs. Sometimes Papa comes home and I know he is mad because of the way he walks. The sound of his feet is mad. And when he opens and shuts doors or moves things around or turns on the water I know he is mad. Once I was so mad that he was mad that I punched my pillow. Papa used to be my best friend. He used to play with me every day. He used to watch me draw and ask me questions about what I was drawing. I drew millions and millions of drawings for him. He used to read me stories every night. I love hearing the sound of his voice. I hear it in my head when I read. I smile at him. He smiles back.

I don't talk a lot with Papa anymore because he always interrupts me to tell me what a word means. He always says if I don't know what I'm saying I shouldn't say anything. Sometimes he lets me sit next to him and watch him in his office. Papa spends a lot of time in his office. I watch him for hours, but I have to be quiet. I look at his face. He doesn't smile a lot. I wish he would smile more. He is the funniest. Once he put a lampshade on his head. Another time he brought me a crocodile as big as my whole body. I hope he never dies. Sometimes I imagine him dying. I can really imagine it. I want to tell him I love him.

I look down the staircase. Grandpa Otto doesn't say hello to Mama, he just nods. He always looks sleepy. Whenever I ask him a question his eyes look like they are far away. I don't ask him questions anymore. Grandma Ness gives Mama a bag, but she

doesn't smile. When I am alone with her, Grandma Ness tells me nasty things about Mama. She says Mama is fat and that she doesn't care about Papa. I don't know what to say. I can't tell her to stop. I can't. But I wonder if she forgets that she is talking about Mama. I don't think Grandma Ness loves me. I have four boy cousins. They always get more food and she smiles at them all the time. I heard her tell Grandpa Otto that I was just a girl. I can read and hear at the same time. When Mama has to go somewhere I have to choose between Grandma Ness or Nana. I choose Grandma Ness because it's worse with Nana. I don't tell Mama all this because I don't want her to be sad. But every time I look at Mama I can hear Grandma Ness in my head.

I tell Peter, who is on my shoulder, "Peter, shhh, don't make a sound. They won't know we're here."

Grandma Ness and Grandpa Otto go into the living room. Mama and Papa look at each other. Mama and Papa don't talk a lot. It's like they have a secret. A bad secret. Yesterday at dinner I could hear the clock ticking and the sound of Papa's fork in the salad. It hurt my ears. Then the toaster was on fire and I watched the fire for a long time before Mama noticed. I know some kids don't have parents but I wish mine were happy. Holding hands and kissing and loving each other. I wonder if they love each other. Once I was playing in my room and I heard Papa and Mama laugh at the same time. I went to the TV room, and I saw them on the sofa watching Star Trek. They were holding hands. I climbed between them. I wished it would last forever.

"Let's go back, Peter," I whisper. "Ged is waiting for us."

Ged is being attacked by a shadow that is pretending to be his friend. I shudder at the thought that a shadow could pretend. I already have to protect my family from a shadow, but at least it isn't someone I know. Or me. That would be so scary. I open the window in my room. The moon is bright like a piece of silver. I change directions on the bed so my head is close to the window. The wind in my hair reminds me of Mama's hands.

Peter plays with my pages while I read. I tell Peter, "Behave silly bird."

It's not Nana. It's Papa's friend Alex and someone else. Oh. It's my babysitter, Isabelle. When Mama goes on business trips Isabelle comes and stays with me and Papa in our house. Papa and Isabelle spend a lot of time together. Papa is teaching Isabelle how to draw. She made a pretty drawing of me. It had big eyes. But they looked sad. I stood very still and she looked at my face for a really long time. But I also get to spend time with her. One time we watched a movie about the last unicorn who was looking for other unicorns because she was lonely, and a butterfly told her that all the unicorns were pushed into the water by a red bull that belonged to a king who was very sad. At the end they all came out of the water and ran around and around the castle until it broke and the king fell into the sea and drowned. The king was sad the whole time except when he was falling into the water. I like Isabelle. It's good Papa has a friend for when Mama is gone. They talk a lot. She looks like Mama. She has the same hair and eyes. And she is going to have a baby. I think Isabelle will be a good mother. But not as good as Mama.

Peter is playing with the buttons on my dress. "Stop it, Peter," I say.

He doesn't stop it. I grab Peter with my hand tightly and I put him in his cage and I close the door. I sit on my bed and pick at my blanket. I can't read anymore. I keep thinking that I have to play the piano for Nana. It's Nana's birthday today. I really hope I don't make mistakes.

There is a mirror outside Nana's apartment door and every time I go to her house I look at myself in the mirror to check for what is wrong with me. And then she opens the door and I don't know how to explain it but I want to be invisible. But I can't be invisible. I have to be there. It's like I did something really bad. Like she wants me to be another little girl. Maybe it's because I'm not pretty enough. She always wanted me to dance ballet. I hate ballet. I threw up in my first class so Mama would come get me. I didn't want to go back. I remember I had grapes for breakfast because the grapes were on the blue mat.

It's Nana. I wish I wasn't here. I wish I was just with Mama. I wish I was with Papa at the computer. I wish I could read all day.

"Liz!"

I play a game where I'm going to get up and I imagine I am getting up and there are shadows of me getting up but I am still lying down. I count the shadows.

"Liz!"

I take a deep breath. I fix my bed so it's not crooked. I put my book on my table so it's not crooked. One two three four five. To the hallway. Twenty-four steps. One two

three four five. To the living room. I look for Mama's eyes right away. But she is not there. I have to go around and kiss everybody. I don't want to kiss anybody right now. But I have to. I kiss Isabelle. I kiss Papa's friend Alex. I kiss Grandpa Andrew. Nana has another husband who is my real grandpa but I don't see him because he likes little girls. But I like Grandpa Andrew. He's English and he walks with a cane. He calls me little monkey and Mama big monkey. At least Grandpa Andrew smiles. I kiss Grandpa Otto. He doesn't smile. But I'm not surprised. I kiss Grandma Ness. She smiles a little but it's very small. She is probably complaining about something in her head. I kiss Nana last.

Nana is talking about something and she doesn't stop talking. She is like a queen, still wearing her fur coat with her gold earrings and her pearl necklace and her pretty dress. Everyone really likes Nana. It feels wrong. Nana always tells Mama that she is fat in front of me, but when strangers are there Nana is suddenly nice to Mama. I hate that so much. When I kiss her she pinches her lips. She says, "Hello, Elizabeth." When I am done kissing everybody I don't know what to do. Grandma Ness gets up to help Mama in the kitchen. Grandpa Otto looks asleep. Grandpa Andrew gets a brandy from the liquor cabinet. Nana is finished with her joke. Papa and Isabelle are talking with each other. Isabelle has her hand on her belly. I go to the kitchen to see what Mama is doing, but she is already coming out carrying glasses on a tray and almost steps on me. I look at Mama's face. She is smiling. I love Mama. The most.

"Liz prepared a song for you, Nana," Mama says.

"Oh?" says Nana. "How wonderful."

"How wonderful!" everyone says.

“Go on, darling” Mama says.

I decide I will do it for Mama. I will be brave for Mama. My heart is beating very loud in my chest. I walk to the piano. One two three four five. Everyone is very quiet and I hear the creaking of the floors under my feet. I try to be like a ballet dancer in my own way. I sit exactly on the edge of the bench and I put one foot on the ground and one on the pedal. I make my back very straight. I put my hands on my knees. I look in the shiny wood of the piano. And then I take a deep breath.

My fingers are slippery but my fingers remember, like I taught them. I only make one mistake at the beginning but I stop and start over and I do the rest without any mistakes. My ears are very hot the whole time. When I am finished, I lift my hands off the piano and I put them on my knees. I count to three. Then I get up and I make a small bow with one hand on the piano. Everyone claps. I look at Mama’s eyes. She is smiling. I must have done it right.

“Can’t this girl do anything without making a mistake?” Nana says.

I feel something strange but I can’t cry.

I can’t cry.

Grandma Ness is looking at Grandpa Otto. Grandpa Otto’s eyes are closed. Grandpa Andrew is looking at Alex. Alex is looking at Isabelle. Isabelle is looking at Papa. Papa is looking at Nana. Nana is looking at me. No one is saying anything. I turn my head to look at Mama. Mama looks at me. Her eyes are sad. I look at her but she doesn’t say anything.

