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What Haunts Us: Stories

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What Haunts Us:

Stories

A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By

Katherine Elizabeth Bell

Spring 2017

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Mall Security

When Corey stepped into the mall security car for his overnight shift, leather seat still sticky with a swing shifter's sweat, he hoped it would be an easy night. He'd only had a few hours to go home and decompress after his meeting with the funeral director before heading to work for the night, a few hours to eat and watch a rerun of *Perry Mason* on TV Land, but not enough time for a nap. Sleep wasn't easy this week. He'd been averaging only three or four hours per night. The job itself—Mall Security for the Frederick Towne Mall—wasn't particularly demanding, but the overnight shift was rougher than day or swing shifts. Hooligans came out at night, using the half-abandoned mall as a drug-drop spot, a clean wall as a canvas for vandalism, or the empty parking lot as a racetrack for souped-up cars, and it was Corey's job to make sure those things didn't happen.

Even though the A/C hadn't worked for the swing shifter, he thought it might work for him, but the vents rattled, wheezed, and huffed. Corey sighed and flicked it off completely. He'd gotten used to sweating through his uniform early in the summer, when the A/C gave out the first week of June. It was just another part of the job. He would get through it tonight, just like he had every other night. And then, after getting through it, after watching the sun rise on the clock and seeing his replacement walk in for the next shift, he would finally go home, sleep a few hours, and attend his mother's funeral.

His older sister had arrived last night, but he wouldn't see her until the funeral. She'd decided to stay in a DC hotel with her husband and young children. They would

attend the funeral and then spend some time sightseeing, she told him, because when would they have another opportunity to travel all the way across the country ever again? Corey was too tired to muster the anger he usually found for his sister's selfishness, like the indignation he'd felt when she skipped his high school graduation for a Weezer concert. Or the rage he discovered the time she traded in their shared F-150, the one they'd inherited from their father, for a mufflerless Chevrolet Monte Carlo that broke down every other weekend. He pushed back the memory of his father's funeral his freshman year of high school—the time he'd found his sister and best friend fucking in the eighth grade confirmation classroom—but dreaded the day he would feel again what he felt that day, no word for the hatred that bubbled in his throat like a too-carbonated soda.

Most likely, he'd be in the shower when he would feel it, that pure hate, trying to remember whether or not he'd already shampooed his hair. He might be standing in front of the microwave, eyes flicking between the TV tray and the timer. He might even be chain smoking and drinking whiskey on his porch, watching the neighbors stare at him, wondering what they were thinking about him, when the bubbling came up. He'd have to swallow it back down, back into his belly, and live with it like he lived with everything else. Like his job. Like sweating through his clothes. Like the worn out joke of a Mall Security car that should have been replaced years ago.

He eased around the corner of the mall, around the Home Depot that had become an anchor store after the Montgomery Ward closed in 2001. It had been that opening that started the Frederick Towne Mall's downfall. The damn store closed off its interior entrance so customers could only get in from the outside, negating the point of a mall in

the first place. Corey couldn't explain why he'd gotten so frustrated with the change to anyone, even himself, so he watched as the construction crew set out signs and plastered up the wall as if there'd never been a door there in the first place.

For the past year, the horn on the security car had been going off whenever it felt like it. As Corey drove next to the closed CVS, the horn blasted two short beeps, one long beep, and another short beep, like Morse code. He kept driving, circling the mall.

The radio didn't work. Neither did the CD player, which was as old as the car, a 1999 model, which seemed new when he first started there in 2000, back when he was 21, fresh out of college with a useless film degree. Ten years later, he wasn't young enough to be a regular barfly haunting downtown Frederick bars, but he wasn't old enough to inherit his mother's house as a bachelor. And he would stay a bachelor. He would never love another woman as much as he loved his mother.

Two months ago, the lights on the top of the car stopped flashing. The back hatch had rusted shut at some point, no one knew when. The mall was slated to close its doors to the public within the next few weeks. The plan—according to the *Frederick News Post*—would be to knock down the hollowed-out mall and build something in its place, keeping the Boscovs and the Home Depot intact. One article reported that Walmart was considering the space as an option for a new store, which would make it the third Walmart in Frederick. He'd crumpled his paper after reading the article. Weren't two Walmarts enough?

