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## Long Run, You'll Be Fine

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Long Run, You'll Be Fine

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing

by

Alex Dimeff

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May 2016

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## The Opposite

I only go because my father tells me to. Even as I step into the station wagon, I am still protesting. “But nobody likes Maggie Vandermeyer,” I say.

“That’s all the more reason to be nice to her, Tanya,” my father says. “You should know how hard it is.”

He fastens his seatbelt and checks his mirrors. He does not understand the risks involved in attaching myself to the least liked student in the sixth grade. This semester I have finally ascended to mid-level popularity, which is to say that my social position is still remarkably unstable. A certain incident had damaged my reputation back in the fourth. I am only now recovering. “Do I have to?” I ask.

He starts the car. “It’s just one evening,” he says, as if one evening has never ruined a person.

I sit still. A few years ago, I would be kicking the seat in front of me or punching the back of its headrest, but I don't throw tantrums anymore. I've learned that self-control is simple: when I experience frustration, I just do the opposite of whatever I feel like doing, until the anger subsides. Instead of screaming, I go silent. Instead of flailing, I clutch my hands in my lap. This is an effective method.

We drive across our suburb. The houses grow larger and grander until we reach the mansions lining the periphery of Horseshoe Park. Long ago my mother used to take me through this neighborhood once a year to see the Christmas lights. Today is the first time it fully occurs to me that people actually live inside these stately, old mansions, that they eat cereal inside them and play video games and use the toilet.

We arrive at Maggie's house, which looks a lot like a castle. It's longer and wider than our redbrick apartment building, though not as tall.

We pull into the circle driveway. Mrs. Vandermeier steps out and waves at us. She wears a navy flannel shirt and has her hair pulled back in a ponytail. She looks normal, not like my idea of a millionaire.

My father walks me to the front door.

Mrs. Vandermeier yells, "Maggie!" She turns to my father and says, "We're just so excited Tanya could come today."

On the doorstep, a little white dog wags its tail and yaps.

Maggie races through the entrance. She brings herself to a sudden but full stop.

The dog is prancing in a circle now. Maggie crouches down, scratches its head, and says, "Hi, dog."

"Maggie, look who's here," Mrs. Vandermeier says.

“Hi,” I say.

Maggie turns to me and waves. “*Bienvenue!*” she says. She likes to borrow phrases from other languages—phrases her dad teaches her, she says—as if she thinks three words of French or Japanese will convince us all of her sophistication.

Mrs. Vandermeier asks, “Why don’t you show Tanya your room?”

I follow Maggie up one side of a double stairway. Her bedroom lies directly off the landing. We don’t travel down any crooked corridors or hidden passageways to get there. This disappoints me. I have always been attracted to dark, secret spaces. I covet nothing in this world more than Jessica Karl’s garage loft, rickety, wooden, and paint-stained. It’s dusty and disordered there, but dust and disorder are appropriate in places like that. There is something secure about a dilapidated hideout. Still, I am aware that Maggie’s house is objectively impressive, more impressive than a plywood loft, and I plan to relate every detail about the mansion to Jessica Karl.

Maggie flings her bedroom door open.

I step inside, but I am not sure if I should sit down. Maggie’s room contains many beautiful things: antique furniture, a floor-standing globe, a full wall of hardcover books, a sleek set of speakers. Someone has carefully arranged every object. There are no toys or clothes strewn across the floor. Her bed is made. The folds are crisp. The duvet is floral. One would expect this room to belong to someone shy and prim, not to the weird kid with eczema who once gnawed on the spine of her social studies textbook in the middle of class. Apparently, she was pretending to be a dog.

There is nothing haphazard here until Maggie kicks off her sneakers. I unlace my shoes and set them side-by-side by her door.

“So what do you want to do?” I ask.

Maggie stands on the bed and hops into the air. Her feet wrinkle the pristine duvet. She continues bouncing. I tuck my hands into the front pocket of my sweatshirt and wait.

“Whatever you want to do,” she says.

Maggie jumps again and nearly knocks into a shelf that hangs above her bed. The shelf holds approximately one dozen porcelain creatures: a rabbit in a powder blue suit jacket; a cat carrying a picnic basket; an owl reading to a squirrel, the squirrel listening eagerly, the owl tilting her head in maternal tenderness—animals pretending to be people.

I ask about the figurines. Maggie tells me they are Beatrix Potter. I don’t know what that means. I nod.

“It’s dumb,” Maggie says, still bouncing. “I’m not allowed to touch them because Mom says I’d break them. They’re for the future. Like to hand down to my kids someday. My dad gets them for me. He feels bad because he’s always away. Mom says he’s a workaholic. It’s cool that your dad brought you here, that he’s around.”

I say nothing. I can’t tell if she’s trying to bait my pity, or if she has heard a rumor about my mother and is trying to trick me into confirming it. I’d imagined it hundreds of times, the parents of my classmates reading the article on a local news website. *What a horrible woman!* they must have said. And then they probably asked their children, *Doesn’t her daughter go to school with you?* Of course, the adults would’ve had the best intentions about it all. *You should be nice to that girl,* they would say. *She must be going through a hard time.* Then they would add, *I don’t want you hanging around her too much, though. It’s not the poor girl’s fault, but kids who go through things like that—oh, just be careful with her.*



Maggie reaches to touch the ceiling, to press her fingertips against it, but she can't jump high enough. At least this one surface is safe from her.

"So what do you do for fun, Maggie?" I ask. "You don't just jump up and down on your bed all day, right?"

She stops bouncing and perches on the edge of the mattress. "I don't know," she says. "What do you do with people?"

"Talk. Watch things on the internet. Dance to music videos," I say. Really, I am not sure how to answer her, how to explain normalcy, which should come to a person naturally.

"Sometimes people play soccer or basketball, but no one just jumps up and down. Unless there's a trampoline."

Maggie does not have a trampoline, and she is only allowed to use the internet between two and five p.m.

"Do you want to play basketball then?" she asks.

"I don't like basketball," I say. "That was just an example of stuff normal people do."

I worry she'll suggest some little kid thing next, that she'll want to play house or have a tea party. But she produces a deck of cards from her nightstand and asks if I know how to play Egyptian Rat Screw.

"Slap on doubles, slap on sandwiches," I say. "Do you want to slap on Jacks, too? That's how I play with Jessica Karl."

"Whatever you want."

We sit cross-legged on the floor.

Maggie begins to deal out the deck. "So you're good friends with Jessica, huh?"

I straighten my pile of cards. "I guess so. Why?"

“No reason,” she says. “Well, don’t tell her I said this. It’s just that she’s not exactly the brightest banana in the bunch, you know? One time in English, she asked how to spell the word *orange*.”

I smirk. “Jessica can be a little slow on the uptake, but she’s cool, though.”

“Nothing against her or anything, I swear.” Maggie cracks her knuckles and adjusts her half of the deck. “All right, you ready to play? Watch out. My dad says I have hands like lightning.”

I count down, “Ready, three, two, one.”

\* \* \*

Later that night, Mrs. Vandermeier knocks on the bedroom door to tell us she’s ordered Chinese food, which is my favorite. Maggie and I eat dinner in a small room they call the breakfast nook. And even though Maggie brags about her skill with chopsticks, and even though she lifts the plate to her face to lick it clean, I don’t cringe. Nothing she does embarrasses me here because we’re alone. By the end of the meal, the clock above the doorway reads ten past eight. I could ask to go home now without being rude. And yet I don’t tell her that I’m ready to leave. I don’t mention the time at all.

It sounds unbelievable, but for my entire life I have suffered from a persistent headache, sometimes splitting, sometimes dull, but never completely absent. Every minute, pressure builds within my skull, like breath filling a balloon. I used to believe that this was simply what it felt like to be alive. But then Maggie sets down her tongue-washed plate and smiles and says,

“*Finito*,” and in the moment before I giggle, I notice that my head feels clear. I wonder if I am possibly having fun. I wonder if this is what other people feel like all the time.

The takeout food inspires me. “Do you want to do prank phone calls?” I ask.

Maggie grins. She snatches a cordless phone from its cradle on an end table, and we sprint upstairs without putting away our plates.

Maggie has another phone in her room, so one of us can talk to our victim, while the other mutes her phone and listens in. I dial \*67, to ensure our anonymity, then enter random phone numbers until a call goes through.

“Hello, I’d like confirm an order,” I say. “Fifteen pepperoni pizzas, for a total of one-hundred and thirty dollars. And sixty-three cents.”

In the background, Maggie shouts things a cook might say in the kitchen (“No red sauce on order 271! Are we out of green peppers? Jonathan, I told you to cut more peppers! This is your last strike, Jonathan.”). Maggie stands halfway across the room from me, and her voice comes through my phone, loud enough that it’s audible but not overpowering. She yells at full force, the way we never could in my bedroom or even in Jessica Karl’s loft. With no neighbors within an acre of us and with Maggie’s mother in another wing, we can shout all we want, and no one will hear.

Maggie and I play our roles with conviction, but the person on the other end of the line doesn’t respond.

“Sir,” I say. “Sir?”

He hangs up.

“This is never going to work,” I say. “They can tell we’re kids.”

Maggie rests her chin in the crook between her thumb and pointer finger. She paces the room the way detectives do in movies, the way no one does in real life.

She looks to me and grins. “Wait until you hear this.”

She dials a number, and I pick up the cordless phone and mute it. I hold it to my ear. It rings.

A woman picks up. “Hello?” she asks.

“Grandma?” Maggie asks in a higher pitch than usual. She softens the consonants, so that ‘Grandma’ becomes ‘*Gwandma*.’ She continues in this little kid voice, “I wanna talk to Grandma.”

“This isn’t your grandmother,” the woman says.

“But I need to talk to Grandma.” Maggie whines, almost screeches. “Mommy is coming for me. She’s gonna find me. Tell Grandma I’m in the washing machine. I’m hiding like she told me.”

“Coming for you?” the woman asks.

“I’m scared. Is this Grandma? Where is Grandma? Tell Grandma I’m in the washing machine. Mommy wants to hurt me.”

Maggie hunches forward and grinds her thumbnail against her tooth. She has stopped being herself. She’s disappeared into her role. Now, there is only the child in the washing machine, and the stranger on the line, and, roaming the house, the mother. Somehow, I am here, too, watching it all.

The laundry room is not real. I am standing in Maggie’s bedroom. My shoes are still sitting by her door. Her lovely duvet is still tragically crumpled. On the bedroom shelf, the porcelain figures are still opening picnic baskets, and clutching umbrellas, and reading stories to

each other, living out some bizarre, anthropomorphic fantasy, oblivious to the even more bizarre fantasy Maggie now weaves over the phone.

“Listen sweetheart, I need you to hang up the phone and dial 9-1-1,” the stranger says.

“Can you remember that? 9-1-1. Say it back to me.”

“But I just want Grandma. Can you give me Grandma? Where’s Grandma?”

“I don’t know your grandma,” the woman says. “You’re going to call 9-1-1, and they are going to help you, okay, sweetheart?”

“I have to be quiet now,” Maggie says. “Mommy can hear me. She has the wood.”

“The wood?”

“The wood she uses.” Then Maggie screams into the phone. She hangs up mid-screch.

There are actual tears in her eyes.

I step toward Maggie, who cannot have made this all up, who cannot just be pretending. I reach to touch her shoulder, to let her know that I understand, more than most people.

She tosses the phone onto her bed, and it’s gone, the illusion. She is laughing. “Come on, tell me that wasn’t good.”

“None of that was real?” I ask.

“Jeez, you were standing right here, and I still got you,” she says. “*Mein Gott*, they should give me an Oscar. Tell me I’m not good.”

She gives a dramatic bow. Her pale face beams.

I could slap her right now, but I know what would happen next. My hands would become fists, and then rumors about me would circulate. Self-control is a virtue, the first virtue, that which divides beasts and monks. “Killer performance,” I say.

“Should we do it again?”

“There’s no way we’re topping that. We should quit while we’re ahead,” I say. “Besides, I should probably go home soon. I have church tomorrow morning and stuff.”

Maggie tries to convince me to stay overnight, but I say that my father wouldn’t be comfortable with it. “Since this is the first time he’s met your mom and everything.”

I call home. My father will be here in twenty minutes. Maggie offers ice cream, and we return to the breakfast nook. She serves me a big bowl with whipped cream and hot fudge, but I can’t eat very much.

Her little white dog sits at our feet and whines. It swishes its tail back and forth. I kneel down and stroke its head.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Maggie asks.

I massage the dog’s chin. “Who’s a good pup?”

“I made this whole thing for you,” Maggie says. “You could have just said if you didn’t want it.”

A musical doorbell rings. It echoes throughout the house.

“I should get my shoes on,” I say. I jog to the staircase before Maggie can respond.

I enter her room. The figurines stand on their shelf, relics from a world where cheerful rabbits carry vegetables in baskets instead of pawing for their food in the dirt, where animals don’t hunt each other; they just read each other stories.

I climb on Maggie’s bed and snatch the figurine of the owl and squirrel. I slip it into the front pocket of my sweatshirt. Then I tie my shoes and fly down to the foyer, where my father is chatting with Mrs. Vandermeier.

Maggie looks downwards and kicks her socked foot back and forth across the hardwood floor. Inside my sweatshirt pocket, I clutch the figurine with both hands.

“Ready?” my father asks.

\* \* \*

An hour later, I lie in my own bed again. The liberated figurine sits safely on my bookshelf. According to the internet, it is worth either ten dollars or nearly a hundred, depending on its year of manufacture. If it is worth a hundred dollars, it is my most valuable possession. And, I repeat to myself, Maggie won't notice it's gone. In fact, she probably thinks the whole night with me was an absolute success.

I press my face into the pillow. I growl into it. I bite it. I do this almost every night. It is a method of maintaining self-control. To avoid excessive, socially inappropriate displays of emotion, one must periodically release said emotion in a safe, private environment. This is particularly important for those who have inherited a familial rage, and of course everyone has always known which parent I take after, temperamentally.

People have said as much. Before my mother's arrest, I once listened in on a phone call between my father and my grandmother.

*Tanya's just a kid, my father said. Kids throw tantrums.*

*She has that anger streak, my grandmother said. Like her mother.*

Then my father said, *They both have a temper.*

\* \* \*

The morning after I visited Maggie's house, my father lets me pick out a donut at the bakery after church. When we get home, he reads the newspaper, and I glance through the advertisements, careful not to smear their glossy pages with powdered sugar. A really wonderful catalog is selling miniature, porcelain buildings: sweet shops, chapels, and Victorian mansions, all with snow-covered rooftops. As a set, they make up something called *Christmas Village*. It's not impossible to think that I could own it all one day. With last night's theft, I have now joined the ranks of porcelain collectors. Although a single owl is inferior to an entire village, I imagine that many years in the future, when I am an adult, I will treasure the stolen statuette as the first of my hoard, which will undoubtedly be vast.

I bring the catalog into my room and stash it on my shelf, so I can examine it again whenever I'd like. I sit on my bed and open my math homework, but before I start the first problem, I retrieve the catalog and set it beneath my workbook. Every time I solve a problem, I will allow myself look at the pictures for thirty seconds.

Halfway through my assignment, the phone rings. I let my father answer it. I continue working on a somewhat tricky order of operations question. I scribble down an answer, but it doesn't seem right.

My father appears in my doorway, phone in hand. He muffles the mouthpiece. "It's Mrs. Vandermeier. Apparently something went missing from Maggie's room last night. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that?"

I don't look up from my workbook. "Maggie has a lot of stuff. She probably loses things all the time." I frown at the math problem then erase my answer.