She doesn’t say anything.

I walk out the room. One two three four five. To the door. One two three four five. To the stairs. Twenty-four stairs. One two three four five. To my room. I turn the knob that locks the door.

After everybody has gone I call Mama.

“What is it, Liz?” says Mama.

I show her the cage. Peter is lying on his back in the bottom of the cage. His eyes are closed. His feet are curled.

“What happened?” says Mama.

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” I cry. I didn’t know.

I can’t tell her that it felt really, really good.

Shadow Play

I have this dream.

A little girl walks past me. I look over her shoulder at the room she just walked out of. That's my room. I follow her down the staircase. Her knuckles are white where she grasps the banister. There are photographs on the wall. The little girl points to the first one.

Strawberry cake with sixteen candles. I'm in the center of the image, in a red sweater, my face like a budding rose. Dad enters from the left of the photograph, and takes a seat. He is greying at the temples. He puts one arm around me, and kisses my cheek. Mom walks in and hands me a glass of bubbly. We face the camera. We have the same eyes, the same eyebrows. In the window behind us, it snows. I blow the candles out. My wish, on the day I turned sixteen, was to meet the love of my life.

"Ged," the little girl says.

"Who's that?" I say.

The little girl shrugs.

View of our house with the oak door. It's hard to see clearly, but Mom's rose bushes are right there, under the snow. In the spring, the rosebuds burst, and have long stems and sharp thorns. The sun is setting behind the trees. Mom's rusty blue Corolla is parked out front. Mom and I are in the car. My feet are up on the dash. Her voice is sweet, like the wind in my hair before sleep.

“Mama,” she says.

Top of the stairs. I’m reading. The skylight is covered in a layer of snow. I am sitting in the square of light underneath, on the last step. My left hand holds the book by the spine, my right supports the weight of my head. When I turn the page, the only thing that moves is my hand. No living thing was as familiar to me as the voice in the page. It called my name, and where it called I went, leaving my body behind.

“Home,” I say.

Park in front of the house. There’s an oak tree in the background. Its branches are lined with snow down to the smallest twig. At the center, there’s an old jungle gym, a huge pyramid of empty cubes, painted red and white. It has three tiers. I stand at the bottom. My hand shoots up to grab the second tier. I grin sheepishly at the camera. I was afraid to climb up. The bars were slippery, and I didn’t trust my hands.

The little girl grabs my hand.

Lilac trees. Must be spring. They’re bursting with flowers. I can almost feel the sun on my hair, hear the sound of little sparrows in the trees, taste the raspberries and mint from the bushes at the base of the fence. Nana’s in mid-laughter, carrying a big red pot from the table to where Mom kneels, tending to the stone barbecue on the tree stump with a pair of silver tongs. When Nana laughs, I get that same feeling as when Mom laughs – the entire world brightens. I’m propped on my elbows in the grass, grinning. Grandpa Andrew, in a white suit with a red kerchief in the breast pocket, extends his arms towards me. His cane, the one with the mother of pearl pommel, hangs on the back of his chair.

“I don’t remember Nana being happy,” I say.

Vaulted ceiling. Glass skylight. Matte crimson walls. The Louvre. Dad and I are standing in front of a painting in a gold frame. He’s got his hands in his pockets and his legs are spread in an easy stance. I’m next to him, mimicking his posture exactly, except that my head is tilted much higher. It’s a wooden boat in a green sea, the waves almost black in places. There are spurts of white foam, like veins in the green. The sky is a thick grey. Clouds spread across it like gauze. Crags rise in the distance, a pale light behind them. Six men pull back the sails, which are flying in the wind, nearly beyond reach. In the center of the boat, under a red velvet blanket, lies a sleeping man with dark auburn hair. I wonder how he can be so still in the storm.

“He’s sleeping,” the little girl says.

Our library. Dad is sitting with his back against the books. He’s pointing at the letter “L” drawn on a cream-white card propped up on his lap. A picture of a lamb is drawn under the letter. There are twenty-six cards on the floor, around me. A cloud. An oak tree. A mountain. A field. A rose. An apricot. I think of clouds that are close enough to touch, and mountains rippling like skin. The lines in the trunk of a tree, ochre fields coming to life in the wind. I think of the sweet, fleshy meat of an apricot breaking open in my hand.

“‘L’ is for lamb,” she says.

“My first word was ‘light,’” I say.

A church. The back wall is painted dark blue. Two little girls in pale pink dresses hold white candles with long stems. Their hair is tied with pink ribbons. On the altar,

candles are lit, six on each side in silver holders. There are tapestries of saints. The candles flicker. A priest wearing a white robe with a tall collar holds me over the baptismal font, one hand on the back of my neck, the other grasping my legs. Dad stands on the left, Mom on the right. Incense on a gold chain swings into the air. The priest makes the sign of the cross on my forehead. My skin glistens with holy water.

“You,” she says.

Mom is in a rocking chair. Her hair falls in a long braid over the shoulder of her blue silk robe. There are little white sparrows embroidered on the hem. I’m wrapped in a red blanket in her arms. The sun filters through the curtains. A breeze ruffles the petals of the bouquet of roses on the window sill. Dad enters from the left and kneels next to the chair. She puts her head on his shoulder. He puts his arm around her. His wedding ring glints.

When I turn around, the little girl is gone.

I reach the landing. I know that behind me is the oak door with the brass latch and the cracked black and white mosaic of the entrance floor. And ahead, the kitchen, with the sunflower-yellow tiles. I stand on the threshold, looking in. The tiny television on top of the fridge is on. The antenna’s a little crooked, hidden in the foliage of the spider plant on top of the cupboard. Pots rattle on the stove, steam fogging up the kitchen windows. Snow piles up on the ledge.

The little girl’s head is buried in Mom’s dress, arms around her hips. Mom’s hand brushes her hair back.

The phone on the counter rings. I pick up.

"Liar," says a voice on the other end.

A prelude begins.

I wake up with a start and sit on the edge of the bed, the metal bedframe pressing against my thighs. The air smells like sugar and sweat. I'm not supposed to be here.

A drop of blood falls on my hand.

You did this.

I look at the phone across the room and almost see myself calling Mom. I almost hear her saying my name.

Ged's breathing goes up and down, up and down. I push him with my hand.

He can't help you.

His skin is wet. He is heavy, like a dead body.

Ged stirs.

Ged's eyes are black pits, rimmed red. His cheeks are sunken. His nose is bleeding. His hair is plastered on his forehead.

"Morning," he says.

He wipes the blood with the back of his hand. He's not supposed to look like that.

"You look like shit," I say.

"Just the thing a guy wants to hear in the morning," he says.

Oh... look at those puppy eyes.

"I had a dream," I say.

"About what?" he says.

"I want to get out of here," I say.

You're wasting your time.

"Where?" he says.

"I don't know. Let's go for a drive," I say.

"C'mon, lie down," he says.

A skeletal arm reaches for me.

"No."

"Why don't you go?" he says.

"You know I don't drive," I say.

That's right, you don't.

"Maybe later?" he says.

"No," I say.

"What's wrong?" he says.

"It has to be now," I say.

Ged rolls out of bed, and drops down to the floor. He pulls himself up, leaning on the headboard. He takes a moment to steady himself. He pulls on his pants. His ribs play up against his skin.

He always does what you say, doesn't he?

"You really look like shit," I say.

"Stop it," he says.

He's not capable of real anger.

Ged walks to the table and opens the little wooden box.

"What are you doing?" I say.

You know what he's doing.

I get up and slap the box out of his hands. It skids across the table, and knocks against the wall.

"What's wrong with you?" he says.

I grab his wrists tightly. His hands go limp.

"Just a hit," he says, "to wake up."

"No," I say.

"Why?" he says.

The question bounces around aimlessly in my head.

You think you have a chance. How sweet.

"Do we really need to?" I say.

Who are you trying to save?

"It's just a hit, babe," he says.

You know you're exhausted. Give up.

"Please don't," I say.

You can't live without it. It's humiliating, isn't it?

Ged picks up the box.