Corey had no backup plan, no job applications out to prospective employers, no mother to nag him to send things out anymore. His mother had always nagged him for a new job, a better job, but as she got older and as he kept working for Mall Security,

she'd stopped telling him to go back to school or to find a better job. She said "I love you just the way you are, my son," and thanked him for taking care of her as her cancer kept making her worse. When she approached the end of her life, he moved her hospital bed into his room and monitored each of her shallow breaths.

The mall had fallen into a state of disrepair. Paint chips fell from its overhangs onto the sidewalks, signage crumpled onto the ground, decorative bushes grew to the size and shape of nightmare monsters, and Corey remembered what it had been like when he first started working there, when Montgomery Ward had anchored the big space, standing strong across from JC Penney, the place Boscovs stood now. When he'd started, it was like working at the same mall where his mom had first taken him when he was a kid. His first special treat from mom to son for good behavior. He remembered how she'd said it, "Our special day," so proud of him for his good report card.

Now, no one could get into the mall. All of the entrances were boarded up. Corey's job as Mall Security Officer was to patrol the exterior, to drive around in a broken car and call the police if anything serious came up. He circled and circled, not bothering to keep count like he usually did. The clock on the dashboard had also broken some time ago, so he used his phone to keep track of time, but the night seemed to slide by slower than other shifts he'd worked.

He'd be giving the eulogy tomorrow and had a basic idea of what he'd say, but didn't know how he'd put it all together. His mother had wanted the best for him, had loved him, and he'd loved her more than he loved anyone else in the world. But how to say that without using those words? He couldn't tell people sitting at a funeral that when he was a kid his mother would enter his room and slip into his bed, to tell him he would

always be the only man she'd ever love with all of her heart and no one would ever come between them. He couldn't tell them how, when she'd stopped the practice as he entered middle school, he'd longed for her body next to his, how he'd whispered "I will love you with all of my heart. No one will ever come between us," to himself so he could sleep. He couldn't tell them how he still recited her words to himself, alone in that very same bed, that very same room, to this day.

Rounding Boscovs, he pulled up to the Ollie's Bargain Outlet parking lot. Though it wasn't part of the mall, it was on mall property, and its red lights lit up the back half of the mall as if there were something still worth visiting, if you squinted. The horn went off again, two short beeps and one long.

He passed the trash bin area, where the county had removed the dumpsters and the recycling bins months ago. It was an empty concrete and brick hideout, now perfect for drug dealers to sneak through and lurk in the shadows. Some nights, when he was feeling proactive, he would stop the car, take a flashlight, and go examine the area to make sure no one was there, but tonight would not be one of those nights. At least, not yet. Not until he was feeling bored enough that he needed to kill time with something. Just ahead of him, a big Hoyts sign, the former movie theatre, loomed, still flickering in the night. It was the only sign at the mall that worked. He was waiting for the day it would burn out or topple over like the others.

Before he could reach the sign, he spotted something moving, just barely. There was a big brick wall where the theatre had been housed, but now there was something black and F-shaped on it. Corey slowed the car to get a better view. A blond kid, maybe fourteen or fifteen, in a green hoodie and white sneakers, took up a can of spray paint

and formed a U right next to the F. He was supposed to call the police in a situation like this. He picked up his phone, which flashed a text message from his sister: “Just found out there’s no MARC service from DC to Frederick on the weekend. Can you pick us up from the Metro tomorrow morning?”

Corey groaned. “No,” he sent back and turned off his phone. Not only was she wrong—the Megabus would run from Union Station to Frederick, she’d know that if she did her research—but he was not responsible for his sister. He was not her car service. And he wasn’t driving all the way to Gaithersburg to pick her up when she could take the bus. She could figure it out herself. Plus, she had the audacity to ask him to do this, hours before the goddamn funeral—he’d keep his phone off the rest of the night and well into the morning. He didn’t want to read any incoming text messages about being a “bad brother,” about “how could you do this to me,” about being “so selfish”—when he’d planned the entire funeral, bought the casket with *his* inheritance, left her out of the decision making process because she couldn’t have handled it—even if he should call police on this kid instead.

It’s not like he couldn’t handle a kid. A high school tagger. What’s the worst that could happen? All he’d have to do would be run him off and call it a night—he’d run off lots of drug dealers, guys who’d probably had knives or who knows what on them—and nothing bad had happened so far.

Even as he drove up behind him, the kid kept going. He finished the C, stepped back to admire his work, and then started the K. It was crude, a giant “FUCK” on a mall, but it was something Corey might have done at fourteen, the year his father died. After

his father died, his mother had broken her promise not to let another man come between them. His name was Les and he'd seemed nice, but he shouldn't have been there.