"I'm sure the Vandermeiers would understand if someone took it," he says. "As long as that person owned up to it and apologized. Sometimes we do things we don't really mean



because we don't think things through. That's what we call behaving impulsively. Do you know what 'impulsively' means?"

I squeeze my pencil. "I didn't do anything impulsive."

"Really, Tanya? Because I can see something new on your shelf."

"It wasn't impulsive. It was justice," I say. "She did something that made me mad."

"We've gone through this," he says.

He uncovers the phone and speaks to Mrs. Vandermeyer again. He tells her that I'm so sorry and that I'll bring the figurine to Maggie tomorrow at school. He hangs up the phone and sighs. "Tanya, I'm really disappointed in you," he says. "We've talked about the way we act when people do things that make us angry. And on top of everything, you lied to me. This isn't like you. You're not acting like yourself right now."

"Why don't you just say it?" I ask. "Why don't you just say who I remind you of?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, sweetheart," he says. "What have we said about projecting your feelings onto other people?"

I realize that I am gnawing on my pencil. My teeth have bent the metal casing around the eraser.

"I am having a hard time practicing self-control right now," I say. "Would you please go away? I need to release some aggression. I need to blow off some steam."

He tells me to do jumping jacks. I don't want to do jumping jacks. I want to hurl the figurine at my wall. I want to grind my knuckles into the shards. I want to punch, punch the windowsill, punch the doorframe, something hard, something very hard. But instead I do jumping jacks, up and down, up and down, up and down.

\* \* \*

On Monday morning, I wrap the figurine in newspaper and tuck it into the inner pocket of my backpack. I don't have any classes with Maggie until the afternoon. At lunch, I approach her at the weird kids' table.

"Can I talk to you in the restroom?" I ask. "I have something for you."

She bites her sandwich. Mayonnaise gathers on her upper lip. "What's with all the secrecy? You're such a sneak, Tanya. Sneaking into my room, sneaking away things that don't belong to you."

"It was just a prank," I say. "I wanted to see how long it would take you to notice."

"Whatever you say." Maggie stands up and holds out her hand. "Cough it up, sneak."

I clutch the carefully packaged figurine at my side. I could still drop it on the floor. I could crush it under my foot.

"Well?" Maggie asks.

She nods at the ball of newsprint in my hand. People are starting to look at us. Jessica Karl watches me from across the cafeteria. I press the package into Maggie's open palm.

"It's my fault," Maggie announces. "This is what you get when you let someone like Tanya into your house. I should be surprised you didn't steal anything bigger."

The smear of mayonnaise lingers above her grin.

"Hey, Maggie," I say. "You've got something on your face."

I make a fist, even though I know that if I hit her, everyone will whisper behind my back again. *Flipped out, they'll say. Went completely psycho. Remember in fourth grade, when she tried to stab Joey Newsom with a mechanical pencil? Total headcase.*

Maggie lifts her hand to her mouth, exposing her stomach. I can still save myself. I'm not undone yet. I have been accused of theft, but that's meaningless to the rest of the cafeteria. After all, people brag about crime in rap music and old country songs. After all, the junior high school boys quote gangster movies. After all, Robin Hood is a hero. People don't react to abstract rules of property. They react to emotional cues.

Maggie wipes the mayonnaise from her lip, and I remind myself: self-control is simple. You do the opposite of whatever you feel like doing, and then you keep doing the opposite every minute every day all the time.

I turn around. I meet Jessica Karl's eyes across the cafeteria. I shrug and grimace. This demonstrates social discomfort, small displays of which are humanizing.

I can handle it all from here. It's a simple matter of tone, of returning to my seat at the table and explaining, with the proper balance of earnestness and composure: *All right, so I did the most ridiculous thing—I can't even blame Maggie for being mad at me.* (Here, I will lift my sandwich then set it back down). *It was sort of an experiment. I just wanted to see if someone with a lot of super fancy things—I told you she lives in like a legit mansion—I wanted see if a person like that would even notice if something went missing.* (Here, I will shake my head at my own mischievousness then take a full bite of my tuna salad sandwich. I will continue my speech mid-swallow.) *So, all right, I stole this figurine—it was really tacky, something you'd see in an old lady's house. Anyway, I thought Maggie would never notice—I was going to tell her about the whole thing at the end of the week. I know, I'm the absolute worst! It was a crazy thing to do. But you know me. Once I get an idea in my head.* (Here, I will insert a sheepish grin.) *But I do have to give it to her, she noticed that it was gone right away. Or maybe her mom did, or a*

*cleaning lady, who knows? Anyway, I tried to say I was sorry. But you know Maggie—she's got a temper. Not that I blame her, no, of course not, not at all.*

## Lessen

Jenny's father tells Jenny to sit on the lip of the bathtub.

Jenny: removing headphones.

Bathtub: hard, cold.

Father: rifling through bathroom drawer, saying, *Think this kind of stunt impresses people? Difference between earning respect and getting attention. We tell you all the time.*

All the time at dinner, Mother and Father discuss friends' children's misbehavior.

Example: four years ago, Alisha Russaw got her tongue pierced in the locker room of Holy Cross, the junior high Jenny now attends. Jenny can picture two girls in uniform, naked knees, kneeling on tile. Can picture one girl sterilizing aluminum skewer with plastic cigarette lighter, the other girl opening mouth to offer tongue. Then next day, Alisha: speaking in class, sounding mouth-full-of-water. Teacher: suspicious. Alisha: suspended. Mrs. Russaw: too soft, too

indulgent, buys Alisha Xbox birthday gift later that month. Four years later, Alisha: repeating junior year at public school. Father asking, *Any wonder?*

Father: turning on electric clipper.

Jenny: gripping lip of tub.

Father's voice: calm when he tells Jenny to be still.

\* \* \*

The night before Father's clipper, Lydia tells Jenny, *Hold still*. Lydia: hands rubber-gloved, stroking Jenny's hair, spreading bleach mixture.

Jenny: clenching toilet seat in upstairs bathroom of Lydia's house.

Lydia's mother: works evenings.

Lydia saying, *Guess we wait*.

Jenny: sucking a breath mint.

Jenny's scalp: radiating a prickling halo.

Later, washing out the bleach. Later, applying Manic Cerulean semi-permanent dye.

Later, examining hair in mirror. Bleach-yellow shows through blue. Jenny thinking, this will have to be my hair from now on.

Lydia saying, *You look legit*.

Jenny: shifting weight, setting hand on hip, looking to Lydia. Jenny asking, *You really think?*

Jenny: walking home, hiding hair under faux-fur bomber hat. Creeping to bed that night wearing hat, slinking out front door the next morning wearing hat.

Jenny unveils hair in homeroom.

Sister Diane wants to speak with her in hall.

Jenny asking, *What's the issue?*

\* \* \*

Sister Diane on phone with Mother, saying, *May return once her hair is a natural color.*

Mother: dying Jenny's hair brown.

Father saying, *Need to show her there are consequences.*

\* \* \*

Jenny's hair gathers on porcelain.

Jenny: crying even though it is stupid to cry.

Father saying, *Your own sake, sweetheart. Long run, you'll be fine.*

\* \* \*

Two weeks before Father's clipper, Jenny saying, *Will be fine. Blue's always been my color.*

Jenny and Lydia: huddling in handicap stall, secret place to apply mascara, secret place to roll waistbands of kilts, raising hemlines inches above knees/uniform policy standards.

Lydia: clutching compact mirror, asking, *Afraid of what your dad will say?*

Jenny: dusting cheeks with blush, saying, *Not afraid of anyone.*

\* \* \*

One hour after Father's clipper, Lydia calls, swears she'll fix Jenny's hair.

Jenny says there's nothing left to fix.

Jenny: ending call, trudging back to bedroom mirror, seeing a soldier's crewcut, but no soldier. Jenny: too small, too weak to be a soldier. Jenny: looking more cancer survivor. Frail, but defying frailness, not dead.

Jenny thinking, this is my face from now on.

Jenny: baring teeth.



## Super Ball

Mary hangs the darks. There is no clothesline. She drapes the clothes over doorknobs and open dresser drawers. She has only lived here with Colson for one week. If she had known that he had no proper place to hang things, she would've bought him a drying rack before she moved in. She would've bought him one a long time before that.

Colson is late. Mary's parents are taking the two of them out to dinner at seven, but it's quarter to, and Colson isn't here yet. He has been working at a fulfillment center outside Santa Cruz for the holiday season. It's a long drive, but he should've gotten home an hour ago.

She tosses the last of Colson's flannel shirts over a lampshade. Then she spreads herself on his bed. The wet clothes look good suspended around the room. Mary hopes someone, maybe Colson, maybe her father, will praise her resourcefulness. She is eighteen, and it's the first time she's ever done laundry. She loves the smell of detergent and loves this bedroom, which is

already beginning to feel like hers. On Colson's bookshelf, her belongings mix in with his, her Jane Austen novels alongside his fantasy paperbacks, her chipped resin horses beside his high school tennis trophy. Every object has its secret history.

Mary fingers her necklace, which she has not taken off in six years. She is so used to its weight now that the red silk string might as well be a part of her. Only now and then does she even remember that it's there, this foreign object that her body has become so accustomed to. This is the way it will be with Colson and her, his life becoming a part of hers, and her life becoming a part of his. They will transcend liking and disliking each other, she thinks, and their love will be automatic.

Someone knocks on the door. Elaine and Samuel have arrived on time.

Mary lets them in.

Elaine glances around. "Where is your boyfriend?"

"He'll be here soon," Mary says.

Samuel sits on the couch and folds his hands in his lap, but Elaine wants to explore the doublewide. Mary steps softly behind her mother. In the bedroom, Elaine points at the flannel shirt hanging over the glowing lampshade. "This is a fire hazard, you know." She shuffles to the lamp and clicks it off.

Mary grins apologetically. "Oops."

They join Samuel in the living room, and he says it seems like a peaceful neighborhood at least, much quieter than it would be downtown. Elaine glances at her watch.

"I'm sure he'll be here any minute," Mary says. "Are either of you thirsty? I can get you something to drink."

After Elaine's second glass of water, Mary announces that Colson must've been assigned an extra shift, and he probably hadn't gotten the chance to call. The Yus leave for the restaurant without him. The meal is uncomfortable. Once Elaine finally stops asking about Colson, she wants to know whether Mary has made any progress finding a job, and if she's reconsidered taking classes.

At the end of the evening, when Mary's parents drop her off, Colson's yellow Ford still hasn't appeared in the driveway. Mary steps out of her parents' car. Samuel says, "When you need something, call us. You can always come home."

Alone again, Mary returns to the bed and thinks of all the things that might have delayed Colson. There may have been some holdup at the warehouse, or maybe he ran out of gas on the interstate. Maybe he'd forgotten about dinner with her parents and went out for drinks with a coworker. He probably wasn't used to having someone at home waiting for him, and so maybe that was why he didn't think to call.

Or maybe something worse happened. A wreck on the highway, a bridge collapsing, a fire in the warehouse. Her theories grow increasingly morbid and fantastic. They are oddly comforting. If she thinks of the worst thing that could have happened, whatever the reality is will be a relief.

Mary falls asleep with the light on.

\* \* \*

Mary's family does not believe it because he is five years older than she is, but Colson did not pursue Mary. She chose him. She chose him one year ago, when she first saw him working at the

grocery store, a bulky, towering stock-boy. A manager was berating Colson, calling him stupid. Colson had knocked over several glass bottles of grape juice, and one of them had shattered. Purple liquid coated the floor.

Mary watched the scene from the end of the aisle. Her mother was off inspecting the peppers in the produce section.

“Idiot,” the manager said.

Head down, Colson pinched the back of his neck.

Mary walked towards them. “Excuse me,” she said. She had expected her words to come out loud and commanding, but her voice sounded so small. She swallowed. “You shouldn’t yell at him like that. It was my fault. I tripped into him.”

The manager relaxed his face. “I’m sorry if I disturbed you, ma’am,” he said. “It’s not that he knocks things over. It’s that he doesn’t clean up. He just wanders away. I hope this didn’t affect your shopping experience.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” Mary said.

The manager apologized again and left to retrieve a mop.

Colson still stared at the ground. “Sorry—I mean, thanks.”

Mary wanted to express that she understood what it felt like, although she had never been berated by a supervisor. In fact, she’d never had a job before or a boss. For some reason, she didn’t want Colson to know this. She wanted him to think she was like him, that they were on the same side. “It wasn’t a big deal,” she said.

They exchanged names, and Colson told her that he liked her necklace. Before she could think of some compliment to give him in return, Elaine appeared at the end of the aisle and gestured for Mary.

The next week, Mary approached Colson by the dumpsters behind the store. He was breaking down boxes.

He said sure, he remembered her. And look, she even had on the same necklace again.

“I just wear it out of habit,” she said. “But it’s supposed to bring good fortune or something like that.” She explained that her father, a superstitious man, had given it to her the year she turned the unlucky age of twelve. At the time, Mary thought the whole thing was ridiculous and refused to wear it. “But then we ran into some bad luck,” Mary said. “And I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

“What sort of bad luck?”

Mary toyed with the red string. “Just family stuff,” she said.

“You don’t have to tell me about it,” Colson said. “But if you ever want to talk to someone, I’m around.”

“Thanks.” Mary lowered her hand from her neck. “You know, you’re pretty polite for someone who knocks over juice bottles and runs away.”

He drove his heel into a cardboard box, flattening it. “Well, sometimes I freeze up when I make a mistake,” he said. He tossed the collapsed box into the dumpster. “It gets me into trouble a lot.”

“It’s not all bad though,” Mary said. “I mean, we wouldn’t have met, if you hadn’t gotten into trouble.”

Colson admitted that this was true, but he didn’t say anything else, just stomped another box.

Mary said she should get going, and he said all right.

After a few steps, she turned around. “In case I did ever want someone to talk to, could I maybe have your number?”

Colson grinned and scribbled it down on a scrap of cardboard.

She called him that weekend, and by the end of the month, they were involved. Now, one year later, Mary is living with Colson, only Colson has disappeared, and Mary is thinking about fires and caving bridges.

\* \* \*

Mary awakes when Colson stumbles into their bedroom, rubbing his bare arms. He doesn't look at her.

“I know, I know,” he says. He tugs off his tennis shoes without unlacing them. They hit the floor with two hollow thuds. “I'm sorry. There was this accident on the highway—a few cars up from me. It was awful. You wouldn't believe it. There was a body on the road. I wasn't anywhere near a payphone.”

“You're okay?”

“Of course,” he says. “Just late, really late, I'm sorry.”

“Where's your jacket?” she asks.

“I guess I left it in the car.” He tears off his shirt and wipes his face. “It's not all that cold outside.”

He crawls beside her and leans his forehead against her arm. He feels hot.

“Are you sure you're okay?” she asks.

“Fine,” he mutters.

“You’re so warm.”

“I had this hamburger for lunch,” he says. “I think it was sort of raw.”

She combs her fingers through his oily locks of hair. “You have to be careful about things like that. You could really get sick.”

Colson props himself up and leaves the bed. He paces by the window.

“I have something to tell you,” he says. “I don’t want to tell you, but I think I have to tell you.”

“You don’t have to tell me, unless you want to.”

“I’m going to say it, I’m going to. There was this girl. I stopped to get gas, and I saw her by the ice, you know those big metal ice things they have outside convenience stores? She was standing there, and she needed a ride, and she was bouncing this red Super Ball up and down. I remember that—no, I’m getting off topic. What I mean is…” Instead of explaining what he means, he snaps his fingers repeatedly.