Maybe if you knew what to say. Maybe there's a right word. Maybe you should trick him, trick yourself. You can try, but you know he's weaker than you. If you can't do it, he can't either.

I slap it out of his hands again. It falls on the floor. Ged looks at the box, then looks at me.

And yet, you still try.

"I don't understand," he says.

"I can't," I say. "I can't."

"You don't sound like yourself," he says.

Do you even know who that is?

I clench my teeth.

"Do you love me?" I say.

It's the only thing I can think of. I can see it in his eyes, the precipice between yes and no.

"Yes," he says.

Liar.

"Then trust me," I say.

Liar.

Ged nods weakly. He picks up the box and hands it to me. I put it back on the table. He puts on his coat, helps me put mine on. He brushes my cheek with his hand, and kisses me on the forehead. I don't want to be touched like that.

“Where to?” he says, putting the key in the ignition.

“The highway.”

The sky is a deep blue. I roll down the window. The air is sweet. It makes me sigh involuntarily, a big sigh that hurts my lungs and catches in my throat on the way down. How long has it been? It feels like years since I’ve been outside. The city lights are like shooting stars.

“So pretty,” I say.

“Sure is,” he says, looking at the road.

I put my hand out the window and feel the wind pushing against it. It feels real. I put my head out the window and close my eyes. I remember this.

“Faster,” I say. Ged presses on the gas.

There’s a sign on the side of the highway. The blue letters, their familiar curving shapes, remind me of Mom’s blue Corolla; of a road trip, of dreaming in the car with the seatbelt buckle pressing on my ribs, and looking up to see her eyes in the rear view. That sign, it meant that we were close to home.

“Take me home,” I say.

“You want to go back?” he says.

“No, I want to go home.”

Ged turns off the ignition.

My house looks different. I don’t live here anymore.

I wish I could talk to Mom. I close my eyes and pretend I'm sitting in the car with her. I want to ask her what happened. I want to hear her say my name.

"Say my name," I say.

"Liz," he says.

I open my eyes. Ged looks different. Achingly familiar.

He's in a field, his skin tanned, the sun on his hair like gold. He's hitting a ball clear out of the park. A beautiful, slow swing. I'm lying on the grass, shoes off, skirt playing in the breeze. After the game, I put my head on his chest, and we talk until the sun goes down, laughing at each other's jokes. We walk across the field to the Camaro. I loved being the girl in the Camaro. I was the kind of girl a guy like Ged would want. When we met, I knew everything would be OK.

"Say it again," I say.

"Liz," he says.

He winks. He'd do that when we first met.

"Remember baseball?" I say.

"Yeah," he says.

"I love watching you play," I say.

"You do?" he says.

"Yeah," I say.

"Can we do it again?" I say.

"What?" he says.

"Baseball," I say.

"Yeah," he says.

"Really?" I say.

"Sure, babe, anytime," he says.

I caress his cheek. He smiles and turns his head to kiss my fingers.

We'll get married. We'll have kids, like we talked about. We'll buy a house on a sunny street full of oak trees that are red in the autumn and green in the summer. All sorts of colors. We'll have big windows, on every wall, to let the light in; a garden full of lilac trees, and rose bushes, and raspberries and mint. We'll have barbecues in the yard. We'll build bookshelves. I'll tell the kids stories. All the stories. I'll draw those little cardboards with the letters on them, with a picture for every letter. I'll draw them by hand. We'll go to museums. All the museums. Even the ones in Paris. Even the Louvre. We'll be together all the time. Ged would be such a good Dad. He's good.

I lean over and unzip his pants. I stroke him. Clamber over him. Put him inside me.

"I love you," I say. "I love you so much."

Liar.

I stumble in the snow. I nearly run into the door. I'm breathing heavily. I fumble with the key. It falls in the snow and I claw to get it out. We both do, on our knees. I burst into the house.

The hit goes up my nose and my eyes water. There's a tang in the back of my throat. I drop my head back and make a sound, like I've been holding my breath my entire life. My cheeks hurt from smiling.

I close my eyes.

I'm in the park, looking at an oak tree, trying to see if anything has changed. I can't tell at first. And then it gets quiet, and everything changes. I know every knot, every line in the trunk. Above my head the branches shoot into the sky. I know every twig, every branch. And still higher, a bird is frozen in mid-flight. I know that bird. Snowflakes dance around me. At my feet, the snow sparkles brighter than I have ever seen it. It catches my eye, the red and white pyramid I've always been afraid to climb. It's small. My stomach lurches. I grab the bar over my head and pull myself up. My hands don't slip. A seed of warmth tickles my gut. I keep climbing. The pleasure bubbles up my spine, heats my blood, presses up against my skin until I can't hold it in anymore. I get to the top. I let go of the bars and spread my arms.

The door swings open. I bend down and run my finger over the cracks in the black and white mosaic. The house envelops me, heavy and warm. It smells like a familiar dust. A familiar life.

"Mom, I'm home!"

I run up the stairs. The wood creaks under my feet.

Mom is sitting in a rocking chair in my room. Her lashes are thick, her skin rosy. Her hair falls in a long braid over the shoulder of her blue silk robe. There are little

white sparrows embroidered on the hem. The sun filters through the curtains. A breeze ruffles the petals of the bouquet of roses on the window sill. I'm wrapped in a red blanket in her arms. I kneel and look into her beautiful eyes.

I am a red rosebud. I am its soft petals. I am its thorns. I am snow falling. I am the sun setting behind the trees. I am the wind. I am the pages of a book. I am an oak tree. I am the roots in the earth. I am a lilac in the spring. I am a sparrow flying through the brush. I am the taste of raspberries and mint. I am the ocean, rippling green. I am the pale light on the horizon. I am fire. I am desert sands. I am an apricot. I am the dappled sun. I am a prelude. I am the clouds. I am ochre fields rippling in the wind. I am the breeze. I am the morning dew. I am a forest. I am hard rain.

"I love you," I say.

She looks up. Her eyes are sad.

"Liar," she says.

I want to explain. I back out of the room and run to the library. Dad is sitting against the bookcase. There are twenty-six cards. All blank. There was a cloud. A tree. A mountain. A field. A rose. An apricot. A tree. A mountain. A field. A rose. A tree. A mountain. A field. A tree. A rose. Roses are. Apricots taste like. I shake my head. It tingles. I take a book out of the library. There is nothing on this page. I turn the page. There is nothing on that page. I shake my leg. It tingles.

I look at Dad. His eyes are angry.

"Liar," he says.

I hear my name from downstairs. I go down the stairs. The living room door is open. There is a strawberry cake on the table. A prelude plays on the piano.

“Liz.”

The shadow steps forward and extends its arms. I step back but it draws me near, pressing its cheek against my cheek. It begins to dance. We go ‘round and ‘round. It grasps me tightly. It presses its lips to my forehead, to my cheeks, to my mouth. It whirls me faster and faster. Harder and harder. I am knocked against the furniture and the walls.

“I love you,” it whispers in my ear.

I crawl into the garden, and lie on my belly, my cheek against the earth. I would give anything to hear Nana laugh. To feel Grandpa Andrew’s arms. To touch his white suit with the red kerchief in the breast pocket. To see his cane with the mother of pearl pommel hanging on the back of the chair. I would give anything to hold Dad’s hand. To sit in the car with Mom again. I would give anything to feel the sun on my hair. To hear the sound of little sparrows in the trees. To taste the raspberries and mint. To see snow. I would give anything. I hear a laugh. I try to roll over, but I can’t. The laughter gets louder, and louder, and louder. My ears burst. There is a deafening silence.

The shadow picks me up.

“Home,” it says.

I’m looking out the car window. I am waiting for the sweet voice. When it doesn’t come I turn my head. There is a shadow where Mom should be, its face a dark spot in the car. It is leaning back, both hands on the wheel. It turns the key in the

ignition. Mom's roses, right there, under the snow, with their long stems and sharp thorns, disappear in the rear-view. My mouth is transfixed into an O. Words are coming out of it like paper chains. The shadow's tongue wags.

"Look."