Although Corey had never been close with his father, he appreciated what he'd taught him—the intricate way to stack firewood, the amber hue of healthy engine oil on a dipstick, the best way to set up a tent in a campground—and assumed his mother had learned all that and more. His father had been practical, a man who'd worked with his hands, and Corey knew his mother had liked that about him. That's why Corey tried to be like him with his film degree. Film had been about working with his hands. He learned to set up certain lenses for different lighting. He'd needed to know where to put the camera for the perfect shot. He held a boom mike above his head for so long his arms shook. And then, when there were no jobs in the film industry in Maryland, Corey gave it up. He worked with his hands as a Mall Security officer and patrolled the mall—both inside and outside—until the mall gave it up, too.

Les, though, his hands were clean. He wore suits and did office-type things. Corey remembered sneaking out of the house the nights Les would come for a visit. He hated that his mother would let Les come over. He hated that she lied to him when he was young when she said she wouldn't let anyone come between them. Les had come between them. He hated that his mother had been capable of lying to him.

Corey grabbed his flashlight and squeaked out of the car, the sticky sweat spot on the back of his uniform cooling to the outside temperature. "Excuse me," he said in a booming voice.

The kid glanced at Corey, then pointed the bottom of the K.

"You can't do that here!"

“Well, duh.” He began a Y.

Corey pretended to observe the wall like a painting in a museum. “I’ve seen a lot of vandalism in my day, and I have to tell you, your technique is off. You see how that line,” he drew his finger along the K’s vertical line, “goes from thin to thick and back to thin again? You want it to be either thick or thin, not both.”

“Go away,” the kid said.

“And call the police?”

The kid laughed. “Like they care about this stupid place. Isn’t it shutting down anyway?”

He had a point. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“I’m spray painting ‘fuck you’ on a wall. What does it look like I’m doing?”

Corey shined the flashlight into the kid’s face. He closed his eyes and backed away, but something struck Corey—the boy looked familiar. “How do I know you?”

“You don’t.”

“I’ve seen your face somewhere.”

As Corey stared off into space to think about how he knew him, the kid used his distraction to paint an O. “Seriously?” Corey said. “Give me the paint.” He held out his hand.

“I want to finish it. It’s almost done.”

The kid’s face seemed familiar because it might have appeared in a recent *Frederick News Post* front page photo. Maybe his mother was the county’s Superintendent of Schools and she’d died in a sudden car accident. Maybe he

remembered the kid's face from the photograph he'd seen from the funeral and that was how he knew him.

Or he could have known the kid's face from the funeral home. He could have seen the kid coming in with his grandparents, picking out a casket for his father who'd died from a drug overdose—wasn't there a family like that in there when he was choosing his mother's casket?

Or perhaps the kid was a relative of his? One of the extended family members he could never remember—his mom's sister's kid's kid, his mom's sister had always been a little trashy, that's who his sister had inherited it from—and he'd seen him in one of the photo albums he'd looked through as he selected pictures to display during the viewing.

“Why?”

“Because it looks weird as ‘Fuck Yo.’”

Again, the kid had a point, but he'd never admit it to him. “But why are you doing this in the first place?”

“What do you care?” His lips curled into a snarl.

“You're what? Fourteen? Fifteen?”

The snarl dropped away as the kid's mouth and eyes widened. “So?”

“I was about your age when my dad died. One night, I snuck out of the house without my mom knowing it, but instead of spray-painting ‘fuck you’ on a mall, I got so drunk I almost died.”

“Um, cool?”

“I'm just saying you don't have to do this. There are better ways to handle your grief.”

“Oh. Well. Okay, great. Good talk, mall security guy.” The kid patted him on the back, grimaced when his hand came away with a sheen of sweat.

“I know you’re hurting right now, but you won’t always feel like this.”

The kid rolled his eyes.

“I’ve been in a similar situation,” Corey said.

“Who says I’m hurting?”

“You have to be hurting to act out like this.”

The kid cocked his head and looked Corey up and down. “Maybe you need some professional help, bro, because I’m fine.”

“But you’re not fine. Look at you. You’re spray painting ‘Fuck You on a wall. Tell me. Who in your family died recently?”

“What the hell? No one’s dead. Everyone is definitely alive, you nutso.”

“And do they love you?”

“What the hell kind of question is that?”

“Do they love you?”

“What’s wrong with you? Just leave me alone already!”