“Colson, it’s okay,” she says. “Breathe.”

He swallows and tries again. “You ever wonder if you could do something really messed up? And then you keep wondering and wondering? It’s like that.”

“I don’t think I understand,” she says.

“I can show you.”

He grabs her hand and marches her outside. The asphalt is wet and cold against the bare soles of her feet, and she winces.

Colson fumbles with the lock on the trunk of his car, but eventually he manages to turn the key. He steps back and points to a blood-spattered jean jacket. Beside it lies a pistol.

“Don’t touch anything,” he says. “We can’t let anyone find out that you’ve seen the evidence.” He digs his nails into the back of his neck. He’s hyperventilating.

“Colson, you have to calm down,” she says.

He turns away from her and presses the trunk door closed.

“Look,” she says. She says it before she thinks it, and then all she can think about is the way the word felt when it left her mouth, the bend of the ‘l,’ the forceful stop of the ‘k.’ Her throat closes up, but somehow her body continues to speak. “It was brave of you to show me.”

*Brave* begins with lips pressed together and ends with the lower lip against teeth.

“Now tell me what happened,” she says.

“I dumped the body in the river. I don’t think anyone saw,” Colson says. “It was just one second. Everything came down to one second. After I pulled out the gun, I was going to pretend it was all a joke, but the way she was staring at me, like she was taking it so seriously.

Beforehand, I thought she was going to see right through my act. Call my bluff. *Look at this fucking coward playing like he’s really going to shoot somebody.*” Colson’s speech slows. He takes a breath. “But then it went just the way I’d always fantasized it would. It was almost like she was playing along. I was about to let her go. I was going to say it was all a joke, but suddenly, I’d already pulled the trigger.”

It’s possible that Colson is confused. It’s possible that there was an accident, and Colson is mixing it all up. There is blood on his jacket, but it could be an animal’s blood, for all Mary knows. She has no way to confirm anything. All she knows is that Colson is standing three feet before her, and he is shaking.

“We have to go inside,” Mary says. “You need to get some rest.”



They return to bed but don't sleep. Colson makes a sobbing sound without actually crying. It seems best to concentrate on that noise he's making, on stroking his head until he breathes normally again. The other thing—the event that triggered this emotion—she'll have to deal with that later. Right now, it's not her job to think about that. If Colson did the thing he says he's done, then that girl is beyond helping, and Colson is very sick.

Mary knows something about this kind of sicknesses. She was twelve the summer Uncle Yu Ming moved in. He was forty-eight. They shared a zodiac year. This was particularly unlucky, according to Mary's father.

Yu Ming was lanky, almost skeletal, and his breath was sour and dry. He spoke of the Battle of Laoshan frequently, although he'd never been to Laoshan. According to Mary's mother, Yu Ming had never seen any action; he'd only loaded supplies onto helicopters. The war was simply his excuse for his inability to support himself.

Although Yu Ming had trouble keeping a job, he had many ideas about how he would improve his financial situation. He wanted to open a bar. He wanted to open a restaurant. He wanted to open a movie theater dedicated to East Asian cinema. He had plans for his own films, too: a drama about a teenage boy with photosensitivity whose father died in a boat accident, a documentary about all the different families who lived on the Yus' block. Though he struggled to find work, Yu Ming was generous—irresponsible, her mother would say—with the little money he had. He gave her parents a DVD player and kept buying Mary resin horses from thrift stores. She didn't tell her uncle that she was too old to be playing with toys. And secretly, she liked the way they looked on her dresser. The dappled stallion with a missing hoof, the foal with a chipped ear, those two had been her favorites. The figurines that were not slightly broken seemed arrogant in their perfection.

One night, Mary heard someone slamming cabinet doors in the kitchen. She crept into the living room to listen. She lay down on the couch, so that if anyone entered, she could pretend to be sleeping. In the other room, Yu Ming was speaking in rapid fire: *An accident, I was driving, and she appeared in the middle of the road, this woman appeared, an old woman.*

Samuel calmly explained that their car had been in the shop for the past two days. There was no way Yu Ming could've driven it that night.

*No, no, I told you. The body, the body. Didn't I just tell you?*

Then the voices got quieter, too soft to hear. Mary waited for them to get louder, but her eyes felt sore, and she closed them, and when she awoke, it was morning, and there was no one in the kitchen.

Two weeks later, Yu Ming got into argument with Elaine, who stated that she had been watching their valuables and that she had marked Sam's liquor bottles. *Everything*, she said, she knew everything. Yu Ming was no longer welcome. To allow him to stay would be to enable his destructive behavior.

The following day, Samuel helped his brother get settled in a studio apartment a few miles away. But that weekend, something happened to Yu Ming, something very unlucky. Elaine used the word accident; Sam referred to a nonspecific illness. At the funeral, Mary dared herself to touch her uncle's hand. The skin was cool and waxy, and for the first time, she saw that a body could be an inert, meaningless thing, like a rubber glove or a hairbrush. She tried to summon that stinging feeling in her eyes, but she wasn't sad for the figure in the coffin. It was just a body. She couldn't pity it. She wouldn't feel anything that resembled sadness until that night, when she saw her father crying, actually crying, alone in the kitchen. But that was later.

When she stood at Yu Ming's coffin, she experienced no sadness, only this cold sense that every living person was on the brink of in-animation, of thing-ness.

After that day, she heeded her father's advice and wore the red silk string, as if fortune were the only force delaying death, as if there had been nothing any of them could have done to save her uncle.

\* \* \*

The morning after Colson's confession, Mary sits cross-legged on the living room floor. Colson has called in sick. He sets two plates of fried eggs on the coffee table and kneels beside her.

Mary doesn't reach for her portion. She picks at loops of the carpet.

"Did you have anything you were going to do today?" Colson asks.

"I don't know," she says. "Before, I was planning on walking down to the store."

"You should go. It's suspicious if we both hole up," he says. "You should act like you think I just have the flu."

"I would stay with you if you had the flu."

"I know you would," he says. "I've never had someone before who was behind me all the way." He breaks the yolk of an egg, takes a bite, and wipes his chin. "I think I want to go outside, just for a little. I can't stand being inside anymore."

"Then we should go outside."

Outside, the sun casts clean, blue shadows. Colson strolls down the road, his massive shoulders relaxed and his back upright. His arms swing freely. Mary sits by the door, hunched on the sun-bleached wooden steps.

Colson reaches the end of the block and turns around. He walks back to her smiling.

“That felt good,” he says.

They go inside and watch a few reruns of a sitcom. To Mary, it is all static, nothing but indecipherable sound. She can’t process the faces on the television screen or the laugh track, can’t comprehend the idea that anyone anywhere is laughing, has ever laughed.

Somehow Colson seems to be himself. He watches the screen and grins at the one-liners. In the afternoon, he takes the laundry down, folds it, and puts it away. Then he cleans the bathroom, organizes the bedroom bookshelf, gathers old magazines and junk mail from around the trailer and throws it all out.

“I don’t know how you have so much energy,” Mary says. “I feel like I could sleep for ten years.”

Colson squats by the cabinet beneath the sink and rifles through the grocery store bags and bottles of soap.

“I feel endlessly alive today,” he says. He tears a black bag from the roll of trashcan liners. “Last night, it was like I was doomed. But now I have this feeling like God is on my side or something. That sounds crazy. Not God, but something like that.”

The edge of a cloud slips past the sun, and the room suddenly dims then brightens again. This is something so pleasant and ordinary and out of place.

“I can’t explain it,” he says. “But I feel like it’s all going to work out.”

“But—”

“But what?” he asks. “It’s just the way I feel right now. Grateful, like in this spiritual sense. Grateful to be living here on this planet. Grateful to be sharing this day with you. It’s a good thing, right?” He tucks his hair behind his ear and steps past her.

Outside, she watches him open the trunk of his Ford and stuff the jacket and the gun into the trash bag. They return to the kitchen. He kneels by the sink cabinet again and smashes the evidence beneath the mass of grocery store bags.

“Don’t you think it’s weird to keep it in the house?” Mary asks.

“Well, if they’re searching this place, they’ll probably already have me cornered anyway.” He stands up and wipes his hands on his jeans. He suddenly smirks. “Unless you’re afraid the gun is haunted. I know you can be superstitious.”

“It’s not really a superstition.”

“All right, whatever you say, baby.” He kisses her on the forehead.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Colson tells Mary that he is going to the store to buy a bottle of bleach. He closes the front door behind him. Suddenly the trailer is empty and quiet.

Mary sits on the edge of their bed. She has twenty minutes, maybe half an hour. She could call someone, but Colson might be testing her loyalty. He could be hiding somewhere, monitoring the phone. *I know what you did*, he would say. And Mary is not a good liar. She would start shaking or crying. She would make it obvious.

She could call her father. This would be less of a betrayal than calling the police. Her father would understand. Anxiety, agitation, euphoria. Talking more than usual. Cleaning everything. Colson is sick. A person had to be sick to do the thing he had done. But then again, Mary’s parents don’t really know Colson. They wouldn’t care about helping him. They would only want Mary to be safe.

Mary tilts her head. Something new has appeared on the bookshelf, a red Super Ball, just beside Colson's old tennis trophy.

She approaches the shelf. She taps the ball with her fingertip but immediately jerks her hand away, as if the rubber might burn her. When nothing happens, she picks the ball up and runs her thumb along its seam, just like the girl might have done, as she sat in Colson's passenger seat, gazing out the window and watching the forest blur past. In fact, the ball may have been one of the last surfaces the girl ever touched. Whoever she was, she would've left behind fingerprints, and skin cells, and oil from her hands, and other miniscule traces of human life. The remnants are too small to be visible, but Mary knows they are there.

She can see the girl's fingers, wrapped around the ball. The cuticles are red and raw, and the unpainted nails have been chewed down to nubs. Mary can picture these hands perfectly, but the rest of the victim's body remains a formless blur. Mary knows nothing about her. When Colson said the word "girl," Mary assumed he meant someone her own age, but really "girl" could mean anything. A girl could be thirteen or twenty-two or six. A girl could be ten years old and lost, when a man in a yellow Ford says he can take her to her mother's house. A girl could be on her way back from dance practice, and a girl could be sneaking out to a rock concert, and a girl could be visiting home from college, or visiting her boyfriend, or visiting her sister in the hospital, when her car breaks down outside a gas station, and wouldn't it be a shame to call a mechanic, when she knows how to fix the damn thing, if only she had the right part, if only she could hitch a ride to the auto supply store the next exit over?

A car pulls in the driveway, and Mary returns the ball to the shelf. Someone opens the front door and slams it shut.

“Mary,” Colson shouts. He stomps into the bedroom. “Mary, they found them. It was on the news, on the radio. I can’t believe this is happening. It’s been one day, and they already found them.”

“Them? You said it was one girl.”

“Jesus Christ, I meant the pieces, the hands and the head.”

He paces, and the room almost seems to shake under his footsteps. Somehow she had forgotten this, how massive he was.

“You cut her into pieces?”

He turned to her. “No, don’t look at me like that. You know it really hurts me when you do things like that, when you act like I scare you.”

He steps forward, and she can feel the space between them contract. She stops herself from inching backwards. Backwards is nearer to the corner and farther from the exit.

Colson steps away from her, into the doorway, blocking it.

“Mary. Look, I did something awful,” he says. “You think I don’t know that? I’m messed up. I’m really messed up. But I’m not a total monster.”

“Are there any others?”

“People I’ve actually killed?”

“People you’ve done anything to.”

He glances at the floor. “I beat up my older sister once when I was eleven.”

“I’m not talking about getting into a fight with your sister.”

“No,” he says. “I mean I hospitalized her.”

Colson tells her that he is sorry, and that he understands if she's afraid of him. He says she can leave him, if she wants to. He says so many things, but he does not move from the doorway.

Mary stands very still, and this makes her limbs feel heavy, like they could drop away from her. Her whole body could drop away. Somehow this would be okay. She wonders if the girl felt something like this, too.

“Okay, Colson, okay,” she says.

She lies down on the bed, and he lies behind her. He wraps his arm around her stomach and reaches for her hand. She doesn't jerk it away. His fingers are oddly soft, somehow softer than she's ever noticed. This makes it easier to imagine that they belong to someone else. He traces his finger along her necklace. She closes her eyes and tries to ignore it, but the red silk string feels a little tight.



## Thomas Jefferson Is Dead

Two sisters walk along the beach at night. Back in their room at the West Palm Inn, their father has gone to sleep. The girls are on their own.

The sand is cold. Leah, the older sister, thinks, *you forget what darkness really is until you're somewhere without streetlights, and you can barely see the person you're with.*

Taylor, the younger girl, strolls ahead.

Leah halts at the water's edge. Here is the end of dry ground. Here is the ocean's empty expanse. The black surface bends. *There is a feeling you only get when you look out over the water*, Leah reflects. Then: *Tomorrow I'll take Jakša here, and he'll hold my hand, and I'll explain this to him, this very specific emotion, this ocean feeling.*

"I wish we lived here," Leah says. "I love that you can walk to the beach whenever you feel like it. It's, like, the best thing."

“Yeah, I guess so,” Taylor says.

The girls sit in the sand.

Leah knows this beach well. They have spent many vacations here. Last year with their mother, this year with their father. Leah remembers him, asleep in their room. He is missing this, the dark waves, the empty sky. A single dot of light sits on the horizon, an oil rig probably, or a commercial fishing boat, or something else ugly and mechanical up close. From this distance, it’s only a faint, mysterious light. Lovely, very lovely (even Taylor would have to concede this). Tomorrow, Leah will bring Jakša here alone and hold his hand. Tomorrow, it will have to be tomorrow. Tomorrow is their last night here.

“Don’t you think Jakša is nice?” Leah asks.

“Yeah,” Taylor says. “Spring break is a wonderful time to form meaningful connections with people you’ve just met.”

Leah does not respond. Taylor has always been a little critical, but lately she disapproves of everything other people enjoy. She doesn’t belong to any clubs at school and never talks about friends, or dates, or dances. She even quit violin, back in September, shortly after Leah had left for her first semester of college. At Christmas, their father told Leah, “Your sister just needs a new activity. Some way to meet people.” (Across the room, Taylor was shoving red and green candlesticks into their holders. Poor Taylor couldn’t open a lock without fighting it, couldn’t pick up a toothbrush without snatching it. Maybe that was just the physical awkwardness of her age.) “It’s not easy to be fifteen,” Leah said to her father. “It’s hard for anyone.”

A wave crashes on the shore.

“Spring break romances,” Taylor says. “Not shallow at all.”

“Mom and Dad met on spring break.”

“And they’re divorced now, aren’t they?”

“That doesn’t mean they’re shallow,” Leah says. “And anyway, what’s the point of being deep and meaningful all the time? Vacation is supposed to be fun.”

But Taylor has seemed intent on not having fun from the first day of the trip. Things got off to a bad start. Their father drove, and he never played music in the car, only NPR or books on tape, always nonfiction, never interesting like a mystery novel or something with a love story in it. For this trip, he’d chosen a fawning Thomas Jefferson biography. Every time the narrator uttered the phrase “dazzling mind,” Taylor clenched her square jaw and huffed, looking incredibly like a bulldog.

After the first two chapters of the biography, Leah listened to her mp3 player and stared out the window. When she eventually glanced back at her sister, Taylor was groaning, and sighing, and scratching a scab on her thumb. Taylor, poor Taylor, who couldn’t pick up a toothbrush.

Leah tugged out her earphones. “You’re picking at yourself again. You have to let it heal. Would you calm down?”