I am alone under the vaulted ceiling. I am standing in front of the painting of the boat in the gold frame. The crimson walls are damp. The sea is filling with a spidery black tar. The crags rise unevenly like ragged fingers, spilling over the light. The six men and the wooden boat twist in the wind and fade into darkness. There is only the man with the auburn hair under the red red velvet blanket. His skin is deathly white. His eyes are open. He stares wildly at me, as if he is surprised. His teeth are ground together. His lips are retracted. There are deep lines in his face. His skin is drawn so tightly around the eyes it looks like it could snap. I don't want to look at him. But I can't look away. The crimson walls bleed. There is a sickening thud.

I wake up in a church, in the blinding light. The back wall is painted dark blue. On the altar, candles are lit, six on each side in long silver holders. There are tapestries of saints on either side. The candles flicker. A priest holds me over the baptismal font, one hand on the back of my neck, the other grasping my legs. He makes the sign of the cross on my forehead. My skin glistens with holy water. The church doors open, and the shadow comes in. When it reaches the altar, the priest turns slowly and hands me over, one hand on the back of my neck, the other grasping my legs. Incense on a long chain swings into the air. It takes me the same way as the priest. I pray I won't do it again. I pray like I would pray to God. I have never prayed to God. Our Father, Who art

in heaven. Hallowed be Thy Name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

I open my eyes.

Ged is sitting across from me, slumped in his chair. A shiver courses up my spine.

"Please help," I say.

The muscles of his face are limp.

"Say something," I say.

Something else is staring at me from inside his face.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" I say.

Ged nods.

"Please stop," I say. "Ged, Ged, Ged, please, are you there?"

The corners of his mouth lift.

"Ged?"

Only the corners. The eyes stay the same.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" I say.

Pure rage feels like a bolt of electricity. It feels like twenty tons of ramming force.

I hit him again and again and again and again. I don't know for how long. His body shakes like a bag of packed meat, but he doesn't move. It feels good.

He slumps further forward and his head hits the table. I run out and walk until I don't want to hit him anymore. When I get back home, Ged is under the covers. His arms wind round me weakly. I love him more than anything in the world.

I pray for the end.

When I wake up, I fumble for the lamp, swatting the darkness in a panic. The room comes into focus. I desperately need to feel the heat and weight of Ged's body close to mine. I turn to find his familiar shape under the blanket. I lift the blanket. There are bruises everywhere. Deep, purple bruises.

I want to say sorry so hard that I want to not be who I am.

"Why didn't you fight back?" I say.

I don't know what this feeling is. It could be crushed by a breath.

I separate from Ged. My feet touch the floor. The phone is in the corner. I walk straight to it and pick it up. Each time my finger turns the dial, it turns harder. The ring resonates in my chest. And then it clicks.

"Liz, is that you?"

"Yes, Ma," I say. "Yes, it's me."

I know her voice is real. It sounds like nothing I expect.

Cyrano

"Is she sleeping?" she said.

Jessie came in tiptoeing, in that terribly ineffective way she had that made me love her more.

She clambered up onto the bed and blew on my nose.

I opened my eyes to find something so near that it was out of focus.

It was a rose.

I brought my hand out of the covers and took it.

"I picked it in the garden," she said.

"It's beautiful," I said.

I twirled it, watching the light grow and fade on its petals.

"Isn't it," said Dolores, lowering her book.

Jessie sat between us, wearing a towel-cape and a feathered hat.

"Who are you today?" said Dolores.

"Guess," said Jessie.

"A silly little girl," said Dolores.

"*You're* a silly little girl!" said Jessie.

"There's only one silly little girl here," said Dolores.

They fell into the covers in a tangle of laughter.

"Lizzie," Jessie squealed. "Save me, quick!"

It was impossible to beat Dolores. She was relentless.

"Uncle!" we both cried.

As we lay breathless, I turned on my side to admire them. It was a portrait. Mother and daughter, in light tones. The sunlight bathed everything in gold. Their noses, eyebrows, eyes, their smiles. Twice the beauty, twice the perspective. Their eyes were locked. I could see the secret of life between them. That secret that mothers and daughters had. I held my breath.

My eyes fell on Dolores, her long legs wrapped in the white comforter, her golden-brown hair wild. Dolores met my gaze while it was on her chest.

"This is the happiest day of my life," Jessie said, taking both of our hands.

"You always say that," we said.

"It's true," said Jessie.

Every time she said it, it moved something lodged in my heart.

"You know what, Jessie?" I said.

"What, Lizzie?" she said.

"You're Cyrano," I said.

"Who's Cyrano?"

"Aha, it's a story," I said.

Jessie leapt up on the bed.

"I want to hear it!" she said.

"Brush your teeth first," said Dolores.

"Do I have to?" said Jessie.

"Yes, baby," said Dolores.

Jessie whipped her cape around her shoulders and leapt off the bed.

"Wait for me!" she said, her voice trailing as she ran.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

I turned and kissed Dolores, pulling her into me. It was the only way I knew to love her, to swallow her whole.

She pushed me back.

"Sweetie, I told you not to look at me like that," she said, brushing a lock of hair from my eyes.

My face burned.

"You have no idea how much it hurts me to say no to you," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Why is this not enough?" she said.

"But do you want to be with me?"

"Of course I do. I adore you, more than anything in the world," she said.

"Then why can't everybody know? Nobody would care, Jessie wouldn't care, and we wouldn't have to hide," I said.

"Liz, please stop, you're doing it again," she said. "It's like you have amnesia. You have no idea how pressured I feel. I'm not ready, I'm scared. I need space to figure it out. I need something to lean on. All you think about is yourself. It's all about you, all the time, what you need, what you want. I need you to show me I can trust you," she said.

"I'm trying," I said.

"You keep saying that, and then you can't hack it. It's obvious you're hurting yourself. Sometimes I think we should stop," she said.

"No, I'm sorry, please. I'll get better," I said.

"Sometimes I don't think it's me you love," she said.

"Please don't say that," I said.

The phone rang.

"Wait," I said.

"No, I have responsibilities. I have Jessie, I have the party tonight. I need to deal with that," she said.

She climbed off the bed.

Dolores picked up. "Hello?"

Shortly afterward, she laughed. It was a peeling laughter, like bells.

Dolores threw the best parties. There were white tablecloths, and silverware and china, and tea lights in the garden, and everything was tidy and beautiful, and classical music played from the record player. It was how I imagined a house should be.

I hoped she would wear the green dress with the low back. She wore it once to meet me at the Gare de Lyon in Paris. When she came off the train, her skin bronzed from the Italian sun, her eyes soft and all for me, it took my breath away. So hard I thought I would faint.

Men always flocked around her. She'd laugh, her throat bent back, her earrings brushing against her shoulders. It would be so easy for them to have what was mine. I could see how they looked at her. The vulnerability of her throat, the soft skin of her back, her round shoulders, her little waist. I would sit there nursing a glass of wine, feeling like an ugly thing. And still, I would have to smile, repeating to myself that our love was beautiful, even like this, even as a lie.

I breathed out shakily. There was so much bile in me. I felt I was going mad. I could sense how sad it made her. I admit, I wanted her to be sad. I wanted to hurt her. I could imagine myself going back to where I came from. The dark unmentionable place I swore I would never return to. No one could ever love me as I was.

I heard footsteps approaching. I hoped it was Dolores, but Jessie burst into the room. In her arms, there was a pillow from the living room sofa. A flat box of crayons. A drawing pad. She precariously carried a glass of milk in her other hand. An arsenal of happiness-making objects.

Scrambling, I opened a door in my mind and pushed everything I was feeling inside. It was like trying to hide a sad, dark thing in a crystal glass.

"This is for you," she said, handing me the glass of milk. I drank it dutifully to give her action a purpose. The milk tasted of her kindness. She put the pillow under my head, and in truth I was less comfortable than before, but her gentleness was overwhelming.

She was eight years old. Her face had had that incredible mixture of grown-up pragmatism and little-girl innocence. She was her own person, untouchable.

It was hard to think that I had once been terrified of her. I thought I would destroy her just by being in the same room. I wondered if she saw me for what I was. For her to know what I felt would be a crime worse than the feeling itself.