“You can walk away from me anytime you want to. And yet, you’re still here. Answer my question. Does your family love you?”

“Yeah. Of course they do. They say so every single day,” he said.

“Then what are you doing here?”

The kid shrugged. The ball in the can of paint rattled as he dropped it to his side.

“I don’t know, man. I just felt like doing something bad for once.”

Corey tried not to smile, but he couldn’t hide it.

The kid noticed. “What?”

The kid wasn’t like him at all. “What’s it like, being bad for once?”

“I don’t know. I have a test tomorrow I should have studied for instead,” he said.

Corey laughed. He was relieved the kid wouldn’t have to deal with the same kind of childhood he had: fretting every minute over his mother’s affection, slipping out of the house nights Les came over, drinking to keep his worry over his mother at bay, constantly trying to break them up, which only isolated him further from his mother. “Fine. You can finish the ‘Fuck You,’ then you have to go.”

The kid grinned and shook the can of spray paint. “Thanks, bro.”

He blasted a U onto the brick, then underlined the whole “Fuck You,” a long black line, and took off across the parking lot, waving at Corey as he ran.

There. Corey had done his job, had gotten the kid to leave. That there was a big “Fuck You” painted there now would matter to his bosses in the morning, but he’d deal with it then—after the funeral. He’d lie. He’d explain that his phone had died, that he’d forgotten to charge it because he’d been dealing with funeral shit. His bosses would have to accept that excuse.

He squelched back into the car. Now that he’d turned his phone off, he’d be without a clock for the rest of the night. He didn’t need a clock. His shift would end with the sunrise. In his eulogy, he would mention his mother’s love for sunrises, for the outdoors, for stories told between s’mores while camping, when their father was still alive, general knowledge—stuff everyone else knew about her, too.

The horn went off again. Two short beeps, one long beep, and one short beep. He thought of the kid, returning home, wherever home was, to his own mother who may

have been scared to see an empty bed as she checked on her son. The kid's mom would have been relieved to see him tucked back in later: safe and sound, secure.

Corey's mother was gone. He'd never hug her again. He'd never read her *Frederick News Post* horoscope to her and make her giggle again. He'd never pretend he couldn't hear her, just so she'd say "I love you" one extra time. And he was only realizing this now? He put the car in drive and pressed his foot on the gas. The only thing he could do was circle the mall, remembering how it felt to be young, to have parents who were worried about where he went at night.

15th & K: Friday, December 11, 6:30 P.M.

Adrienne stands in line at CVS. She's waiting between a tall man wearing plaid and an attractive businessman dressed like he has his life together with shiny black shoes and a form-fitting peacoat. He's lined up behind her, pulling off his gloves one finger at a time. Adrienne wants to be pretty enough for him; she hopes he will notice her; hopes he will fall in love in just one glance, and then all of the problems in her life—like hiding beneath bed sheets after the sun comes up, and scalding hot showers that redden her skin hours afterward, and half-drunk cups of coffee lining the windowsill of her apartment that have begun to grow mold, that have begun to smell—will disappear as his presence grows.

As the plaid man finishes his transaction, Adrienne steps closer to the counter, says: "Last name Glover," and offers a smile to the new pharmacist, the one she's never seen behind the counter before.

The pharmacist's fingers peck at the keyboard. "Just the one this time?" he asks.

Adrienne freezes and hopes the pharmacist isn't about to say Prozac. If he does, if he says the name of her prescription, then it will mean the businessman will know she isn't normal. She wants him to think she's normal. That she might have a cold or a sinus infection or is picking up her monthly rations of birth control pills, like other women waiting in line at a pharmacy.

But if the pharmacist says Prozac, then the businessman will lump her in with every other woman taking Prozac in the world, because he's seen *Prozac Nation* and has

formed an opinion of women taking antidepressants based on one character in one movie, even though Adrienne's depression is different than the character's, even though everyone's depression is different than everyone else's depression, even though Adrienne's depression forced her roommate to move out of their apartment on short notice.

Aren't pharmacists taught *not* to say it in front of a long line of customers? Something about confidentiality and patient rights? Besides, all her information should already be up on the computer screen—it's like the shittiest things always happen to her—of course the pharmacist would ask her to clarify her medication in front of a gorgeous businessman.