“I just can’t believe people buy into this romanticized version of things.” Taylor dropped her hand. “Thomas Jefferson was a slave-owner and, if you think about it, a rapist.”

“Look, you can borrow my headphones if you don’t want to listen to the book.”

“I have my own headphones, it’s not that,” Taylor said. “It’s this apologist bullshit.”

Then, citing the use of the illicit word, their father reached backwards, open palm, and demanded Taylor’s cell phone. A hollow punishment. Taylor barely used her phone anyway.

“You can have it back in the morning,” their father said.

“Isn’t that a little harsh?” Leah asked. “She was just upset. She wasn’t thinking.”

Through Leah's negotiation, their father eventually agreed to return Taylor's phone after dinner, on the condition that she behave for the rest of the drive. Of course, Taylor did not seem particularly grateful for her sister's intervention. All night Taylor scoffed at Leah for going to tanning booths, scoffed at Leah for posting pictures online of her dinner salad, scoffed at Leah for thinking Anne Sexton was the first American saint. "Anne Sexton was a poet," Taylor said. "You're thinking of Elizabeth Ann Seton. I can't believe they let you into college. By the way, have you even picked your major yet?"

All that, and now this cynicism towards Jakša, the boy Leah had met on their first night at the hotel pool.

Leah drags her finger in the damp sand.

"This might be the last time our spring breaks ever line up," Taylor says. "But I guess at a certain point, you don't go on family vacations anymore. Or you start your own family."

"I'm not getting married any time soon." Leah hugs her knees. A chilly night but a beautiful one—even Taylor could not deny it. The dark water and that light at the horizon, the fishing boat or oil rig. Tomorrow, she will take Jakša here alone.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Taylor wakes to the sterile hum of the air conditioner. On the far side of the bed, Leah breathes as deeply as a bull. According to the clock on the nightstand, it is a quarter to six. If Taylor is lucky, the others will sleep for another two hours, and she will have that entire time to herself, two hours to lie in silent contemplation.

Taylor should not be so eager to spend time alone, it's true. But other people are so demanding, so invasive, so difficult to be around. Like the other day at lunch, when Taylor checked her phone and read online that Erica Delay, another one of Walter's violin students, had gotten into Curtis. The moment Taylor leaned closer to the screen to reread the status, Leah was on her. *What are you reading? Show me.* Then Taylor had to explain who Erica Delay was, what Curtis was. No, not just a good school. The most exclusive conservatory in the country. Finally their father strutted back to the table from the bathroom and snatched a handful of fries from Taylor's plate.

"Erica Delay got accepted to Curtis?" he asked. "Walter must be thrilled."

"I'm sure he's just beside himself," Taylor said. "I'm sure he's ecstatic."

"We'll have to congratulate him the next time we see him," he said.

"I don't think that will happen any time soon." She jammed her phone back into her pocket. "This is why I didn't want to tell you guys. You always make such a big deal out of everything."

Leah laughed. "I'm pretty sure you're the one making a big deal right now, Taylor."

And Leah was right. Good-natured, good-humored Leah, always smiling, always laughing, always reminding Taylor of her own pettiness. That is the worst part about being around other people: they reveal one's own shortcomings.

Taylor spreads her arms beneath the sheets. Alone again, it is good to be alone.

But soon a soft light glows through the curtains. Leah moans, and their father coughs. Then they rise. Taylor remains in bed while they stomp around, unzipping and reziping things, brushing their teeth, shouting through their foaming mouths: *Where are the towels? Have you seen my sandals?*

The beach would be this way, too. Screaming kids, screaming sea gulls, Leah complaining about her makeup running or the sand in her hair, afraid of running into Jakša without looking perfect.

“Can I just stay at the hotel?” Taylor asks.

“This is our last day here,” her father says.

“I hate the beach during the day.”

Then he tells her to stop being so miserable, and she shouts that she hates the sea salt sticking to her skin, hates the sand collecting under her bathing suit, hates the crowds.

“Plus there are all these creeps,” Taylor says. “These guys in dark sunglasses who are, like, secretly checking everyone out.”

“You’re going to drive yourself crazy,” her father says. “Always focusing on the negative side of things.”

“There’s not really a positive side to creepy guys.”

“The positive side of life,” he says.

“Thomas Jefferson is dead,” Taylor says. “That’s a positive.”

Leah smirks.

Their father snatches his beach bag off the dresser. “All right, Taylor, do whatever you want. Sit in the dark all day and mope.”

He marches out.

Leah shuffles behind him. At the door, she looks back at Taylor. “See you,” Leah says.

Taylor lies down on the mattress and sinks into it. She doesn’t know what to do, now that she has gotten her way, and after all that commotion. This is the worst feeling, this end-of-an-argument feeling, the feeling of having won, of having won nothing. *Anti-climactic*, Taylor

thinks. *A letdown. Disappointment. That's it. I was all worked up, and now that it's over, I feel disappointed.*

Labeled and analyzed, the feeling dissipates. *To name a thing releases its hold*, Taylor thinks. She has come to embrace this theory. It is the way she conquered the thing with Walter.

She conquered it, conquered it, should've conquered it sooner. She'd started studying with him when she was eleven, one of the youngest students he'd ever taken, but still old enough that she should have known. *You're tensing your shoulder, you're tensing your bow arm*, he said. *You strut around here like you're a prodigy, and you don't know the first thing. The first thing is to relax. Relax your shoulder, relax your bow arm, relax your left hand. Always so stiff. Do you stretch at home? Do you relax yourself? Do you know what I mean by relax yourself? Could you show me? I want to see you doing it.*

That was the way it began. The exercise became a regular part of their sessions, a private act but not an evil one, she'd thought. Within a few months, Walter phased it out of their lessons. Taylor cannot remember the last time it happened. It simply stopped being something they did. For a while, the issue lay dormant. Then in eighth grade, that boy on the bus hissed in her ear, *Hey Taylor, do you get yourself off? Do you do it to yourself, alone in bed at night, thinking about Mozart's dick? Do you want me to watch?*

Taylor didn't answer, pretended not hear him. Soon the boy lost interest and left her alone, but he had planted the terrible idea. He'd suggested that a person could be violated without physical contact, that a person could be violated by a man who stood a full yard away, leaning against the piano, his hands tucked in the pockets of his olive suit jacket. (Or was it a violation? Hadn't she been willing?) For another two years, Taylor went about her life as if nothing had happened. She did her homework and studied her sheet music. The doubt resurfaced

at odd moments, while she clipped her toenails in her mother's bathroom, while she scrubbed the crust of dried orange juice from a drinking glass, while she tacked a paper Valentine's Day decoration to the corkboard at school. *Eleven years old, old enough that I sensed the nature of it, but I kept doing it because—why not admit it to myself—I did it because I was flattered. I felt like an adult. Eleven years old, old enough. Eleven years old, in a grownup's eyes, eleven, eleven, not very old at all.*

Then one day, one triumphant day, wiping the rosin from her violin strings with a square of yellow cloth, realizing that she was tensing her forearm as she cleaned the strings, remembering what Walter always told her about tension, Taylor said to herself, *Molestation.*

*That's what happened. That's what he did to me.*

She tucked the cleaning cloth in a compartment of her instrument case. The doubt was gone. She had named the nameless, uncertain thing, and she had vanquished it. Everything that followed would be easy. Taylor set down her violin and locked it in its case.

\* \* \*

Down at the beach, the hot sand glints, but the water is still too cold for swimming.

Leah spreads out two striped towels. Her father stands at the shore, hands on his hips, probably envisioning what the coast looked like to the Spanish conquistadors.



If Taylor were here, Leah would imitate him. *Just imagine what Columbus must have felt, arriving on these virgin shores*, Leah would say. And Taylor would laugh. Taylor only ever laughs when it's at someone else's expense.

Leah stretches her legs. A gull flies across the sun. Taylor, who can't pick up a toothbrush with snatching it. Taylor, who's spending the final day of vacation in the hotel room. Tomorrow they will leave, and Leah will never see Jakša again. The first thing he said to her—besides his apology for accidentally splashing her in the pool—was his name. *It's Croatian. I'm named after my dad*, he said, shrugging, as if this too were an apology. Then he smiled at her. His half-grin accentuated the wire-thin scar above his lip. The scar was a record, a message. It said, *My body has lived before it met you. It contains a history you know nothing about. Would like to learn it?*

But tomorrow she will leave him, and she will ride back to Indiana with her father and her sister, who will scoff at the book-on-tape for the entire drive. Leah will never see Jakša again, and she will miss him, and Taylor will scoff at that, too.

Leah's father walks back from the water's edge. He squats on his towel and shuffles through his beach bag.

Leah wants to say something about Taylor, something that would sum her up and contain her. But a person couldn't ever really explain someone else. One could only reach the most basic conclusions. *It's not easy to be fifteen. It's not easy to be anything.*

"You know," Leah says.

But her father is already spreading open his book, a memoir of a fighter pilot from WWI or WWII or some other long-resolved conflict.

"Sorry, what was that?"

“Nothing,” Leah says. “I was just going to say that it’s a nice day today.”

\* \* \*

At the end of the morning, Taylor leaves the room to sit by the pool.

In the water, Jakša catches a football and tosses it back to one of his friends. So he isn’t with Leah. Leah is running out of time.

The boys stretch their long arms, show off their perfect shoulder blades. Jakša spots Taylor. He waves and shouts her name, but he is not really shouting for her; he is shouting for her sister. That’s who he really wants to see. Taylor is not deluded enough, not conceited enough, to believe otherwise. *There is nothing intrinsic in me that interests him, that interests anyone, even Walter, yes, even Walter.* To Walter, Taylor was simply a generic stand-in for a fantasy. There were probably dozens of other girls. After all Walter didn’t protest when Taylor quit. He shrugged and said it was her choice. As if the loss didn’t sting him at all, as if there were no loss. And now he’s gotten Erica Delay into Curtis.

“Taylor,” Jakša shouts again.

She raises her hand, smiles politely, then returns her eyes to her book.

Half an hour later, Taylor’s phone screen displays a preview for a text: *ok sort of creepy but let me know if you see jaksa around the hotel?*

Taylor sets the phone in her bag without answering her sister.

Later, when Leah finally returns from the beach, she doesn’t ask Taylor about Jakša. She just perches on a deck chair and grins over her phone.

She shows Taylor the message: *I didn't see you around today. Is it weird if I say I was hoping to?*

\* \* \*

That night Leah waits by the pool, and Taylor sits with her. Jakša meets them at nine.

When he arrives, Leah stands and begins to open her arms to embrace him.

But he is bending over, reaching over, tapping the cover of the paperback in Taylor's lap. An intimacy in that—brotherly intimacy though, brotherly. "I used to love Hemingway when I was in high school," he says.

"It's for class," Taylor says. "I actually hate Hemingway. He's a total chauvinist."

Jakša laughs and concedes the point.

Leah read the book for school, too, years ago. She thought it was a beautiful story, but she can't explain what made her feel that way, and she can't defend the novel against her sister's criticism. It never occurred to Leah in the first place, that the book might be chauvinist.

"I think the characters are interesting," Leah says.

"How do you mean?" Taylor asks.

"I don't know. It's been a really long time since I read it."

Then Jakša slips his hands in his pockets and looks up at the sky and comments on the weather. "It's a nice night to be outside," he says. "You want to go down to the beach?"

He asks this while looking at Leah, looking into her eyes, only her eyes. But Taylor follows them, as if invited. They begin the five blocks to the ocean, and she hovers close to Leah's side.

Jakša speaks about himself. He says he wants to be a doctor, like his father, who had been a medical student during Croatia's war for independence. After he fled the Balkans, he finished his education in the States and eventually opened his own practice. "This really is the land of opportunity," Jakša says. "But you have to make it count."

Taylor says she is not sure, but sometimes she thinks about being a lawyer.

"I bet you want to be a defense attorney, someone who protects the little guy?" Jakša asks.

"I think maybe a prosecutor," Taylor says. "So many people think they're too important to be held accountable for anything."

Leah has never heard her sister mention this ambition to be a lawyer. It's possible that Taylor named the first job she thought of, the first career that sounded purposeful.

Leah prepares to shift the conversation to something less dry, but suddenly Taylor is asking questions about internships, whether Jakša's friends had them, how they'd found the positions, how far in advance they'd applied. And Jakša is nodding very earnestly and answering her in detail and telling her about a friend who recently took the LSAT.

Leah glances back and forth between Jakša and Taylor and forces herself to smile. Sometimes Leah tries to envision herself in a career, but in the end she can only conjure generic images: a beige filing cabinet, an office with a window, a computer screen. Really, when she thinks of the future, she sees a crowded living room, all her friends gathered on two white couches. But Leah cannot say this, not while Jakša and Taylor are discussing internships and law degrees.

"Seems like you both have things all figured out," Leah says. "I don't even know what I'm taking next semester."

“I’ve heard that people change their careers an average of five times in their lives,” Jakša says.

“Taylor’s already changed her career plans once,” Leah says. “She used to want to be a violinist.”

The road opens onto the beach. The streetlights end, and Taylor and Jakša become dark blurs.

“Twenty people in the world get to do that for a living,” Taylor says.

Leah steps onto the cold sand. “But that’s not why you stopped. You were really good at it. Then you got bored.”

Taylor scoffs, always ungrateful. One thing, one thing. If Leah could find one thing she were truly good at, she would never give it up.

They stroll towards the water. Jakša’s shoulder grazes Leah’s. His skin is warm, as if it’s absorbed the heat from the sun, like pavement.

“You know, you were gone all last year,” Taylor suddenly says.

Leah turns to her.

“You think you know why I quit,” Taylor says. “But you don’t know. You don’t know anything.”

The great dome of the sky stretches over everything, a pristine, cloudless night. It seems impossible that anyone could start a fight on the beach, especially at this calm hour, with the waves beating so gently.

“I don’t know why you quit, Taylor,” Leah says. “But you could explain it to me without getting so frustrated.”

“You know what? Forget it.” Taylor turns away and trudges towards the opposite end of the beach.

Leah calls her name, and Taylor bursts into a sprint.

Leah is alone with Jakša. Cold sand, dark water. And on the divide between the ocean and the sky sits the oilrig or the fishing boat, that one point of light that seems too distant to ever reach.

“Give me a second. I should check on her,” Leah says, thinking, *She’s just jealous of Jakša and me. She pretends to be so sophisticated, but she keeps throwing tantrums. When I ask if she’s okay, she’ll feel stupid for making such a scene.*

Some yards down the beach, Taylor stops running and kneels in the sand, thinking, *If she comes after me, and asks what’s wrong, I’ll tell her I have something I need to talk about. Then I will say everything.*

Leah sits beside her.

“It’s last night of vacation,” Taylor says. “I guess I got a little agitated. The idea of going home always puts me in a bad mood.”

“I’m going to miss it here,” Leah says. “At least it’s a nice night.”

They sit in silence for several seconds, then Taylor suggests that Leah get back to Jakša.

Leah nods. Both sisters rise to their feet.

“I’ll see you,” Leah says.

“Sure.”

Taylor turns away and starts in the direction of the hotel, crossing the stretch of sand, climbing up the wooden ramp, and disappearing over the hill.



## Underground

One evening in April, I left my friend Sofia at a subway station. She was heading to her boyfriend's apartment. The next morning I received the call that she had never made it there.

The story was familiar. My generation grew up with schoolmates who disappeared from classes and neighbors who abandoned their apartments without notice. We were used to people vanishing. That's not to say that we all had miserable childhoods. Most of my earliest recollections are joyful: catching hard candy at Commemoration Day parades, falling asleep in the grass during film screenings at the public park, watching my mother sew dresses for me, helping her patch the knees in my brother's school trousers.