The first time we met, I sat in the hallway while Dolores tucked Jessie into the white covers with the zoo animals on them, and I could hear Jessie's voice, small and soft. I sat there in the dark hallway outside the room, my head against the wall, closed my eyes and let it wash over me.

Jessie hadn't been part of the plan. I had resented her for making it impossible to express how I felt about her mother. The only time I had with Dolores was at night, behind closed doors. And there were interruptions, so many interruptions. Sometimes I'd secretly wished she didn't exist.

But she was persistent. I would often close my doors and pretend to be working to avoid having to put on a show. Then there would come a small knock, and a small voice would ask if I was busy. I would force myself to smile when she entered the room. I'd absorb her joy and reflect it back to her.

One time, she'd asked me to pretend to be a horse, but I couldn't get my arms and hands to move. I didn't know how to play. It was halting, embarrassing at times. But she was patient, almost understanding, and with practice it improved.

She started asking for stories on the bus as we rode to school. She had a box of disguises in her room, and would come out dressed as various characters every day.

Some days, she was the Queen of the Night, from Mozart's "Enchanted Flute," some days, Hercules from the Greek myths. Her disguises would give me ideas for which stories to tell next. I hadn't told anyone a story before.

I found that she was full of wonder. Her power to see beauty everywhere, to have no boundaries to exploration, it surprised me. I surrendered. It was an opportunity to go back in time. I could only do that with her. I found that whenever I was sad, Jessie would make things better. Around her, I was somehow good.

Storytelling became my favorite way to pass the time, as I could mask myself in them, and tell her things I couldn't say otherwise.

Jessie put the crayons and paper out on the floor, and lay down on her belly. I turned on my side, still half under the covers, my head propped on my elbow. She poised her crayon over the white page, waiting for the tale.

My memory of Cyrano had the taste of childhood, because that's when it began. I was twelve, quite a few years older than Jessie. I had watched the film with my mouth open, my heart fluttering like a moth. At the end, I had extended my hand in rapture, feeling the static from the television screen on my fingers.

"What kind of story is it?" said Jessie.

"A love story," I said.

Jessie smiled. Like all children, and little girls especially, she loved love stories.

"What's her name?" she said.

"Roxanne."

“Was she pretty?” she said.

“Oh, she was very pretty.”

“How did they meet?” she said.

“They used to play together when they were kids.”

One day, a common friend had shown me a photograph of Dolores and Jessie. My eyes had fastened on Dolores. I couldn't explain it, but I knew she was the woman I was going to marry. Incredibly, she had felt the same way. She had told me the story of the well in Verona where she'd thrown in a penny asking for someone to come for her and Jessie, and it was me. We both knew it was meant to be. She would say my name, over and over, and I would say hers.

I had waited all my life for someone like Dolores. In her arms I felt newborn. Every time she touched me, I healed. A little more of the darkness was erased. All of life had an infinite beauty that broke my heart. My gratefulness at being allowed to be near her knew no bounds. She laughed, and it filled my own heart with happiness. She cried, and I wanted to destroy what she feared. I wanted to serve her till the end of time.

“Did she love him too?” Jessie said.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because Cyrano had a very big nose.”

Jessie looked up from her drawing.

“What?” she said.

“Imagine a very, very big nose on a person. This long.”

Jessie laughed.

"That's silly," Jessie said.

"Indeed. But actually," I said, "the story starts in a theatre."

"A theatre?" she said, arching her brows.

"Oh yes! It's a grand affair. There is a beautiful chandelier full of shining candles, like millions of dancing stars. And the stage is huge. And there are big red velvet curtains hiding the stage. Princesses and princes, soldiers, and all the mothers and fathers and children. Everyone is waiting for the story to begin."

"Is Cyrano telling the story?" she said.

"No, not Cyrano. Montesquieu."

"Why not Cyrano?"

"Because the king likes Montesquieu better."

"Is the king the most important person in the land?"

"No, but he's the most powerful one, and people are afraid of him. He can decide who has a house and food and who doesn't. So naturally, at the theatre, they only tell stories that the king likes. And it's always the same story over and over again."

"Doesn't anyone complain?" she said.

"No, because they hear the same story so many times that they think it's the only one. Can you imagine only hearing the same story over and over again and not being able to change it?"

"That would be terrible!"

"But what if you didn't know?"

"I still wouldn't like it," she said.

"Well. When the velvet curtain goes up, and Montesquieu comes on stage in his golden shoes and hat and starts to tell the king's story, Cyrano slides down the balcony in his cape and his hat with the feather in it, like you, and tells Montesquieu to get off the stage."

"But isn't Cyrano afraid the king will get mad?"

"Of course, Cyrano is afraid. It's normal to be afraid. But he has courage. If he thinks something isn't fair, he will stand up for it, even if it means people won't like him. It's called integrity."

"What's integrity?"

"It's when you tell the the truth about what you feel and think, to yourself and to other people." I said. "You see, that's exactly why Cyrano thinks it's wrong for one person to decide for everyone else, because it stops them from knowing the truth about themselves."

"How come Mama can decide for me?" she said.

"Mama's job is to help you learn how to decide for yourself. You're little, so she's still teaching you. But one day, you will be able to make all of your choices yourself."

"How does she know what to teach me?"

"She used to be a little girl," I said.

Jessie reflected on this for a moment. I understood her doubt. Although I was ashamed to admit it, I sometimes doubted Dolores. It's hard for any human to place their trust in someone else. Even a child who can't help but trust.

“As it happens, one of the princes at the theatre does get angry at Cyrano for interrupting the king’s story, and he thinks he has the perfect plan to scare Cyrano away. He comes right up to him, and says, Hey you, you have a big nose!”

“That’s not nice. What does Cyrano do?” Jessie said.

“He says, Of course I have a big nose. But your problem is much worse. You don’t have an imagination! And Cyrano invents a beautiful poem about how big his nose is, to show the prince that with his imagination he can make even his ugly nose beautiful. You see, that is Cyrano’s secret power. He’s a poet.”

“What’s a poet?” Jessie said.

“Poets can make anything beautiful,” I said.

“Like how?”

“They tell the truth.”

“How do they know what’s the truth?” she said.

“They don’t always know. But they always, always search for it.”

“How?”

“There are many things in life that we can’t see, and our imagination helps us see them. Cyrano’s imagination can see beauty, not just the beauty that’s outside, but the beauty that’s inside, and because he sees that, he can see the whole truth of the world,” I said.

“Do I have imagination?” she said.

“Oh, you have the best imagination,” I said. “You’re just like Cyrano.”

Jessie grinned.

"Then what happened?" she said.

"Well, the prince is embarrassed because his plan didn't work, so he challenges Cyrano to a fight to regain his honor."

"What's honor?" she said.

"It's when you do what's right," I said.

"But isn't the prince wrong?"

"Well, he thinks he's right."

"Why?"

"Maybe he didn't use his imagination?"

"But how do you know you're wrong?"

"Sometimes you really want to be right," I said. "So it's hard to know if you're wrong. If you use your imagination to see what's true not just for you, but for everyone, then you can come close to understanding what's right and wrong."

"Sometimes I think Mama is wrong, but she says I talk too much," she says.

We both laughed.

"Now, the day after the fight, Cyrano gets a letter from Roxanne asking him to come right away because she wants to tell him something important."

Jessie gasped.

"She tells him that she loves someone," I said.

"Is it Cyrano?" she said.

"Cyrano hopes that it is," I said.

"What's hope again? I know what it is, but what is it?" she said.

"It's when you want something to happen very much. Unfortunately, Roxanne tells Cyrano that she loves Christian. And Cyrano is sad, but he doesn't show her that he's sad. He keeps it a secret."

"Why?" she said.

"Because he respects that she loves someone else."

"What's respect?" she said.

"It's when you let someone make their own choices."

"But isn't it mean?"

"Isn't what mean?"

"To make him sad," she said.

"Roxanne wasn't doing anything wrong, because she didn't know that Cyrano loved her."

"If Roxanne didn't know, then she wasn't mean?" she said.

"She really didn't know."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. And remember, it's Cyrano's decision," I said.

"Does Christian love Roxanne?"

"Very much."

"Did they meet when they were kids, too?"