Adrienne mouths *yes*, finds her voice has disappeared. She can't let anyone say Prozac out loud. She can't let the businessman find out her roommate—her former roommate—understands how sometimes, Adrienne wishes she was dead and how still, Laura moved out anyway. They'd been friends since college. Laura told her the story of how she'd peed herself in summer camp, then overturned the cooler of Gatorade over herself on purpose to disguise the fact. Adrienne told her about the time she tried to run away from home, but only got as far as the edge of her neighborhood before she turned back, too scared to actually leave.

Then Laura fell in love with some guy, Tom, and it got serious, fast, and she said she felt embarrassed to bring him back to their apartment because of the way it looked. She said *I can't bring him back to this pigsty, you have to make some effort to get out of bed and clean it up, even if you are depressed*. Adrienne knows now she has nothing left to live for, no one to come home to.

She thinks that everyone in line will know how she is tired all the time and how she is experimenting with growing mold in the coffee cups that sit on her counter tops, her floor, her windowsills, mold which doesn't need much, if anything to thrive, and she wonders if they'll ask her why she can understand a fungus better than she can understand herself. She knows the businessman will learn she needs something more—something normal people don't need—to get through life, if she says Prozac. He'll know it's a pill that keeps her alive.

She believes he's in this line for someone else, not for himself; he would only be in line for his mother, his sister, his aunt. Or, she realizes now, maybe he's in line for his girlfriend, his wife. Because of course he would already be taken. A man like that wouldn't stay single long. The businessman's wife is probably everything Adrienne isn't. Someone like Laura—bubbly, energetic, great at design and organization, someone who keeps a tidy house—a house without molding cups lying around. She's probably perfect without trying.

Laura didn't need Prozac. She didn't need anything. How was she able to wake up with the sun every morning and get to her job on time and work all day at a desk in an office without getting bored, without wanting to break the corporate structure wide open, and come home at the same time each night and cook herself a healthy meal and clean up afterward? Adrienne watched in amazement from her bed, or the couch, or sometimes a pile of blankets on the floor, and Laura would say *you can't keep living this way, it's untenable*. And Adrienne would say *you can't keep living the way you live, you're going to burn up, burn out, like a star, and then you'll be here on the floor beside me*, but it never happened. Laura walked away.

Adrienne thinks she found a place with Tom, the boyfriend. She believes that moving in with him so soon will be bad for their relationship, that it will break them up quickly, but she knows that Laura is better at relationships than she is—Adrienne cannot keep a relationship going for more than a month—she either clings too much or pushes him away. She knows it is not her depression that does it, but her personality. The depression follows, or lurks—it is like a rip current on an otherwise beautiful beach day. It catches others off guard, they get caught, dragged off into the ocean of her depression. Adrienne knows the businessman has never felt depressed. She thinks maybe he can help her out of hers, if he would fall in love with her.

But, then again, the businessman and his wife, he definitely has a wife already—and she keeps picturing Laura—live in a two-story house in a bright neighborhood in the DC suburbs with two dogs and one cat and a patio that stays warm, even in the middle of winter. His wife doesn't take showers that make her body splotchy-red on purpose. She gets out of bed when the alarm rings, always refreshed. She has always slept well. She drinks all the coffee in her mug and puts it directly into the dishwasher. Adrienne imagines her as Laura on the weekend, in skintight athletic gear. She's tugging dogs on leashes on a morning jog. This wife works part time as a yoga teacher or a boutique manager or a pet sitter—some low stress job that lets her concentrate on her husband. She probably leads a good life, a life that doesn't require medication without first succumbing to a physical illness.

The pharmacist confirms that her prescription is available, they have it ready in the box behind him. Adrienne pivots, turns to see the line behind her, and steals a look at the businessman—he's focused on his phone. His dark hair has fallen in front of his

eyes, but she likes the way his fingers grip the phone with a gentle strength—careful, yet protective. She wants his fingers to interlock with hers, wants him to hold her hand like they're in love, wants him to ask for her phone number. Adrienne can't tell if he's wearing a ring or not.

She forgets the wife. She imagines how their lives together will start. She'll glance at him on the way out and he won't break eye contact—he'll think she's cute and smart, for reasons she doesn't understand, but for reasons he can somehow see by maintaining eye contact. He'll stop her and flirt a little; he'll say something about the shitty state of the US healthcare system, and she'll giggle and complain about the pharmacy, about her lost time in line. It will make him laugh and he'll ask her on a coffee date.

She will say yes, and then they'll meet up; they'll talk for hours and fall in love and she won't need to take her meds anymore because she's truly happy. Finally, when she brings him back to her place, it will be clean.