I count the day I met Sofia as among the dearest of those first memories.

I was five years old. My father wanted to show me an elaborate playground that had recently opened in a neighborhood across the city. We had to take the subway to get there.



“This is something special, Raisa,” he said. “You’re going to love the roundabout.”

When we reached the playground, and it swarming with children I’d never met. I hesitated, but my father encouraged me to try the slide.

“Don’t be afraid, Rai,” he said.

I darted towards it and gripped a rung of the ladder, and a girl shouted, “You cut me!”

I spun around. Even then, Sofia stood nearly a head beneath me. She was slenderer than I was, too. I wouldn’t say scrawny. I would say compact. Everything about her appearance gave the impression of willful exactness. She bore herself upright, and her lips and nose were tiny and precise, as if sliced from brown clay with a scalpel.

“Did not,” I said.

“Liar,” Sofia said.

“Where is the blood then?”

“You didn’t cut my skin, idiot. You cut me in line.”

I frowned at the unfamiliar phrase.

“That means you didn’t wait your turn,” she said.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

She mounted the ladder, her skinny black braid bouncing against her back. “It’s all right,” she shouted.

I slunk to the end of the line, and after her turn, Sofia took her place behind me.

“Hey,” she said.

I pretended not to hear.

“Hey, you.”

She tapped my shoulder, and I turned.

“You know how the slide burns your legs when you go down it?” she asked. “That’s called friction. It’s a force.”

“You’re lying,” I said. “The Air Force doesn’t use slides.”

“A different kind of force. You’ll learn about it when you’re older.”

It was an odd thing to say, considering that we appeared to be around the same age, but I wasn’t offended. I had wronged her, and she had forgiven me. That was the important thing.

I stayed at her side for the remainder of my visit to the playground. The other children gradually migrated to the monkey bars and swings, until Sofia and I had the yellow slide to ourselves.

I stood in the mulch. Sofia flew down the chute and leapt to her feet with incredible ease. I watched her sprint in my direction. She was somehow superior—to me, to all the other children in the park—and it shone through everything she did.

“Why are you standing there?” she asked. “It’s your turn.”

I climbed onto the platform of the slide. On the ground, children chased each other, and parents chatted on benches. Sofia planted her hands on her hips and glanced around with an air of bored disapproval.

Out past the edge of the playground, just beyond the chain-link fence, a woman in military uniform strolled along the sidewalk. I was used to the sight of low-rank soldiers guarding government buildings or lounging in the backs of trucks in their fatigues. But this woman was of a different class. She wore a crisp, blue jacket, the kind only important people were allowed to wear, politicians and high-level officers. Its gold buttons shimmered in the sun.

For a moment, I was the only one aware of the officer. Then a boy playing on the swings spotted her and shouted. Suddenly several children clambered at the fence, begging for an autograph or a handshake.

I hurled myself down the slide and started towards the crowd.

“Where are you going?” Sofia asked. “It’s only some stupid soldier.”

“An officer,” I said.

“So?”

It was the first time I had ever heard someone dismiss a member of the military.

“Soldiers, officers, they’re all the same,” Sofia said. “Isn’t it dumb that people get so excited?”

Across the playground, the officer in the splendid jacket continued onwards, and her admirers returned to the jungle gym.

“Yeah, really,” I said.

At the end of the afternoon, on the walk home, my father asked if I’d gotten to speak to the officer.

“I don’t care about a stupid soldier,” I said.

He grabbed my wrist. “What’s gotten into you?”

I pulled my arm free and shrugged. “I was kidding.”

“Never let anyone hear you talk like that.”

After this incident, my father did not take me back to that particular playground for the rest of summer. The last weeks of August passed. At the end of the month, I began my formal education. It was a day I had been anticipating for some time.

My mother dressed me that first morning: long white socks, a cotton blouse, and a navy blue jumper with the national seal embroidered over my heart. I was going to an unfamiliar place, but I knew that crest would protect me. It was a contract. A uniform signified something. It meant I had accepted the call. I would improve myself in order to better serve my countrymen, and in turn, my countrymen would guide and watch over me.

That summer, when I had dreamed of what school would be like, I'd always pictured a classroom with big windows and fresh carpets. But when I arrived that first morning, the paint was chipping from the plaster walls, and the door was missing its bottom hinge.

The teacher smiled and assured my mother that he was excited to have me there. At the end of the exchange, he wanted to know if anyone in my family might like to volunteer to help with some minor repairs around the school building.

“This is not the best time,” my mother said. “And I’m not qualified—”

“Father can do it,” I said. “Can’t Father do it?”

My mother slipped her hand onto my shoulder. “We would help if we could.”

“At this age,” the teacher said. “They think their parents can do everything.”

My mother hugged me and told me to be brave, and then she left me there alone.

Across the room, a girl sat cross-legged on the alphabet rug, facing away from me. A skinny black braid dangled from the back of her head like a rope.

I ran to her.

“I know you,” I said.

Sofia glanced up from the picture book in her lap. “Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“Oh.”

She dropped her eyes away from me. I stood there, waiting for more of a response, but she just turned the page of her book.

It would be a long time before we became more than acquaintances. Throughout the first half of primary school, we didn't eat lunch together, and we didn't participate in the same schoolyard activities. (She became a strong jump-roper, while I resigned myself to less athletic diversions, like gossiping and games of The King Says). Still, although we spoke little, I always felt conscious of her presence. I could feel her position in a room, even when I wasn't looking, and I constantly sought reasons to approach her. During our first year as schoolmates, my shoelaces provided my one consistent excuse. I wouldn't learn how to tie them until after I turned six, and Sofia was famous for her bows.

“You're very good at it,” I told her once.

“I taught myself how to do it a whole year ago.” She tugged my shoelaces and grinned.

That was the way she would always start, by yanking my laces until the walls of my shoes squeezed my feet, like a forceful embrace, the kind that could almost break a person's circulation.

\* \* \*

I was in my fifth year in school the first time someone I knew personally disappeared, a boy in my class named Yasiel. He and I were supposed to give a presentation on the classification of clouds together the following week. At first everyone in class assumed he was sick or skipping. I was grateful for his sudden absence. Yasiel was not a hard worker, and I wanted to be assigned to a new group.

When he hadn't returned to school by the end of the month, our teacher informed us that Yasiel's father had been reassigned to a position on the coast, and his family had moved. But Yasiel had not told anyone beforehand, and he'd stopped replying to messages on the internet, so we suspected a different version of events: Yasiel's family were traitors to our nation. Sneaky Yasiel had been lying to us the whole time, pretending to be one of us, when really he'd sworn allegiance to some uncivilized foreign country (we grew up hearing the worst about the regressive ideologies advanced by other nations, and we knew of all the unnecessary violence they'd committed in the names of religion and empire). Once we looked closely, we started remembering odd things about Yasiel. Didn't he forget some of the words of the state anthem once? And he was always so proud of his shoes. He had a new pair every spring. No one else ever had new shoes. Examining the facts, we realized that deep down we'd always known what he really was.

Yasiel's story remained an exceptional case for several years. Then the fall I turned fourteen, an elderly woman carried five sealed pipes packed with match heads and broken glass into a federal courthouse and detonated them in the lobby. After this incident, the state began imposing a ten o'clock curfew. I remember my brother cursing at the television and saying, *Absolutely ridiculous*, and my father frowning and saying it was a necessary measure.

I had no strong opinion on the issue because I couldn't imagine staying out past ten o'clock anyway.

"The government is the real terrorist," Sofia said one night in my room.

I was combing my hair in the mirror. She walked up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders.

“Your hair’s always in your face,” she said. “You should wear it up. So people can actually see you.” She pulled away from me and sat back on the bed. “Although maybe it’s a good idea to keep your face hidden these days, in this police state. Can’t even take a nighttime stroll.”

“You’re just mad that you can’t sneak out to see your boyfriend anymore.”

“I have principles. It’s not just about Tomas.” She collapsed backwards on my bed and spread her arms wide. “But it’s not *not* about him. You’ll get it one day, what it feels like. He looks at me, and I just die.”

Tomas was sixteen years old, smoked clove cigarettes, and knew how to get a foreign IP address, which meant he could visit censored forums and download films from other countries. Tomas might have been bearable if he had given me a valid reason to resent him. But he was kind to me. He lent me coins at vending machines and offered to help with history essays. He was the sort of person any girl would want for her first boyfriend, and that was more devastating than curfew laws or the growing tally of disappearances.

That was the year our numbers really thinned. We made up stories about the missing. We said that they had relatives in Germany, or Canada, or Brazil, that they’d had to leave suddenly without warning anyone, otherwise they’d be caught. They weren’t tragic cases; they were the lucky ones. They’d made it out of the country and were lounging in air-conditioned movie theaters or purchasing expensive athletic shoes at shopping malls. That was what we wanted to believe, and we figured it had to be true at least some of the time.

\* \* \*

The year we turned sixteen, Sofia and I stopped taking classes together. Sofia, whose bedroom walls had been decorated with university brochures since primary school, was enrolled in all advanced courses. By mid-semester, she was failing everything except history and chemistry due to poor attendance. For the first time in our lives, I took home a better midterm report card than she did. I told her that I'd never thought the day would come. But despite the photographs of campuses that still hung on her wall, Sofia just scoffed and said, *There are more important things than school.*

One morning that November, she approached me in the hall.

"You have to come with me tonight," she said. She wouldn't tell me where. "It's a surprise."

I hung my jacket in my locker and shut the door. Lately Sofia had developed a tendency to ignore me for long periods of time then suddenly demand that we spend an afternoon together. (If I ever initiated contact, she'd sigh and say she needed to do her own thing sometimes). Really, I was doing fine without Sofia. I'd taken up with a new crowd, the sort of students who worked hard and earned solid grades in intermediate classes. Whenever they talked about the future beyond graduation, they mostly hoped to be assigned to trade school or to comfortable jobs in government offices. I fit in well with them.

"I actually have plans," I said.

"With your girlfriend? Just bring her with." Sofia glanced down. "I miss seeing you, you know."

I eventually agreed to ask Mira about it, and that night Sofia took us to a concert in a stranger's basement.

"Isn't this great, Rai?" Sofia shouted.



A woman in the front of the crowd bent forward and roared into the microphone, shouting over heavily distorted guitar and a harsh, atonal saxophone riff.

Before I could respond, Sofia was pushing herself into the crush of strangers.

“My friends, my friends, we have a night together,” the woman on stage said. “I want us to do something with it.”

The guitarist strummed more loudly, and someone in the audience yelled something in assent.

I stood at the back of the room next to Mira. I was debating whether or not to hold her hand.

“We are not just here to enjoy ourselves,” the vocalist cried. “Tonight, we tell the world that we will not accept our oppression. We will use nonviolent means when possible and violent means when necessary. We will stop short at nothing.”

Then the saxophone blared, and the drums burst, and the room exploded into dancing. Mira pulled me into the crowd. Smashed between bulging chests and perspiring backs, I understood what the vocalist must have felt, an inexplicable but powerful urge to crash into things. This sensation had nothing to do with government or revolution. It was a physical experience, a bodily reaction to other bodies and to pounding drums. Whatever they might tell themselves, everyone around me was experiencing the same dumb rush, visceral, automatic, and essentially apolitical.

The set ended, and Mira and I drifted back to the wall. Sofia emerged from the mass and approached us. I took Mira’s hand.

“Did you enjoy yourselves?” Sofia asked. She had sweat through her shirt. Her hair was pulled back, but loose strands floated around her head in a static electric halo.

“I’ve never seen a singer like that,” Mira said. “That woman was amazing.”

“I was actually asking Rai,” Sofia said. “Rai, did you think that woman was amazing?”

“I guess,” I said.

“You see, Mira,” Sofia said. “Rai’s not usually into this kind of thing. But I like to test her comfort zone.”

Sofia always said things like that. *Rai’s never been into politics. Rai’s not really a movie person. Rai has this weird thing about mayonnaise.* There was no point in contradicting her. It would only start an argument.

Sofia swayed towards me.

“Are you drunk or something?” I asked.

“Intoxication and sobriety are social constructs,” Sofia said. She grabbed my free hand. “Come with me. We’re going canvassing.”

“Actually, I need to be home before nine,” Mira said.

Sofia stared at me.

“I should go, too,” I said.

“Of course, of course.” Sofia broke her hand away from mine and snapped her fingers. “Get home safe.”

Mira and I reached the doorstep of her apartment building, and I apologized for the night.

“Sofia’s my best friend, but I know she can be a bit much.”

“Sofia is really smart,” Mira said. “And she’s nice in her own way, I guess, but she is a little possessive.”

“A little?” I asked. “You’re a pacifist.”

I kissed her cheek and headed home. It was odd, how quickly Mira had sensed what Sofia was. *Possessive*. I'd never thought the word before, but it described her perfectly.

A few hours later, I woke to the sound of someone stumbling into my bedroom.

"Raisa?" Sofia asked.

"What are you doing here?"

Sofia tugged off her shoes. "We ran into some cops. Your place was closer than mine." She plopped on the bed beside me. Her breath smelled like some kind of alcohol. "I knew I could count on you. I can crash here, right?"

"If you need to." I turned onto my side, away from her, and tried to fall asleep again.

Sofia pressed against my back and draped her arm across me. She breathed into my neck. It was strange, being held by someone so much smaller than I was. She intertwined her fingers in mine.

I jerked my hand away. "Will you stop?"

"Do you actually want me to stop?"

Sofia touched a spot between my shoulder blades. "Come on, Rai. Tell me you want me to stop. Unless you don't want me to?"

"Stop playing around."

"I'm not playing. Do you want me to do the things Mira does to you?"

"I haven't done anything with Mira."

"You're such a good girl, Raisa." Sofia was grinning; I could hear it in her voice.

"Tell me you want me to keep going," Sofia said.

"Okay," I said. "I want you to keep going."

And then Sofia rolled away and laughed. “You’re hilarious, Rai. You know I don’t think of you like that. But it’s good to know how easy it would be.”

I took slow, quiet breaths and pretended I wasn’t there.

“Why are you putting up with this?” She shoved my back. “Why aren’t you trying to stop me?” She pushed me again.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know what you want.”

She stopped shoving me, and for a while, she didn’t say anything. Then she started to cry. I had never witnessed anyone over the age of eight cry, really cry. I turned around. She buried her face in the sheets.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she said.

“I think you’re just really drunk right now, Sofia.”

“No, it’s not like that. I feel awful all the time. I want to make it all stop.”

I set my hand on her shoulder. “It’s going to be okay—”

“Why don’t you just go to sleep?” she asked. “If you’re going to be this condescending.”

I lay on my back. Next to me, she continued sobbing. At first it sounded like she’d never stop, but within a few minutes, she had passed out.

The following afternoon, after Sofia trudged out of my house, hung over and squinting, I called her parents. *She hasn’t been going to classes, and I think she’s been drinking a lot. I think she’s really depressed. She said she wanted to make everything stop.*

Sofia didn’t show up to school at all the next week. Her mother called me and said she was getting help, and she’d return to school as soon she could.

Monday morning, Sofia was standing by her locker again. I called her name. She wouldn’t even look at me.

\* \* \*

When Sofia disappeared, her boyfriend was the one who informed me. She had been sleeping with Hector for about a month, and at that point, I'd known her for twenty-five years. It seemed unfair somehow that he knew she was gone before I did.