"Uh, yes. Yes, they did."

"The trouble is, Roxanne wants Christian to write her a love letter, but Christian can't."

“Why?” said Jessie.

“Because he can’t write,” I said. “He can’t tell the story of how much he loves her.”

“How come Christian can’t write?” she said. “Because he doesn’t have an imagination?”

“Everyone has imagination, but not everyone uses it. It takes practice,” I said.

“Why can’t he just talk to her, why does he have to write letters?”

“Because a love letter is a story of how much you love someone. It will help Roxanne believe that he loves her,” I said. “And lucky for him, Cyrano promises Christian that he will write the love letters and pretend they’re Christian’s.”

Jessie’s eyes widened.

“Roxanne reads Cyrano’s letters, and falls in love with Christian. Christian is scared, because this means he will have to talk to her, and she will find out that he didn’t write them. But Cyrano has an idea. Christian and Cyrano go to Roxanne’s balcony at night, and Cyrano folds his cloak around his shoulders and pulls his big hat with the feather down over his nose. And under the trees, where Roxanne can’t see him, he tells her how much he loves her. And then Christian climbs up the balcony and kisses Roxanne.”

“But why does Cyrano lie so much?” she said.

“Cyrano’s not lying. He’s telling the truth.”

“How?” she said.

“What’s inside the letters is true, because Cyrano loves Roxanne. And Cyrano’s love for Roxanne is true because he respects her choices. And Roxanne’s love for Cyrano is true, because she falls in love with whoever wrote the letters.”

“But Cyrano is writing the letters. It’s not fair!” she said.

“Roxanne falls in love with Cyrano.”

“But she doesn’t know!” she said.

“Cyrano knows.”

“Isn’t he sad?” she said.

“Cyrano is only sad about one thing. That he can’t be with Roxanne. But he doesn’t let it bother him. He practices his imagination all the time. Because of that, Cyrano’s world is so beautiful, and his heart is so big, that if Roxanne is happy, that’s enough for him.”

Jessie scribbled on her paper and sighed.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

“It’s not right. I tried to draw Cyrano, but he doesn’t look like what I see in my head.”

“Show me.”

It was Cyrano. There was the cloak and the hat and the feather.

“You know what?” I said. “This looks exactly like Cyrano. Everybody has a different Cyrano in their heads. If I draw Cyrano, he’s going to be different. Every time someone draws Cyrano, he’s going to be different. It’s not a mistake. It just means you did something your way.”

Jessie sighed.

"I wish it was perfect," she said.

"I understand."

She smiled at that.

"What happened after?"

"Roxanne and Christian got married. Cyrano and Christian went to fight in the war. Cyrano kept writing letters to Roxanne. Christian died in the war, and Roxanne became a nun. Cyrano visited her every Sunday at the church until they were both very old. But one night, Cyrano's enemies dropped a big boulder on his head to try to kill him, and his head started to bleed."

Jessie frowned. I took off Jessie's hat from her head and put it on my head.

"He went to the church for the last time. It was getting dark. Roxanne took out one of Christian's most beautiful letters, and asked Cyrano to read it to her. Cyrano read it in the same voice that he used when he was under the balcony telling her how much he loved her before Christian climbed up to kiss her. And suddenly, Roxanne understood it was him all along. She said: "it's dark, how are you reading? I know that voice. Cyrano, it was you. It was you."

"Oh my goodness!" said Jessie.

"But Cyrano took off his hat, and there was blood on his head, and he felt death coming for him. And you know what he did? Instead of lying down and waiting, he got up, tall and strong, and he wrote a love letter for his whole life. He said thank you to the

stars, and thank you to the moon, and thank you to the trees, and to the water, and to the earth, and thank you to poetry, and thank you to all of the beautiful things.”

I wrapped the sheet over my shoulders, and grabbed a gnarly stick that I had found under a big fir tree while camping with Jessie and Dolores in the summer.

“Then he pulled out his sword and pointed it to the sky, and said: I will fight! I will fight! I will fight!”

I brandished it in the air.

“It was magnificent. He wasn’t even afraid of death. His love of life was stronger than death.”

Jessie looked up at me.

“When he couldn’t stand anymore, he lay down in Roxanne’s arms. And she told him she loved him, and he said, Nothing can take my love of life from me. Even if everything I love is gone, even if my life is gone, I will still have one thing, one thing that will never change, one thing that is infinite...”

I paused. I thought I could see that same awe in Jessie’s eyes that I had felt as a child.

“What’s that?” said Jessie.

“...my spirit.”

“What’s spirit?” she said.

I took the hat off my head, put it on hers, and winked. Seeing her standing there, she reminded me of me, of Dolores, of all little girls. Even though she couldn’t see it in herself, I saw in her shining eyes the entirety of love and life. I wanted to tell Jessie how

much I loved her for being pure and untouched. Though she had it in bucketfuls, she would have to refuse to lose her spirit to understand what it was. I felt a twinge of grief that she would someday become a woman.

"It's when you never give up," I said.

Dolores appeared at the door.

"Jessie baby, go play in your room for a bit, I want to talk to Lizzie."

Jessie gave me a hug.

"Thank you, Lizzie! That was the best story ever!"

She dashed away.

In the background we could hear Jessie's, "I will fight, I will fight, I will fight!" trailing off.

"I've always loved your spirit," Dolores said.

"I'm so sorry. I'll try harder. I promise," I whispered.

"I know," she said, beaming at me.

I bent to kiss her neck.

"Oh my Dolores," I thought.

It was close enough to touch — a real family. How I understood Cyrano's love. What a man, who would lie, and would accept the entirety of the lie with every fiber of his being. It made all lies true. Dolores could not imagine what I was prepared to bear for her.

Jessie peeked around the door, and Dolores pushed me away.

"Lizzie?" Jessie said.

"Yes, Jessie," I said.

"I have a question."

"Shoot."

"Did you ever love anyone like Cyrano loved Roxanne?"

I paused.

"No, not yet," I said.

"I hope you and mommy will find someone someday," said Jessie.

I looked at Dolores, but couldn't read her eyes.

"Alright girls, let's get ready to party!" she said.

Fourth Degree Murder

As she waited for her date to arrive, Liz imagined Dolores leaving the rose on her doorstep. It was a single rose, in a glass vase curiously shaped like a bird.

It was a perfect murder, yet everyone was still alive. Liz had waited ten years for Dolores. But in the end Dolores had married a man. She had blamed Dolores for leading her on, and Dolores had accused her of imagining the whole thing. Liz's imagination was certainly active. She could imagine Dolores and her man with a shocking level of detail. She could imagine Dolores staging the rose on her doorstep, turning it a little to reflect the light. It was the sort of thing Dolores would have done, to transmute cruelty into art.

When she had picked up the rose and brought it inside, Liz had the distinct feeling she was part of a design. And though she had initially planned to spend the evening wallowing in despair, the rose had spurred her to change her fate. She had joined a dating service and arranged to meet a man on a street corner, five minutes from her apartment. She hadn't told him where she lived.

"Hi," the man said.

"Hi," said Liz.

"So where to from here?"

Not knowing precisely what to do, she'd motioned to follow her. As they walked, she felt the space between them, both magnetic and repulsive, unknown and familiar. Liz's first thought was: "What have I done?"

From the corner of her eye, she noted he looked like his photos. He wasn't exactly attractive, but was good enough. Liz wondered how she looked to him. She'd had trouble choosing a photo of herself for her dating profile. They had all been taken by Dolores. But Liz looked happy in them, and happiness was attractive, more so than the fear she'd noted in the mirror on her way out.

Liz gripped the knife in her pocket. It was a beautiful knife. A switchblade with a bone handle and a silver blade. She imagined that if the man made a wrong move, she could protect herself with it. But Liz didn't know if she could bring herself to hurt someone.

The only thing she had ever killed before was a bird, when she was a little girl. She had squeezed it to death. Her therapist had wanted to know whether she had felt guilt. She had. But cruelty to animals was the first of the Homicidal Triad, and although Liz had never wet the bed or set fire to anything, she feared that if she had started down that path, then it really wouldn't take much to make a monster. Liz had studied all of the American serial killers. Kemper. Bittaker and Norris. Rader. Dahmer.