It won't matter that Laura has moved out. She will transform her former bedroom into an office, complete with Pinterest-inspired designs. Whiteboards and corkboards and reminder-boards will line the walls. Her desk will be cute, neat. No disorganized piles of papers or magazines or mail—bills, mostly—like in her bedroom right now. Laura's trace will be scrubbed away, forgotten.

Adrienne won't remember how Laura was the one who'd suggested they'd move in together. *Come on*, she said. *It'll be good for you to have a roommate. You won't be depressed anymore.* She won't remember how it ended.

There won't be coffee cups along the windowsills of the living room. They'll be back in the cupboard. They'll be washed, shining, gleaming from their time in the dishwasher. The mold will disappear. The scent of mold will vanish, replaced by fresh flowers he will have sent to her. She can picture the vase of tulips he will send, right in the middle of her kitchen table.

She thinks that dates to follow will show them exactly how perfect they are for each other, that they will fall more deeply in love the more time they spend together. They will, of course, get married at one of the Smithsonians, probably the Air and Space Museum because it will represent how quickly their love for each other took off—she knows her imagination is going too far now—and she'll wear a white satin dress while he shows up in all black, except for a white satin tie. Together, they'll buy a house in Bethesda and she'll learn how to decorate it tastefully and learn how to tidy up after herself and her husband. She will turn into the woman she's always wanted to be—the wife he is most likely standing in line for right now—the wife who resembles Laura. Coming back to her body, she notices that her hands rest upon the pharmacy countertop.

Adrienne sees that the pharmacist is thumbing through the prescriptions in the box marked "G," for Glover, her last name. Relief loosens her muscles—was she standing so rigidly? She knows now that the businessman will not learn about her medication and even manages a smile. She pulls her credit card from her purse.

The pharmacist flings the package on the counter, so fast that it almost slides off. Adrienne swallows hard, realizes that she could have been a little nicer, a little less spacey, because now the pharmacist is mad at her—both of the man's palms are flat on

the counter and he's hunched over, waiting for Adrienne to do something, but she's used to making people mad, considers it one of her hidden talents.

Some people behind her clear their throats, tap their toes, make hurry-up-lady coughs. She hands over her credit card, pushes the buttons on the touch-screen and grabs the white bag. Now she's done, ready to go. But then her grip slips, the bag falls on the floor in front of the businessman.

Adrienne feels her heart now; she bends for the white paper bag, for the medication rattling inside. What if he grabs it? What if he picks it up and reads the label? Laura would laugh at Adrienne now. She would say *you're just being paranoid, let it go*. But Laura has never understood Adrienne's mind. She's never tried to dive into the ocean of her depression, to feel the pull of anxiety in its undertow. And who would want to? It takes time to understand depression. Time, and effort, and patience. So most people don't bother to try. They just judge.

The businessman hasn't looked up from his phone. Adrienne pulls the bag away from his feet, tells her heart to stop heaving. He sees her. He notices her. They lock eyes—she almost drops the package again—and, as he smiles and nods hello, she knows she must act, she must say something—do something—that will make him like her.

She thinks of the muscles in her face and makes them move. A smile. Sure to grip the package tight, she opens her mouth and says, "Sorry for taking so long. I didn't mean to hold you up."

"It's fine," he says. But he looks past her, at the pharmacist, at the counter, at the wall of prescription boxes beyond her.

Adrienne should move; she should go home and continue with her day, but she can't. Not without saying something more to the businessman—not without taking what she wants.

Still, he's not looking back. He's trying to side-step her and get closer to the counter. He's worried about picking up his wife's medicine and moving on with his life.

Her prescription rattles as she brushes it against her leg and she realizes she has no chance. He's never going to fall in love with her. He's not thinking about her. He'll never ask for her phone number. Adrienne lowers her head, stares at the tile floor, and shuffles out. With nowhere to go but her empty apartment, she will go there. Laura is probably with Tom, on a date at a nice restaurant where they serve expensive seafood and wine—by the bottle only. They're huddled up together, drinking and dining, and talking about the new apartment they have together and how they will furnish it.

Adrienne will go back to her empty two-bedroom apartment, take in a long whiff of mold, and hold it in her lungs like smoke. She will go home and take her medication. She will take a hot shower and touch the red splotches and notice where they come away like a fingerprint for a moment. She will brew herself another cup of coffee.