I took his call in the kitchen, cleaning dishes. The day before, my wife Yilka had forgotten to shut off the coffeemaker, and the coffee had burned. I was scrubbing the charred remnants from the bottom of the pot. I wouldn't let Yilka clean it because it was her birthday. April 14<sup>th</sup>, a date most of the world, including the majority of my countrymen, would remember as the day the Russians shot down a United States aircraft that had violated a no-fly zone. The dawn of another war.

I'd glanced over the articles about the conflict in the paper that morning. I vaguely resented the violence, but I couldn't keep the names of all the foreign politicians straight. I didn't realize, at the time, the extent to which the crisis would affect my own country. For months, international journalists had focused on the threat of a world war. As tensions rose, our government took advantage of the distraction and changed the policy on the enforcement of minor offenses overnight. They did not inform the public. The evening the United States announced that they would disregard the no-fly zone, our secret police raided approximately two hundred private residences in our capital city.

Over the next thirty-six hours, 154 citizens were detained, tried, and executed for the possession of contraband. Some of the confiscated goods included a compact 9mm pistol, a Sony voice recorder, and six illegally imported German chocolate bars. At the onset of the raids, at

least forty unauthorized civilians were found in public after curfew hours. These unauthorized civilians were, in the words of the federal government, “neutralized,” on the grounds of conspiracy to interfere with federal investigation.

That’s the way we tell the story now, years later, after more facts came to light. At the time, all anyone knew was that their neighbor was gone, or their teacher, or their sister. Gradually we heard more and more stories. By the end of the month, we realized that this wasn’t a series of arrests, or even a series of murders. The city had slept through a massacre.

I shut off the faucet and returned the coffee pot to the counter.

“So you haven’t heard from her?” Hector asked.

“Maybe she got caught being out past ten, and the police held her for the night.” In the past year, Sofia had already received two tickets for curfew violations.

“She would’ve called someone from the station,” Hector said.

But we decided not to worry. Sofia had probably gone home, gotten drunk, and passed out without charging her phone. Hector said he’d call me if he heard anything. He wished Yilka a happy birthday. I hung up the phone and started the frosting for a milk cake.

\* \* \*

After Sofia returned to school from the hospital, she didn’t talk to me for the rest of the semester. Then the last day before winter break, she sat beside me on the subway and asked how I’d been.

“Fine,” I said.

Even though I didn’t ask, Sofia explained how well she’d been doing since her parents put her on surveillance. “I’ve gotten my Latin and Language Arts grades up. And my calculus

instructor said if I do well enough on the final, he'll give me an A because that's how it works at university."

"You're still thinking about university then?" I asked. "Didn't you say there were more important things than school?"

She reached into her bag and pulled out an orange. She started peeling it. "I just think I can do the most this way."

"Of course. Everyone else is really stupid for caring about school, but once you decide to care about it, it's completely worthwhile."

"I never said that." She popped a section of the orange into her mouth then held out a piece for me.

I waved it away.

The subway slowed for the next stop.

"I shouldn't have done this." Sofia looped her arms through the straps of her backpack, still clutching the orange in one hand and the peel in the other. "I'm sorry. I'll leave you alone."

The train stopped, and she stood up.

"No, wait." I said. "It's not all your fault."

She turned to me but didn't step any closer.

"I did get you hospitalized and put on lithium," I said.

She sat back down beside me. "SSRIs, actually. Lithium is more for bipolar, but they haven't really used it here since the embargo."

Then Sofia explained the way SSRIs affected hormones and how it worked differently from lithium citrate and SNRIs and NRIs. Sofia stopped taking her prescribed medication once she was released because she was not, in her own opinion, chemically depressed. "You have to

be careful with doctors, especially these state psychiatrists. If they think you're a dissident, they'll diagnose you with latent schizophrenia—sluggish schizophrenia, they call it. It's not a real disorder. It's made up. No other country in the world recognizes it. Anyway, once they diagnose you with it, they put you on a bunch of meds and institutionalize you permanently.”

The subway pulled into my station.

“Sounds like a conspiracy theory,” I said.

“I'm not paranoid. I read it on the BBC website—it's a British news company. It's reputable.”

She exited onto the platform. I followed her, and she took my hand, like it was nothing, like taking someone's hand was the easiest thing in the world.

We climbed the escalators. Outside, the sun was painfully bright, and the air was cool. People pushed their carts of groceries, and parents walked their children home from school. Everyone looked happy to be outdoors. There was even something pleasant in the bored faces of the soldiers standing guard at the subway entrance. I was sure they were planning what they would have for dinner or daydreaming about girlfriends or sports games, completely forgetting the weapons they held across their chest.

When we reached my doorstep, Sofia slipped her hand free.

“I remember the first time I met you,” I said. “Just before kindergarten, at this playground. You were mad at me for cutting you in line. And I thought you meant that I had cut you literally, with a knife. You had to explain it.”

Sofia scratched the corner of her mouth and said she didn't remember.

“But I remember it,” I said. “We spent the whole afternoon playing together. And right away I was totally in love.”



“I doubt it was actually me that day,” she said. “You’re probably conflating.”

“Maybe.”

Sofia leaned against the railing.

I fished through my pocket for my keys. “You know, you act like I’m always wrong. Like I’m always misremembering—”

“It’s not misremembering,” she said. “It’s just how memory works. We talk about this in therapy a lot.”

“I forgot you’re a psychologist now.” I slid the key into the lock and stepped into foyer. I started to say that she should just go home, and I almost closed the door behind me.

“Rai, I wasn’t trying to attack you,” she said. “I know it always comes out that way. What I mean is I’m honored, that you remember it the way you do.”

Then she smiled at me the way I had always wanted her to smile at me, and I let her inside.

\* \* \*

Sofia spent her last afternoon before her disappearance with me. She wanted to help me pick a birthday present for Yilka. “If you give her soap again this year, it’s practically legal grounds for divorce,” Sofia said.

Under her advisement, I purchased a small oil painting at a secondhand shop, a picture of mountains. Yilka had always wanted to see a mountain. She’d once told Sofia and me that the Alps were the first place she’d visit, if our borders ever opened. Sofia wanted to go to Tokyo. I wanted to see Notre-Dame.

After we decided on the gift, Sofia and I went to dinner. We stayed out later than we had planned. The restaurant closed at eight-thirty. It was a warm night. We walked through the park, talking over the usual things. Sofia gushed about Hector. I fretted over whether Yilka would like her present.

At quarter after nine, as curfew approached, the streets emptied. The crowds packed into the subway station. We followed them.

Waiting for the train, Sofia said something about a movie she had been wanting to watch.

Of course, it was almost impossible to watch foreign movies anymore. It wasn't like when we were younger. Internet security had become harder to work around, and a lot of people had been arrested that year for their failed attempts.

"It doesn't sound like a good idea," I said. "It's not worth the trouble."

"You don't have to watch it with us," Sofia said. "It was Hector's idea. He wants to meet you. But I told him you're not really a movie person."

"I'm not *not* a movie person," I said. "You know, you always say stuff like that."

"Are you mad at me for something?" she asked. "You're always testy about one thing or another. I can never keep track."

A golden yellow train pulled up to the far platform. It was the southbound. We were heading north. I told Sofia it was condescending to call someone testy.

"So you're testy about being called testy," she said.

"Really, listen—" I said.

"Damn," Sofia said. "I was supposed to get Hector cigarettes."

She stood up, nearly knocking over a stranger in loud headphones. He backed away and raised an open palm apologetically.

“Hang on,” I said.

“Wait here for me?” Sofia asked.

“Look, I’m trying to tell you something. Can’t you wait—”

But of course, she was in a hurry. The convenience stores closed at 9:30.

She zipped her windbreaker in one fierce motion. “It’s fine. You can have your tantrum when I get back.”

“Whatever,” I said.

I don’t know if she heard me. She was already pressing into the crowd. She zigzagged through the mass of bodies and dashed up the escalator, into the outside world of empty streets and downpours.

By the time the next northbound train arrived, the second to last one that night, Sofia still hadn’t returned. And I knew it would make such a statement to board it without her, to let her ride back to the North District alone.

The train’s doors opened with a hydraulic sigh. I stepped inside the packed compartment, hugging the painting of the mountains to my chest. I reached for the overhead railing with my free hand.

People poured onto the train. Sofia wasn’t among them. Outside the window, the platform was empty. By the time the train jerked into motion, I was already imagining what she would say the next morning, when one of us called the other to apologize.

## Blue Period

Two nights before the incident, I was sitting in the *Café de Flore* with the impressionist Ramon Pichot and the young Carles Casagemas, a Catalan painter and poet. All evening Casagemas hung his wooly head above the table, his wine-stained lips motionless and slightly agape, while Pichot and I discussed the Old Testament. I was hoping our waitress would overhear us. The previous week, I had witnessed her enter a friendly debate with a patron about Song of Songs. I frequented the cafe enough that she recognized my face. And I knew hers very well, the dark eyelashes and the translucent eyes, the high brow and the short chin, the red mouth and the delicate, slightly leftward leaning nose.

Pichot and I were on the topic of Job when she returned with our coffee. I was about to announce that Job was the only book of the Old Testament whose logic made any sense to me. (I hoped the waitress would reply, “But Job is the most absurd book.” And then I would say, “True,

but what is the fundamental nature of our existence if not absurdity? In an absurd world, absurdism is the only authentic logic.”)

But before I had the chance to speak, Casagemas broke his silence. “If there’s any man alive who embodies Job in all his misery, it’s me.”

I glanced at the waitress, to signal an apology for my companion, but she set down our cups without meeting my eyes.

“I see,” she said.

I nodded at her and took a sip of my coffee.

“You see, Guillaume?” Casagemas knocked his shoulder into mine.

Coffee sloshed and spilled onto my hand. I wiped it off with a napkin.

Casagemas pointed at the waitress. “You see, she sees. She recognizes a man in pain.”

“He’s in love with a girl,” Pichot explained.

“She’s an artists’ model and a washer girl,” I said. “And *an apple blushing on the utmost tip of the highest bough.*”

“When I was in Malaga, I wrote her two times a day, sometimes three times,” Casagemas said. “And I’m always drawing her from memory. I bring her the pictures. I leave them by her door. But she’s not interested in anything I do now.” He shrugged with exaggerated complacency. “I’m not angry with her. I could never say a word against her. Anyway I’m equipped for misery. I’m not the sort of person love ever works out for.”

“She owes you better,” Pichot said. He stirred his coffee and tapped his spoon on the lip of his cup. “After everything.”

“I’m sorry to hear you’re unhappy right now,” the waitress said. “I hope things work out for you.” She looked at him with a soft smile, a weary, compassionate expression.

“Hope,” Casagemas said. “I hate that word. I’m tired of hoping. I want to take charge of my fate.”

“It doesn’t sound like there’s very much you can do,” the waitress said.

“Is that what you really think?” Casagemas asked.

“Of course.” She shrugged. “You can’t hold a gun to a woman’s head and command her to love you. There’s no love without free will.”

Pichot nodded at the waitress, in attempt to dismiss her, but she stayed for Casagemas’s reply.

“I didn’t get to make a choice,” Casagemas said. He stared into his porcelain cup and pressed his fingertips into the teeth of his fork. “I saw Germaine, and I loved her, and that’s the gun to my head.”

Pichot clucked and said love could be like that sometimes. “Painful,” he said.

I pried the fork from Casagemas’s hand. I wanted the waitress to know I was not like Casagemas, who always gave himself over to his own emotions without the slightest concern for the people around him. Of course, I agreed with the waitress. Of course, no one owes anyone love. Casagemas was indulgent. I disapproved of him, but I didn’t want to appear unfeeling. I wanted to demonstrate that I was capable of pity.

I asked for our check, excusing her from our awkward scene. She brought us the bill, and Pichot and I dropped some coins on the table, hoisted Casagemas from his chair, and wrestled him into his winter coat. We walked into the snow-filled streets and guided him home.

\* \* \*

Two nights later, Casagemas invited six or seven of us to dinner at *L'Hippodrome*, the restaurant on the first floor of his building. His Germaine arrived on the arm of a guitar player. The pair wore white shirts with black buttons. I remember thinking that the musician's teeth were grotesquely crooked and that Casagemas, beneath his virile thicket of dark hair, was the better-looking man, for all his faults.

The table had drained a few bottles of cheap red wine when someone mentioned a novel about a time machine. I'd read the book. In fact, a few weeks earlier, I had met an Englishman who had studied alongside its author at university. I wanted to tell everyone this story.

Before I got the chance to begin, Casagemas lifted his glass. "We are all traveling through time. But at a rate of one second per second and only in one direction."

The table chuckled politely, except Germaine, who was gazing into the flame of a candle and dipping her finger in its melted wax.

Casagemas drank and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He looked savage, wolfish. I reminded myself not to hate him. Pichot had called his pastels promising, and it was good for me to surround myself with people who produced promising work. One had to forgive Casagemas, I told myself. He had a right to his childishness. After all, he was only twenty.

I set my fork on my plate. "To return to the book—"

But Casagemas continued his monologue. "Fellow time travelers, this is our fate, our condition," he said. "We can't go backwards, and we can't know the future. We are doomed to stumble through the present, unable to foresee the future we're crawling towards. And so everything we do requires courage, tremendous courage."

Germaine whispered something into the ear of her neighbor, the guitar player, who smiled, unveiling that wrangled maze of teeth.

I clenched Casagemas's shoulder. "All right, it's getting late, Carles," I said.

"You see, that's exactly what I mean. It's always been too late." Casagemas rose to his feet. "Germaine, once more, will you marry me?"

She bowed her head like a nun. "Carles, you're drunk."

At that, Casagemas pulled the revolver out of his pocket.

Germaine dove under the table, and Casagemas fired once in her direction.

Then he pressed the barrel against his right temple. "This one is for me."

A second shot rang out, and Casagemas fell to the ground. For a moment, the world was silent except for Germaine's shrill cry.

Pichot leapt to Casagemas's side. Three or four people helped Germaine to her feet.

"He's still breathing. Get a doctor," Pichot shouted.

Germaine backed away from them. She was almost uninjured; the bullet had only grazed her shoulder. Her guitarist said something in her ear. She nodded, and he guided her to a washroom.

On the floor, Pichot cradled Casagemas's head. One side of the wounded man's face had bloomed open like a carnation.

I stayed at the periphery of the scene. A policeman arrived and enlisted a waiter to help haul Casagemas to the pharmacy on the corner. Pichot and a couple of others accompanied them. They moved with such urgency, although they must have known that all their efforts would be in vain.

Unsure of whether I would be in their way, I lingered at *L'Hippodrome*. I stood by the window with a portly sculptor and a birdish washer girl who occasionally modeled for him. The



sculptor picked at his red beard, and the beak-nosed young woman occasionally repeated, “It’s just so terrible.”

Germaine and her guitarist sat across the room. The guitarist bowed his head in his hands. Germaine gazed off into nothing.

A second police officer arrived, asked the routine questions, and dismissed us all.

Once I returned to my apartment, I tried to wash my shirt—there was blood on the collar and over the pocket—but the stains had already set. I ought to have rinsed the fabric out at the restaurant. I didn’t own many shirts. It was a shame to ruin one.

I went to hang the garment to dry in the shower. I reached up and suspended it, as I had done hundreds of times before, as countless people in the course of history had done, as countless people would continue to do. Casagemas would not be among them anymore. He would never wash his clothes again. He had probably left laundry piled on his bedroom floor and clean shirts dangling on a rod in his window. In the morning, sunlight would shine through the fabric as if through stained glass. For a period of time, his possessions would remain where he had left them. Eventually someone would come and dispose of it all. In the final analysis, even someone’s death was best summed up as another set of tasks and inconveniences for the living.