Ted Bundy terrified her especially. He was a master of disguise. He had once worked for a suicide hotline with his friend Anne Rule, a crime writer, who, after spending years with him, hadn't believed he could be a psychopath. Most of Ted's

victims hadn't believed it either. They'd laughed and flirted with him until he'd knocked them on the head with a crowbar and thrown them in the passenger seat of his car, which had been ripped out.

Liz had tried to screen for signs of psychopathy in dating profiles. Mostly, for signs of whether men liked their mothers. That was the thing most serial killers had in common. They were men. And, when at their most vulnerable, they had suffered abuse at the hands of a woman. Their murderous rampages were acts of revenge. But of course, most men didn't mention their mothers in their dating profiles. And Liz knew from experience that, even after years of knowing someone, it was possible to have no idea who they were.

Liz often thought of Ted's victims. In death row interviews, he had speculated in the third person that the killer preferred women who were naturally weak, which he could tell from the way they walked. Liz walked with careful, measured steps

She observed the man's body language, the trajectory and force of his stride. It was innocuous enough, though of little consolation. In the privacy of her pocket, she played with the knife's safety, sliding it up and down.

"Tell me," she said, "do they let you cut on people in med school?"

"I'm not in med school."

"No?"

"No," repeated the man.

"Why did you lie to me?" she said.

"I tell girls that because they like it."

"I'm glad," she said. "I figured it would make the perfect alibi for a killer. You know, bring a syringe full of clear liquid, plunge it into the victim's neck, drag them into a white van parked nearby. That's how I would do it."

"What?" He laughed. "You seriously think I'm a killer?"

"I'm a woman. You're a man. What do you expect?"

"What if you're a killer?" he said.

"I'm not."

"Well, I'm not a killer either," he said.

"How do I know you're not lying?"

"You don't," he said.

"So we're both killers," Liz said. "What is it you do again?"

"Once," he said, "I made a hundred grand and lost it in ten minutes."

"You're a gambler?"

"A businessman," he said.

While she was mildly offended that he thought she could be a serial killer, the hint of playfulness in his tone made her feel less afraid. But what really bothered Liz was that he had lied. Aside from the fact that a lie implied more lies, which was the most pressing concern, a medical student would have ensured at least an interesting conversation.

"Let's sit here," Liz said, motioning to a curb in the middle of the street.

"We could go anywhere," he said, "and this is where we're stopping?"

Liz patted the ground next to her. Sitting down, he leaned back on his elbows, legs outstretched and ankles crossed. She extended a leg nonchalantly into the leaves, and pulled out a cigarette pack, the lid open, the angle studied.

He chuckled.

"You smoke?" he said. "Your profile said you didn't."

Liz shrugged.

She lit their cigarettes.

"So tell me about yourself," he said.

"About what, my childhood?"

"Childhood doesn't interest me," he said.

Though Liz had been joking, she was genuinely offended.

"You wrote you were bisexual. Mostly men or women?" he said.

"About equal."

"Last relationship?" he said.

"Woman."

"Ever been with a real man?" he said.

"Aren't all men real?" Liz shot back.

"I mean one that makes you feel like a woman."

"A woman can do that," she said.

"Did she?"

Liz bet he'd never felt that kind of love, or the pain that went with it. He had no idea they were sitting across the street from the house she had lived in with Dolores.

She had rented an apartment nearby, and walked by at night when she couldn't sleep, looking into the windows, wishing she could go back and warn herself how it would end. Liz thought of how a loved one can become a stranger, how the present can fade, how the things one believes in can stop being true, how children raised on fairy tales might grow up to find they didn't recognize themselves in them at all. She looked into the windows across the street and imagined herself waving back idiotically from the bedroom window of the house.

His voice was close to her ear when he spoke.

"Did you see it coming?"

"None of your business," she said, keeping her voice low.

"Why didn't you leave first?"

"Why do you think?" she said.

"You're an idealist."

"Isn't it the reason why all this exists?" she said, pointing to the city.

The man smiled patiently.

"In the real world," he said, "it's either yes or no. Do or don't. There is no in between, unless you want to fail at life. That's why, even if none of this existed, I'd still come out on top."

He flicked his cigarette into the street.

"Typical utilitarian," Liz said.

"Boy, you really like your philosophy."

"I like *life*," she said.

"You just *think* about it," he said.

The sides of Liz's mouth stretched a few millimeters. She bent and picked up a leaf.

"Are you going to torture that leaf?" he said.

Liz got rid of the leaf. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the knife.

"What's that?" the man said.

"I thought you might be a serial killer, so I brought a knife," she said.

The bone hilt glowed in the streetlight.

"You're crazy," he said. "I should be afraid of you."

Liz pressed the switch and the blade flew open.

"Let me see that," he said.

She gave him the knife.

"What am I going to do to you with this knife?" he said, pointing it at her chest.

Liz held her breath.

"This is stupid," he said, handing her the knife. "I don't want to sit here anymore."

Liz didn't know if she'd had enough of him, but she liked that he followed her without a word.

The bus shelter in front of her apartment building featured an illuminated advertisement for perfume. Under the word "Dior," the sea and sand at their backs, a man and woman posed for the camera. The woman, staring seductively into Liz's eyes.

The man, at the woman's vulnerable neck. Right under the woman's petite breasts, the two bottles, one burly, one tapered, marked Dune. "Escape," read the caption.

"She's hot," he said.

"I think not," she said.

"You're jealous," he chuckled.

"That's not a woman, it's an object," Liz said.

"You think you're different?" he said.

Liz decided then and there she'd had enough. He would have no idea how close he'd come.

The man smiled.

"What am I going to do with you?" he said.

"Nothing."

"I think you have the potential to turn me on," he said.

"I don't want to."

"But you do," he said.

"Listen –" she said.

"I'd like to keep talking to you."

"I don't," she said.

"I don't care. You can show off your reasoning skills. It'll be relaxing," he said.

He grinned.

"I expected this would turn sour when I refused you," she said.

"You deserve a spanking."

"I doubt that would turn me on," she said.

"What would?"

Liz laughed, but she wanted to slap him.

"Stop that," she said.

"You can trust me," he said.

"If you were a serial killer, you would say the same thing."

"Honestly, you're overcomplicating this for no reason," he said.

"Do we call it a night?" she said.

"I can't force you," he said. "You know that."

Liz slammed the shelter wall with her foot. He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Alright," he said. "I'll walk you to your place. I'll take a cab home."

"I live *here*," she said.

He stared at her in surprise.

"I'm freezing out here. What are you afraid of?"

Liz noted that he wasn't wearing socks. His throat was exposed.

"Fine," she said, "but pinky swear you'll just come up for a drink."

Liz's pinky went up. He looked at it and laughed.

When Liz opened her apartment door, she instantly regretted inviting him in.

"I like your place," he said.

"I know."

It was one of the things Liz was sure of, because it pleased everyone. But she had weighed every design choice with excruciating care. She admired people who tried sky-diving and extreme sports and horseback riding, who never thought of failure. It seemed to her that no matter what she did, she just couldn't get it right. It had taken her a year to perfect, but there it was. Where there were once white walls that seemed impossible to touch, the place looked like a magazine. The mid-century sofa. The floor to ceiling bookcases. The antique piano. The exotic hand-woven rugs. The carefully chosen palette of Naples Blue, Van Gogh Yellow, and Poppy Red. Laurels, vines, and other flowering types with lustrous leaves. Art house posters and Modernist paintings. An obligatory green velvet armchair. And no traces of history that couldn't be appropriated by someone else. Erasing her past was the only way Liz had found to survive. When Dolores left, she had destroyed every trace of her.

"Got something to drink?" he said.

He stood at the bookcase, his hand on a shelf. A bead of sweat trickled down Liz's ribs. He didn't belong there.

"Who wrote *Lolita*?" he said.

She handed him the glass of wine.

"Nabokov."

"Whoops," he said. He'd spilled wine on the rug.

"Sorry."

When she came back with the sponge, he was sitting on the sofa.

"I don't know how to clean anything," he said.

"I've never heard anything so stupid," she said, smiling benevolently.

Liz got on her knees to clean the stain.