Nine Boxes

1. Kitchen Items

Pots and pans. Mugs. Beer glasses from various bars across the country. Matching plates and bowls with plums, pears, grapes, lemons, and leaves lining the rims—cast-offs from her mother’s old kitchen, cast-offs because they didn’t match her mother’s new kitchen, the redesigned kitchen—but it didn’t matter to Alana, she needed a set of dishware anyway. She’ll need a set of dishes in the future, in her new apartment—after she finds a new job and settles somewhere in the DC suburbs—and this set has crossed the country many times already, from its first home in Maryland, south to Tennessee, where Alana first lived when she got it—where she inherited it back in college—then north to New Hampshire, where it filled historic district apartment cabinets with additional dishes—her then-boyfriend’s dishes—then west, to Spokane, Washington, where it stayed, for a while with the then-boyfriend’s dishes. Up until she broke up with him. Now, the dishware waits in the box for its return trip across the country, back to Maryland, even though the shelves it once graced, those shelves upon which it was placed straight out of the original box, have disappeared from her mother’s house completely.

2. Clothes

Underwear. Pants. Shirts. Favorite dresses that make her body look better than she could have ever expected. Especially since she lost weight after the breakup. These

are the dresses she knows she'll wear for her guy friends back in Maryland who will praise her for finally breaking up with the man they never liked. They never knew, really. Ben and Jason and Brendan and Tim will lean back into their old ways, back when everyone was sleeping with everyone else. She'd slept with Ben one night and Jason the next and Brendan the night after that. The other girls came and went, but never stayed longer than a few weeks. She lasted. She knew how to act like these men. She knew how to keep up her friendships while sleeping with them. She knew how *not* to fall in love with them: that's what did in those other girls, their feelings for those guys. She overheard tearful confessions. "Why can't we have something more? I don't understand," which would lead Ben or Jason or Brendan or Tim to back away, to lose their phone numbers, to find someone else for a few weeks—until the cycle began again.

Even though she did have feelings for Brendan, she never told him. They were friends. Friends who slept together. No matter how much more she wanted from him. No matter how much she wanted to be one of those girls she laughed at: crying to him, making her own confession in his bed after a night of great sex, she knew it would scare him away. And she wanted to keep him close. The best way to keep him close was to never say, "I love you."

3. Shoes

Some strappy sandals, some black slippers—or *house shoes* as her grandmother calls them—sneakers, everyday heels, fancy party heels, a pair of running shoes she hasn't worn in years and should throw out, but can't, because what if she starts running again? Brendan is a runner. He runs seven miles a day, around his Rockville

neighborhood, and Alana has promised him she'll start running once she moves back, but she's not sure she can keep the promise, not sure she can see Brendan as much as he wants to see her. He's bought a plane ticket, a one-way ticket from Reagan National to Spokane and he's going to help her take these boxes back across the country. Just the two of them in her car for four days. They're going to sleep together again when they stop in hotel rooms along I-90, and her old feelings are going to come back, or, more likely, they're going to show her that they never really left, that she just suppressed them.

Alana found her boyfriend after she couldn't handle sleeping with Brendan under the weight of her feelings for him. The only way to eliminate those feelings was to find someone else, and she did, when she chose to move to New Hampshire for her first job out of college. She found the boyfriend in a Durham bar as he strummed his guitar and covered Steve Earle's *Galway Girl*. He stared at her in the crowd because she matched the lyrics: "Her hair was black and her eyes were blue." They connected after his set and he bought her a beer; he told her his life story: he was a musician and an artist, pursuing his MFA in painting at UNH. He was originally from Connecticut, but had no strong feelings about the town he'd grown up in. He only played these gigs to make extra money—the stipend they gave grad students was piddling.

That night, she'd gone back to his apartment to look at his paintings and ended up in his bed. In the morning, he asked her to date him, and even though she knew it was too soon, even though she knew it was probably a terrible idea, she said yes, because then she could rid herself of the feelings she had for Brendan, and how she'd left him back home with everything unsaid.

4. Office supplies

Sharpies, Pilot G-2's, legal pads—both college and wide-ruled, printer paper that she wasn't technically supposed to take, but snuck out when no one was looking, the mouse pad she's owned since seventh grade: a photo of her childhood cat, Boots, who was born in her mother's living room—the living room that has since been remodeled into an office—but who died a few years ago. She likes her job in Spokane. It is the easiest job she's ever had and she's sad to leave it—she organizes the marketing and advertising for a nonprofit organization that provides support for women throughout Eastern Washington—but she thinks she'll be able to find work in DC. She thinks she'll be able to scrape together a resume and cover letter and some company will readily employ her. Her job is the best part about living in Spokane. She wouldn't have moved to the town by herself given the choice. The boyfriend moved them there because he graduated from UNH and immediately sought another graduate degree in music performance. Alana had loved the idea. She'd supported his decision. Their unconventional relationship—her with the steady job, bringing in most of their income, her subtle control over how the house was run—had been exactly what she'd wanted and needed at the time.