A callous thought, probably inappropriate, but it occurred to me nonetheless, as I stood there in my bathroom, staring up at my damp, ruined shirt.

\* \* \*

The week after Casagemas died, I returned to the *Café de Flore* alone. Once again, my server was the charming waitress with the slightly tilted nose.

“I apologize for my friend last week,” I said after I ordered. I folded the menu and handed it to her. “He was in a state. You shouldn’t have had to see him like that. At least nothing pains him now.”

“Ah, did his model come around?”

“I thought you would’ve heard,” I said. “He was the one at *L’Hippodrome*.”

“I didn’t realize that was him,” she said. She gave her condolences.

“It’s hard to make sense of,” I said. “Well, life is absurd. And short.”

She expressed her sympathies again. For a moment, she set her white hand on my forearm. Then she slipped away from me, back to the kitchen.

I returned a couple of days later, and by the end of the week, I convinced her to pose for me. She wasn’t particularly good at it. She couldn’t stay still for very long. But I requested that she pose for me another time, and another, and another. One night, she had just dressed and was about to head home, but I blocked her way in the door.

“Stop playing, Guillaume.” She pushed me away lightly.

“Okay, I will,” I said.

I leaned in, and she let me kiss her.

That night, as I fucked the waitress, I kept seeing a silhouette in my periphery. I’d turn, and it would be a cabinet or a shadow in the curtains. I felt the objects in the room watching us, and I couldn’t focus on the person beneath me. It depressed me that I couldn’t focus. I had waited a very long time to be with the waitress.

Afterwards, she rested her head on my chest. A lovely head, a lovely person. If I couldn’t be present for her, it seemed impossible that I could enjoy anyone’s company.

She asked what I was thinking about.

“Sex.”

“Your mind really moves in one direction,” she said.

Eventually she drifted off. Her face became a marble mask. Behind her stone eyelids, she was universes away from me. And there I was, an aging body in an apartment with chipping walls and no flowers. My canvases stood stacked in the far corner. It was obvious now. They were irrelevant, forgettable paintings. A woman lay beside me, and the meaning of that was obvious too. I saw her for all she was to me: a stranger.

I lost interest in the waitress after that night. For a period, I lost interest in women in general, at least to a degree. It wasn't that I stopped thinking about them completely. The act of seduction simply did not seem worth the effort anymore.

Meanwhile, life went on for the rest of my circle. The guitarist broke it off with Germaine toward the end of spring. In May, a young Spanish artist, a former friend of Casagemas, returned to Paris. The young painter moved into the former studio of his deceased companion. He painted a lot and sold nothing. Of course Germaine modeled for him. (She modeled for all of us). Within a few weeks, they were sleeping together.

I visited them once, about two years after Casagemas's passing.

When I arrived, Germaine was running an errand. The painter showed me his work.

“This is called ‘The Death of Casagemas,’ and this is ‘Casagemas in His Coffin.’” He shuffled across the room towards another canvas and shifted it so that the paint didn't glare in the sunlight. “‘The Suicide: Casagemas,’” he said.

Then he showed me a large painting, in which a naked Germaine leaned against Casagemas, who wore only a loincloth.

“This one is called ‘Life,’” the painter said.

“And Germaine, she didn’t mind posing for this?”

“Germaine?” The painter shrugged.

There was something ghostly in the blues and greens, in the brushwork. Better than my brushwork? Maybe better than mine, whatever ‘better’ meant. But it was obvious why these pieces weren’t selling. No collector wanted to line the walls of his living room with a series of morbid portraits.

“Well, it certainly has a lot of emotion,” I said.

“And the piece is good,” he said. “Not perfect, but good. A lot of art is emotional; not very many things are good.”

We stood there for a while, staring at the painting.

“It’s my biggest regret,” the painter said. “I let him leave Spain without me. I should have been here when it happened.”

“I wouldn’t wish that on you,” I said.

The front door opened, and Germaine returned with a friend, a thin woman with narrow, green eyes that recalled a lizard’s. The painter embraced both women. Germaine handed him a glass bottle, and he immediately scolded her for buying turpentine instead of mineral spirits. The lizard-eyed woman stood in silence, clasping her bony hands in front of herself.

I stepped away, pretending something outside the window had distracted me. Across the street, a little gray cat sunned himself on the roof of a house, and below, an old woman marched up the hill, hugging several paper shopping bags. This was all ordinary, the way things were always ordinary from the outside.

Later that night, Germaine and I were sitting on one of the couches, and the painter sat opposite us, next to the lizard-eyed woman. She was showing off a bracelet she had recently

acquired. He held her forearm in his hand and examined the piece. We'd all been drinking heavily.

"I've never seen him so interested in a bracelet." Germaine leaned her head against my arm. "Maybe he wants to devote himself to jewelry-making now. Unfortunate for him. I really only like painters." She sighed into my shoulder.

"Don't let her fool you, Guillaume," the painter said. "She's already messing around with Pichot."

"I'm not trying to fool anyone. You of all people should know, dearest, it's possible to like more than one person at once." Germaine straightened herself. "There's something likeable in everyone. And do you know what I like about Guillaume?" She picked the turpentine bottle off the table and rotated it in her hands. "He sees things honestly, like an artist should. For example, he hates Casagemas's guts. Ever since he shot himself, everyone talks about Casagemas like he was a tragic angel. The man was really just an impotent stalker."

The Spanish painter cocked his head and faked a beatific smile. "Our Germaine is so gentle-hearted," he said.

I gazed into the curve of the painter's lips. I suddenly felt that I'd stumbled into a play about other people's lives, just as the cast was approaching the finale. And that finale was clear, more or less. After the lizard-eyed woman and I left this room, Germaine and the Spanish painter would fight again. Germaine would shove the bottle of turpentine into his hands, or hurl it at the floor, or set it down on the table loudly. Then the painter would kick the leg of a chair, or grab at Germaine's sleeve, or snatch the bread knife from the cutting board, and Germaine would fling the nearest objects—charcoals, spoons, books of poetry—in the general direction of her aggressor, or she would flee the apartment, or she would lock herself in the bathroom.

“It’s getting late,” the Spanish painter said.

“He wants everyone to leave now,” Germaine said. “So he can wake up early tomorrow to paint. You see how impossible he is.”

She threw her head back, exposing the long, white curve of her throat. The pose summarized Germaine, showed her in her essence: a virgin-martyr, bound to a pillar or stake, craning her neck to gaze upward, sighing for her audience. One hated to give in to saints. They always demanded to be pitied, and admired, and looked upon. But then again, pity was a small thing to ask for.

“Let him have an early night,” I said. “We can enjoy ourselves without him.”

Germaine smiled, and her friend reached for her handbag, and I stood from the couch and retrieved my coat from the rack.

“Stay out until the morning if you want,” the painter said. “It’s nothing to me.”

The painter stayed behind, and the rest of us decided on a nightclub a little less than a mile from the studio. On the street, Germaine linked her arm in mine. Her friend walked in front of us and complained about the temperature, although it wasn’t terribly cold. Snow was falling, but it melted the moment it met the ground, not covering anything, only making the pavement slick.

“If you’re feeling cold, that means you haven’t had enough to drink,” Germaine said.

Her friend laughed, and Germaine drew my arm closer.

“Anyway, I’d rather be swimming naked in the Arctic than be stuck in that apartment alone with him. At least when he’s in a mood,” Germaine said. “Some days, he’s insufferable.”

“You know, I worry about you,” I said.

“About me?” She turned to me and grinned the way all artists grinned when someone praised their work. “But I’m perfectly fine.”

She looked at me for a long moment. Her skin was white, not like marble or ivory, but like tissue paper, brittle, transparent. Already delicate creases were forming at the corners of her mouth. She must have known that within ten years, artists would stop asking her to pose. And when that time came, she would no longer be able to think of herself as a young, reckless bohemian. She would be an anonymous washerwoman once again.

She faced forward. “I don’t want you to worry, Guillaume. That’s the last thing I want.”

We turned the final corner. There were only a few more blocks between us and our destination.

“I doubt that,” I said. “But I worry all the same.”

## Edelweiss

The four of us had just reached the main road when Heidi Klinger, sitting shotgun because her boyfriend Rob was driving, announced that she'd forgotten her lint-roller. Rob groaned. "A lint-roller, babe?"

"If there's going to be a cat there," Heidi said.

"Give me a break," Bette Rule said.

Bette was sitting with me in the back. We were both smaller women, but unlike me, Bette projected a voice much bigger than her body. "What the hell do you need a lint-roller for?" Bette asked.

"Yeah, really," I said.

Heidi turned towards the two of us and smiled. Her lipstick was always perfect. "We don't have to go back if it's an inconvenience."



It was not an inconvenience. We were only a few blocks from Heidi's place. It was more the principle of the thing. But we didn't want to hear about the lint-roller all weekend, so Rob turned the car around.

A few minutes later, we were parked in her driveway again. Heidi stood at her front door, digging for her house key in pockets of her jean shorts, while the rest of us stayed in the car.

Bette picked at her blue nail polish and said, "A lint-roller. I mean come on, Rob. How are you still dating this girl?"

"Yeah, I'd go crazy," I said.

Rob said there were benefits, we'd have to be guys to understand, or maybe we'd get it when we were older. Rob joked about his age a lot. He had a few years on the rest of us. I'd be sixteen in a month, and Bette and Heidi had just graduated high school. Rob was beyond all that. He rented his own little house and worked full-time at a locksmith shop. He used to brag that he could break into any home in the area, if he wanted to. Claims like that convinced us that Rob wasn't too serious and mature to be our actual friend. At twenty-three, he was, in our eyes, an adult but still one of us.

Heidi jogged back to the car. She held the lint-roller high above her head like a baton. I remember it in slow motion: her flowing hair, her bouncing steps, her idiotic smile. She was beautiful, in an obvious way, which was unfortunate. It didn't matter that Bette made fun of the right pop singers and knew a Telecaster from a Les Paul. Guys like Rob, locally cool guys in mediocre bar bands, would always pick girls like Heidi.

Heidi jumped in the front seat and slammed the car door.

"You sure you have everything, babe?" Rob asked.

Heidi swore she did. "Sorry everyone. I know it seems silly."

“You do shed a lot,” Rob said. He combed his fingers through Heidi’s hair, pinched a lock between his fingers, and tugged.

“Stop it,” Heidi said. She shoved him away.

“All right, babe,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

He leaned over the console and kissed her, and Bette Rule pretended to gag.

“Goddamn it, Bette,” Rob said. He was always pretending to be annoyed with her.

Rob started the car, and we went to pick up Liam, who lived on the far side of town. We reached his driveway, and I opened the car door and scooted into the center seat to make room for him. He smiled at me in an impersonal way, like a teacher on the first day of class.

Liam probably would not have run in our circle if he didn’t play bass in Rob’s band. He was more formal than the rest of us. Whenever the car made a hard turn and my body bumped into his bony shoulder, he compressed himself against the car window, like a cat clinging to the back of its carrier at the vet’s office. “Sorry, sorry,” he said. I wanted to tell him I didn’t mind. He didn’t have anything to apologize for.

It was going to be a long drive, five or six hours. We were headed to a little town on a reservoir. One of Rob’s uncles had a place on the water, and he was away for the week. He had asked Rob to check up on the house, maybe spend the weekend there, feed the cat, water the ferns.

For the first hour or so of the drive, we all played that game where each passenger hunted for the letters of the alphabet, in order, on license plates, road signs, and billboards. But then I tried to help Bette find her Q, and Heidi got mad at us for cheating and quit. After that, Bette quit, and Rob quit, and Liam opened his book. I asked what he was reading.

He said it was called *Steppenwolf*. “I’m not sure you’d like it.” He rubbed his forehead and glanced back down at the open page.

I knew the novel. My brother had tried to get me to read it before. It was boring as hell. “Maybe you’re right,” I said. “I always hated ‘Born to be Wild.’”

“It isn’t about the band.” He scratched a whitehead near his mouth. The red skin around the pimple looked painful. “It’s hard to explain what it’s about though. You sort of have to read it to get it.”

“Don’t worry, kid. I hate ‘Born to be Wild,’ too,” Rob said to me.

Liam said whatever and returned to his reading. Then the rest of us bemoaned the cheesiness of hard rock, the idiocy of the Evangelical billboards lining the road, and the regrettable truth that the best restaurant in our hometown was attached to a gas station. When we ran out of things to criticize, we went quiet. The sugarcane fields had long become bayou, and on one of the long bridges over swamp, Bette broke the silence. “Hey, Heidi, so did your parents name you after the book?”

“It’s my grandmother’s name,” Heidi said.

“So the Klinger family honors their traditions.” Bette picked at her nail polish again. “Lots of yodeling and bratwurst?”

Rob snickered. Heidi said nothing.

“Don’t be shy, girl of the Alps,” Bette said. “I bet your grandfather makes great bratwurst. Sings you songs from *das Vaterland* while he grills them up, nice and greasy.”

“Just like in *Heidi*,” I said. “Takes you up to his cabin and sings you ‘Edelweiss.’”

Liam looked up from his book. “‘Edelweiss’ is from *Sound of Music*.”

“Oh Liam, our German scholar,” I said.

I wanted him to tease me back, but he just turned towards the window.

Rob sang a line from “Edelweiss,” and Bette joined him.

Heidi snapped, “Oh, would you all just shut up?”

The two of them kept singing, and Liam told them to leave her alone. Rob started ragging on him, too.

Outside, the trees rushed past us in a green blur. For a second, I felt deeply aware of where I was, what I was. I was a young, insignificant person, and I was with my friends, and this was good. Six months earlier, I never would have imagined having my own clan like this. Back then, there were people I ate lunch with and people I talked to in class, but I never visited anyone’s house after school, at least not regularly. Then I had class with Bette. In order to graduate, she needed to repeat the second semester of sophomore-year biology. Within the first few weeks, she’d chosen me as something of an underclassman pet, maybe because everyone else in our class was already attached to a clique. I was an independent. That was at the end of winter, beginning of spring. Now it was June, and I was riding across the state with these people, my people. At the moment, we were arguing for some reason, but that didn’t matter. We’d laugh at these spats someday. Years in the future, we’d sit together in someone’s living room and share coffee or wine and reminisce about this very car ride. I was so certain of this.

“Edelweiss, edelweiss,” Bette sang.

Heidi sighed. “Really, you guys—”

“Enough of this shouting,” Rob said. He lit a joint he’d rolled before the trip. “Let’s be one happy family, okay?”

We passed it around and talked about water, how metallic it tasted out of outdoor drinking fountains, how earthy it tasted straight from the hose, how murky the reservoir would be.

When we finally got to the lake house, two cars had already parked in the gravel driveway. A dozen or so of Rob's friends were hanging out on the lawn and on the front porch. They looked older, college-age. I recognized two of them from his band, but most of them were strangers.

I stepped out of the car and stood up for the first time in hours. I stumbled.

Rob pressed one white tablet each into Heidi's hand and mine.

"Take this, kid," he said to me.

I read the numbers engraved on its round, white face.

"Don't be shy," Rob said. "The two of you said just last week you wanted to try it."

"You don't have to take everything he gives you," Liam said. He presented his open palm. "Come on, hand it to me."

I shook my head. Liam tried to wrestle the tablet away from me, but I closed my fist. I guarded the pill like an egg. Then I clapped my hand to my mouth and swallowed the tablet.

"Your choice," Liam said. He stalked off and sat down on the porch steps by himself.

"Do you want to see the water?" Rob asked.