"You're cocky. I like that," he said. "Thing is, I'm probably cockier than you are."

"And it attracts women, of course," she said.

"Especially if you knew how many orgasms I could give you all night."

Liz got up, hot in the face.

"Did I hear you right?" she said.

He smiled.

"Get out of here!" she said.

"Hey, relax. I'm sorry."

"Don't tell me to relax," she said, "you can't just say something like that!"

"Why not?" he said.

"Why should you? Because you can?"

"The real reason?" he said.

"No, the fake reason."

"I was wondering if you were a bit kinky," he said.

"If you use your brain first," she snapped.

"Good," he said. "Good."

The knife was in her coat, behind the man's head.

"Sit," he said. "I'm sorry I scared you. I swear I just wanted to see if you were in the mood. Can you blame a guy?"

He grinned. She glared.

"I'm not scared," she said. "And yes I can."

Liz steadied herself and sat at the other end of the sofa, her back straight. He turned his torso towards her, his legs crossed, one arm hanging over the backrest. It was like playing Russian roulette, she thought, staring into his eyes.

"I really enjoy talking to you," he said.

Liz searched his eyes.

"Why?" she said.

"Like I said, I want something different."

"Why's that?" she said.

"I get bored easily."

"That's arrogant," she said.

"I'm comfortable with myself."

Liz snorted.

"Good, so do we have your mother to thank for that?"

"That's inappropriate," he snapped.

"Is it? I love mothers. Don't you?" she said.

"Why are you giving me such a hard time?" he said.

Liz's heart beat faster.

"There's something about you I haven't quite put my finger on," she said.

"You will never put a finger on this," he said, gesturing to the space between them.

He smiled placidly at her.

"It's a question of trust," he said.

"You think you can do whatever you want, and it's your mother's — it's everyone else's fault for letting you."

"That's right. If I want something, I take it," he said.

"You're entitled," she said.

"You think I'm entitled because you don't know what you want," he said.

The man moved to sit next to her. His hand found hers. Liz frowned. Her cheeks flushed. Her breath caught in her throat. Her breathing quickened. His eyes were blue, she noticed for the first time. He wore cologne. When he blinked, she noticed that his pupils were midway dilated, that he had stubble, that his shirt was taut around his arm.

He touched her face with the palm of his hand. She forced herself to stare frankly into his eyes. A little curious, a little defiant, a little scared. He brought his mouth close to hers, touched her lips with his fingers, parted them with his thumb. Liz did not animate until he pulled a handful of her hair and she bit his lip, partly to punish him. He groaned and roughly pulled her in, and she staggered and softened her kiss.

"You're a great kisser," he said.

Liz repressed a smile. The man kissed her neck, and it was vaguely familiar. His hand played at her throat, then on her breast, then on her belly, then with her belt, then in her pants, where he touched her too hard. She resisted, legs crossed, because it was too easy for him, but he threw her leg over. She slapped him away and straddled him. He kneaded her breasts. She buried her head in his neck.

"Let's go," he said, squeezing her hips.

Before she got up, she slipped the knife out of her coat pocket.

He pulled her sweater over her head.

"I love your breasts," he said. "What size are those?"

Liz covered her breasts.

"I don't know," Liz lied.

"What size?" he said, taking off his shirt.

"Does it matter?" Liz said.

Suddenly, he was naked. He lay on the bed.

"Want to suck it?"

Liz hesitated. She did, briefly, closing her eyes. Then she raised her head, put one hand gingerly on his chest, traced the slope of his ribs and his soft angled arm, which was tucked behind his head. She breathed out slowly. The last person her hands had touched had been a woman.

"Take off your pants," he said.

"Why?" she said, quietly.

"Take them off," he said. "Or do you want me to."

"You do it," Liz said.

He pulled them off. Liz looked at him to see what he thought of her. He touched himself. She turned to the side, facing him. He waited. She kissed his cheek softly. He kept touching himself.

"You want it?" he said.

"What do you mean?" thought Liz.

"You want it?" he repeated.

She touched it lightly.

"Condoms," he grunted.

"I have condoms," Liz said, surprising herself.

"Are you going to get up?" he said.

Walking out of the room, Liz wondered what she looked like to him.

"Open it," she said, handing him the box of condoms.

The amused blue of his eyes bore into her.

"Give me that knife," he said. "The one you brought in here with you."

Her body heat rising, Liz reached under the pillow, took the knife out, and put it in his open hand. He pressed the switch. The blade snapped open. Liz flinched. Still watching her, he plunged it into the box and sawed the top off. Liz's heart beat in her ears as he ripped the lime-green wrapper along the dotted line.

When he entered her, Liz remembered he was a businessman. It was perfunctory, as if he was writing a cheque.

"Spread your legs," he said.

Liz clenched her teeth. Her nails dug into his back.

"No nails," he said.

As he thrust, Liz moaned to reassure herself, to reassure him.

"You like it?" he said.

"Yeah," Liz lied, staring at the wall over his shoulder.

"You like it hard?" he said.

He thrust harder. Liz winced. Suddenly his hand flew to her face and her cheek stung.

Liz yelped.

"Don't do that," Liz said.

"I thought you'd like it," he said.

Liz shook her head.

His hand squeezed her throat. Liz wheezed. It squeezed harder. She gagged, but found herself wondering if she wanted to tell him to stop.

"Do you want me to come in your mouth?" he said.

Liz gaped. The man straddled her with his clean, soft thighs.

"Put it in your mouth," he commanded.

Liz obeyed. She swallowed and tasted salt. The man raised a thigh and dismounted. He considered her, sitting on his haunches.

"You have a cum moustache," he said.

Liz's face burned, but she forced a smile.

"You taste good," she lied.

"Do you have a towel?" he said.

She stared dumbly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm compulsive. I need to shower after sex."

"I like showers too," Liz stammered.

Liz watched him get off the bed. She breathed out slowly.

In the bathroom, his skin was pink against the tiles.

“How does your shower work?” he said.

Liz leaned over and turned on the tap. The water burst out of the showerhead.

“Towel,” he demanded.

Liz placed a clean, folded towel in his hands.

“In or out?” he said.

“Me or the curtain?” Liz said.

He shook his head as if she were an idiot and stepped in.

Suddenly, she heard him laugh. Liz turned to find him proffering the vase to her from behind the curtain.

“What’s this?” he said.

“Nothing,” she said.

She took it and got out of his sight.

In the kitchen, she filled a glass with water. She tipped her head back and drank. She filled the glass again, and again, and again, but the taste of salt in her mouth was indelible.

From where she stood, she could see the bathroom through the open door. She could see the tub ledge. She had seen these things before. She saw his hand reach for her bottle of shampoo. She saw his hand reach for her soap. She saw the soap float up into the air. Liz turned away.

She waited there naked a while longer, wondering if she would be needed. And then, he went to her closet, and selected the plaid flannel shirt she had worn the day she had fallen in love with Dolores. It was the one thing she had kept. She did not put on pants. She sat on the edge of the bed and waited.

Eventually, the water stopped. He came in, towel high around his waist, his hair wet. He stared at her.

"Are you OK?" he said.

Liz smiled.

"Of course," she said.

He sat on the bed next to her.

"I have a girlfriend," he said.

"Right."

"She's really beautiful," he said.

He dried his hair with her towel.

"Is your name even Matt?" she said.

"Nope," he chuckled. "You had sex with me and you didn't even know my name."

Liz turned her face away, and reached for a sock.

"Hey, Liz," he said.

Liz's spine stiffened.

"I'm a serial killer."

She turned slowly to look into his eyes. After a beat, he laughed.

She couldn't feel her face.

He got up, leaving the damp trace of his bum on the sheets, and pulled on his jeans and t-shirt.

"I'm going to sleep really well tonight," he said.

She straightened her shoulders.

"You sure you're OK?" he said.

"Do you need me to reassure you?" she said.

Liz got up. Chest to chest, she patted his back gently with her hand.

"Thanks, Mom," he said.

After he left, Liz stood in front of the mirror and debated whether to brush her hair. When she glimpsed the reflection of the rose in the vase behind her, she touched its image in the glass, and wished she could roll back time.