I thought he was talking to me, but the next thing I knew, he was taking Heidi by the hand, and they were walking off behind the house. Bette had already inserted herself into the pack of strangers. I stood alone.

I approached the porch steps and asked Liam if I could sit with him.

"I'm not mad at you or anything," he said. "I'm just bored."

“But we just got here,” I said.

“I meant bored with everything,” he said. “Bored with my life.”

“I know what you meant,” I said. “And I know what *Steppenwolf* is. Every time I make a joke, you take it seriously. You must really think I’m some dumb little kid.”

“I feel like a jerk now,” he said.

He looked me in the eyes. I had the strong urge to look away, but I resisted it. I would never get anywhere with him, or with anyone, if I were too scared to make eye contact.

He leaned closer, almost imperceptibly closer, but then he glanced down at the lawn. “I’m sorry,” he said.

I wanted to sit by the water with him, but for some reason, we stayed on the steps, even after a redheaded girl in a sundress half-tripped over us and spilled her vodka drink on my canvas sneakers. Liam and I talked for a long time. I told him that I hated *Steppenwolf*, but I liked that he liked it. I told him about my brother who loved all those dense, hypnotic European novels. Back when my brother still lived with us, he used to lounge in the living room all day reading his books. He’d shout lines of poems in Romance languages he could barely pronounce. On the rare occasions when he did leave his nest on the couch, artifacts of his existence remained on the end table: a torn paperback, a cereal bowl with hardened cornflakes stuck to its porcelain, an unwashed fork sitting in a crusty can of peaches in heavy syrup.

“So what happened to him?” Liam asked.

“Nothing. He lives in Lake Charles now. He works for Bell South.”

Liam reached down and plucked a piece of grass. He lifted it close to his face.

“But it’s different,” I said. “When he visits us, he doesn’t just sit around and sulk. He helps clean the dishes and asks me how school is. He’s considerate now. He’s an adult. It’s weird, but I miss him being lazy and selfish. It was more real or something—”

I wanted to keep talking and talking, but all the muscles in my mouth felt too heavy, too loose. The redheaded girl came back and stood above us. Her cheeks were round and pink. I tried to reach her face, but it was very high and far away, like the sun, and my arm was heavy.

“She should lie down,” the redheaded girl said.

She and Liam carried me onto the grass. The girl asked if I was okay. I nodded and closed my eyes. When I opened them, it was dark, and no one was out on the lawn anymore. A soft pressure expanded in my ears and behind my eyes.

I rolled onto my stomach and propped myself up. Warm, yellow light shone through the windows of the house. I climbed the steps and entered the foyer. Heavy footsteps thundered above me. I followed the noise into what must have been the master bedroom. A bunch of people were crowded around. A lot of them seemed to be deep in their own heads, transfixed by ordinary things. One person guarded a floor lamp and stroked its pleated shade.

Rob stood at the center of the room, by the end of a bed, where Heidi lay. He held someone’s tube of lipstick in one hand. With the other, he clutched Heidi’s face. “Let’s see,” he said. He scribbled a crude eye in the middle of her forehead.

He hesitated, and Bette strutted up to him and snatched the lipstick from his hands. She painted the word “fuck” on Heidi’s left cheek and the word “me” on her right. Then Bette backed away from the body, and Rob walked across the room and grabbed Heidi’s lint roller off the dresser.

He held it up in the air so we could all see it, like a magician waving his deck of cards around for the audience. I wasn't sure if I was seeing something hilarious or something horrific. I couldn't tell from the people around me. The lampshade guy was now picking at the carpet, and two people next to me were talking about black holes. Several people watched Rob, but they were all making different expressions. Some of them grinned; some looked serious. Most of their faces were blank.

A girl I didn't know asked, "What is he doing?"

Bette laughed and said, "Just Rob being Rob."

And then someone jeered, and everyone was jeering, or it felt that way. Rob rolled the lint roller down Heidi's forearm. Then he took the lint-roller by the sticky end. He pressed the tip of the handle against Heidi's mouth. He pushed her lips away and rubbed the plastic against her teeth. Heidi's eyelids cracked open. I saw a flash of her pale blue iris before Rob clapped his hand over her eyes. People were laughing, and some girl lit a cigarette. Rob yanked at Heidi's jean shorts, but they wouldn't come down.

Someone grabbed my arm and pulled me into the hallway.

"Jesus, Liam," I said. "You scared me."

"I didn't think you should see that," he said.

I started to walk back into the room, but he took my wrist again.

"What, because I'm such a little kid?" I asked. The words were slurred and didn't feel like mine. I didn't have any words. I listened to myself say, "It's just Rob being Rob. I can handle it."

"I don't think anyone should see that."

"But you didn't pull anyone else away."



Liam leaned backwards and said, “If you’d seen your face. Don’t you know you were crying?”

His shoulder blades pressed into the wall. The wallpaper was floral. I didn’t know what any of the flowers were called. Most of them were red and purple and had yellow stamens. There were hundreds and hundreds of these flowers, frozen and flattened and blooming. I couldn’t remember why I’d acted like I was mad at Liam for pulling me away. I wondered why we were standing so far away from each other, and how it was possible that Liam and I were in the hallway having some argument I couldn’t even understand, while Heidi was unconscious in the bedroom with all those people.

“Well.” Liam nodded at the doorway. “No one’s stopping you.”

I couldn’t look in that direction. I couldn’t think about touching the doorknob. I looked at Liam instead. I wanted to push my hand through the cavity between the stupid floral wallpaper and the small of his back. I knew how warm it would be there. The flowers were dizzying, an audience of blurred faces. I wanted to get away from them. I wanted to get away from the house. I wanted to go back into the darkness outside, where I couldn’t see anything and where nothing could see me. I wanted to sit next to Liam on the grass beneath a tree and hold hands like children.

I stepped towards him. I took his hand and said his name.

He jerked himself away. “Look, you’re still pretty fucked up right now,” he said.

“I didn’t mean—” But I couldn’t remember what I wanted to say.

I leaned against the banister. The railing dug into my stomach. The floor below looked very far away. My body didn’t feel like a solid thing. It felt like sloshing water.

Someone walked out of the bedroom and slapped my back. “How are you feeling, Maura?” they asked.

I turned around and saw the redheaded girl. I wasn’t sure how she knew my name. Her face was suddenly very close to mine and very huge. I touched the splotches on her cheek, and she started to kiss me, and I let her kiss me, and I heard Liam walk away. I still felt sloshing, liquid, sick.

“I have to go now,” I said to the girl. I grinned, but I didn’t know how much longer I could keep grinning.

The girl asked if I was okay, and I patted her on the shoulder and laughed and said of course.

I was able to hold myself together until I made it to the back yard. I hid by a bush. My stomach clenched, and I thought I was going to throw up, but I didn’t. I panted and couldn’t stop. I gulped air, and the air hurt. My scalp and fingertips burned with the oxygen. “Oh God, please stop it, you idiot,” I said.

Eventually my breathing slowed to its normal pace. I was very tired, but I knew I shouldn’t sleep out there alone. To be safe, I was going to stay awake until dawn, or at least until everyone else was asleep. But my eyelids got heavy.

Sometime later, I woke up in the wet grass. A couple of other people slept crumpled on the lawn, scattered like islands. The sun began to rise over the treetops, and the reservoir was glassy and still. I fell back asleep, and when I woke up, the day was bright. I climbed the hill and entered the house through the sliding doors in the back.

Heidi was flitting around the kitchen. She told me good morning without pausing in her work. I stood by the glass doors and watched her. She couldn’t seem to keep her fingers still. She

kept rubbing them together, or snapping, or picking up a utensil and immediately setting it down. Most of the lipstick had been removed from her face, but a ghost of the red marks remained.

“I can’t believe Rob’s uncle only has decaf.” Heidi stood up on her toes. She opened a high cabinet, peered inside, and flicked it shut. “I wanted to surprise everyone with breakfast.”

She checked another cabinet and removed a box of pancake mix. “I wonder where the cat food is. That’s why we came here, you know. Imagine if after everything, we forgot to feed the cat.”

“Maybe in the garage,” I said. “Is the cat even here? I never saw it.”

“I’m sure she’s hiding somewhere,” Heidi said. “With everybody stomping through here, the poor thing was probably scared to death.”

“Things got really out of control last night.”

“That’s what you sign up for with Rob. Isn’t that what everyone keeps saying?” She dipped a tin cup into the box of pancake mix then leveled off the overflow with a butter knife. “All those people weren’t supposed to be here.” She dumped the mix into the bowl and measured some milk. “It was just supposed to be you and me and him and Liam and Bette. But you know how Rob is.”

“But you’re doing okay, right?”

“Of course. I’m not even hung over.” She turned to me, crinkled her nose, and smiled so briefly it looked like a twitch.

I asked if Liam was awake, and she told me he’d already left.

She stirred the batter. “Some people had to get back home for work,” she said. “He was awake, so he said he might as well go with them. Isn’t that awful? Having to work on a Sunday?”

“Having to work at all,” someone said.

Heidi turned, and when she saw Rob standing in the doorway, she smiled. Not a forced, spastic grin, but that mindless, golden-retriever smile I knew she only made unconsciously. Rob walked to her and hugged her from behind and kissed her neck, and she said, “Good morning, babe.”

When Rob let her go, she poured some of the pale batter onto the greased pan. People began to drift in. Like spectators at an art museum, they didn’t talk above a whisper.

Heidi was just asking Rob about the cat food, when Bette stumbled in, arms stretched out like the crucifixion. She was dressed in black.

“I haven’t seen the cat food,” Bette said. “But I know there’s a cat somewhere, and I know that it’s white, because I’m covered in its hair.” She dropped her arms and let them slap her sides. “Wait, Heidi, didn’t you bring a lint roller? You think I could borrow it?”

Heidi pinned her pancake to her plate with her fork and started sawing it into tiny trapezoids. “Oh, I have no idea where it is.”

“Don’t be silly,” Bette said. “You haven’t even looked for it yet.”

Heidi swirled a piece of pancake around in syrup, but she didn’t lift her fork to her mouth. “Everything in my room got so messed around last night.”

“Messed around, huh?” Bette asked.

Rob smirked and pretended to hide it by guzzling his orange juice.

“Leave her alone,” I said. “You were the one who gave her such a hard time about bringing it in the first place.”

“All right, I’ll admit it,” Bette said, “I was wrong yesterday. I’m so, so sorry, Heidi. Forgive me, *schönes Mädchen*.”

“You know what, Bette? It’s fine,” Heidi said. She set down her fork and pushed her plate away. She still hadn’t actually eaten anything. “Does anyone want more pancakes?”

A few people murmured that they did, and she stationed herself at the stove again. We ate more pancakes, and Rob helped Heidi with the dishes, and eventually someone found the cat food. All in all, the morning went smoothly. I did not ride back with Rob and Heidi because I saw the redheaded girl get into Rob’s backseat, and I didn’t want to talk to her. But Heidi and Rob did drive back together, I witnessed that much. And I witnessed the way she smiled when she first saw him that morning. That was how I knew that everything was fine, really fine.

The rest of the summer passed by quickly. By the end of July, Heidi and Liam were buying books for classes and bed sheets for their dorm rooms. Bette repeatedly announced that they were real idiots for signing up for another four years of torture. Bette, who was trying to find a job in town, tended to get sarcastic whenever Heidi mentioned her college plans. These plans always included Rob. “My parents were long distance for a year, when my dad was finishing law school,” Heidi told me once. “And they’ve been married for twenty-three years.”

In August, the five of us spent our last afternoon together at Rob’s house. Heidi was sleeping off a hangover in Rob’s bedroom. Rob was making lemonade in his kitchen. The radio played, and Bette sang along with it and teased Rob for not joining in.

“What, you don’t know the words?” she asked. “Is this song after your time?”

“Are you calling me old?” Rob stepped towards her.

“Maybe,” Bette said.

They stood there for a second, staring at each other.

“You know what?” Rob asked. He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her closer to him, and he kissed her, a deep, open-mouthed kiss. I thought of a snake unhinging its jaw.

Liam looked at me and tilted his head towards the door. We stepped out onto the back patio.

Outside, the air was hot and thick. We stood by a cement birdbath in the shape of a seashell. I dipped my hand inside and ran my finger along the algae-slick bottom.

“Don’t touch that,” Liam said. “That water is disgusting.”

I wetted the nape of my neck. Liam clutched his hands behind his back, and I knew right then that he would never grab me in the kitchen and push me up against the counter. Liam would always be holding his hands behind him.

The door to the house clanged open, and Rob and Bette emerged. They skipped across the driveway, hand-in-hand, to Rob’s station wagon. They didn’t even glance at us. We heard the ignition, and Liam swore softly. Neither of us had a car.

We sat down in two sun-streaked plastic chairs and waited for him to return. A half an hour or so later, Heidi found us out there.

“I don’t know where Rob went,” I said. “Maybe he wanted to get you soup or aspirin or something.”

“This is Rob we’re talking about,” Heidi said.

“I’m sure he’ll be back soon,” Liam said.

Heidi lowered herself into the third chair and dropped her arms on the armrests. Her hair was a mess, a regal mess. The sunlight illuminated her flyaways like a crown. The three of us stared up at the clouds and watched the shadows they made on the flat, close-cut lawn. We lit cigarettes, and Heidi held hers without smoking it.

At some point, Liam offered to pick up some fried chicken from the gas station on the corner. He walked down the gleaming cement driveway. The stiff fabric of his jeans pulled one

way and then the other over the backs of his long legs. I could feel Heidi watching me watching him.

“Do you remember what happened that night at the lake house?” she asked. She looked at me without blinking.

I leaned forward and rubbed my cigarette out in the ceramic ashtray on the table. The ashtray bore the logo of a college sports team. I wondered if it was supposed to be a joke. I’d never heard Rob utter a single word about sports. “I passed out on the lawn an hour in,” I said. “I remember Liam being there, and this girl with red hair. That’s about it.”

“Knowing Liam, he probably stayed with you the whole time.”

“I feel like he did,” I said. “I feel like he was always there.”

“That was the right thing for him to do,” she said. “You were lucky to have someone looking out for you.”

“Probably,” I said.

She was still staring at me. I pulled another cigarette from the pack. It took a few tries to light it. My thumb kept slipping on the spark wheel.

“This thing started a couple weeks ago where I can’t sleep anymore,” Heidi said. “Do you know how crazy you become when you don’t sleep?”

“You don’t seem crazy to me.” I set the lighter back on the table.

“If only you knew the things that go through my mind now.” Heidi leaned her head back. She looked perfectly relaxed. She could have been posing for an ad for suntan oil.

I told her that everybody thought crazy things sometimes.

“You’re right, Maura. You’re right,” she said. Then she sat upright again and said she hoped Liam would get back soon. She was starving. She’d ring a chicken’s neck herself, if Liam didn’t hurry up.

He appeared a few minutes later at the end of the driveway, clutching a white paper bag. He grinned at me.

This would probably be the last time we would eat together. It was better that Rob and Bette weren’t there. Now that it was just Liam and Heidi and me, it was obvious: things were always better when Rob and Bette weren’t around.

“Heidi, listen,” I said. “What I said earlier about that night at the lake house—”

She waved at Liam. “Thank God! It took you long enough.”

Liam strolled up to us and set the chicken on the table. “Dig in,” he said. He sat down between us.

Heidi reached into the grease-soaked bag and removed a thigh, pinched it between two fingers. She bit into the skin. Mouth still full, she asked, “Sorry, what were you about to say, Maura?”

“Nothing,” I said, leaning away from her. “I really can’t remember.”



## VITA

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