Eastern Washington University was the only program that accepted him and gave him a stipend—still more piddling than UNH's, he'd said—but he decided to go anyway. Alana decided to go with him, and she thinks she decided to go with him because she was kind of in love with him—not a passionate love, but still, love

nonetheless—but now she can't find an answer for the reason she's in Spokane at all whenever anyone asks her why she relocated.

At her office, she is respected and looked to as an expert in her field, which boosts her confidence and allows her to walk through the hallways with her shoulders squared and her eyes confident. Except when she's around Pete, because she has a crush on Pete and has always had a crush on Pete—but he's married, which sucks, and nothing could ever happen between them.

She's not sure whether he's happy in his marriage or not. Sometimes, in meetings, she'll catch him watching her when he's not supposed to be, when he should be looking at the boss. They make eye contact across the oak table and he makes a silly face and she smiles in response and flicks her eyes away, telling herself to keep her gaze from straying, but the pull to look back grabs her again after some colleague makes a dumb comment and she has to start over again, repeating to herself, "Don't look back, don't look back." Alana can't sit next to him in those meetings. If she did, she knows she'd be overwhelmed with the desire to rest her hand on his knee and to slide it closer and closer to his thigh. Goddamn she wants him. She wants his light brown hair that glints red in the Spokane sunlight. His blue eyes, flecked with silver and framed with the most perfect-fitting glasses. His long legs and tight ass that look great in jeans, but better in the dress pants he wears for formal events. Just one night, Alana thinks every time she sees him. Just one night.

For this reason, she is glad she is leaving her job. She will no longer be consumed with thoughts of Pete. *Out of sight, out of mind*—she believes the old cliché.

Yes, she'll miss him, but he'll never know how much she wanted him. She's been a good girl. She hasn't fucked up his marriage, no matter how much she's wanted to.

5. Bathroom stuff

The decorative shower curtain with silver sequins she's had since college. The rugs she bought to match in Spokane. Her shampoo and conditioner. The Bath and Body Works soaps, lotions, scrubs. Her makeup—Sephora-bought when her mother came to visit for her birthday—her nightly three-step makeup remover and moisturizing routine, which keeps her looking good and youthful and bright-faced. She hates when men say, “I prefer women who don't wear makeup,” because they have the privilege of misunderstanding why women wear makeup. Alana never wears makeup for men. She wears it because she likes the way her blush highlights her cheekbones. She likes the way mascara emphasizes her already long eyelashes. She likes filling her lips with lipstick and choosing to paint them with different colors each day. Her femininity is an earned femininity, which she keeps track of like a bank account. These gender roles that others subscribe to, that they so easily fall into, she doesn't, even though she wears the makeup and the dresses and the shoes.

Her body comes with all the parts for making children, for raising them to adulthood and sending them out into the world, but she doesn't want that for herself. She wants the traditional masculine: the career, and the money, and the leisure time. Children will just get in the way. But the boyfriend, it turns out, didn't see it that way, even though he did at the start of their relationship. Toward the end, he tried to convince her she was wrong and that they should get married and have children and settle down. He'd

first brought it up one night after sex. After she'd been picturing Pete between her thighs instead of her boyfriend.

"Have you reconsidered your stance on us having kids together," he said, trying to cuddle her closer.

"No," she said. "I thought we'd agreed on that a long time ago."

"I've been hoping you might change your mind."

"Nope." She pushed his arms away.

"Never?"

She turned off the bedside lamp.

But he kept pressuring her and asking her in different ways, until she felt like the Spokane Falls churning and overflowing. It was clear things were never going to change. He was always going to want what she'd never give him. He was trying to flip their relationship around, to take back those traditional masculine roles for himself. And she'd never give those up, not when she had them already. After a short time, she tired of coming home to constant questions, to annoyance and outrage, to his frown and looks of disappointment. She packed her things into nine boxes and rented a hotel room for two weeks, to finish out her two weeks' notice at work.

6. Bedroom Items

The sheet set and comforter that moved from New Hampshire to Spokane, but that the boyfriend didn't object to her taking when she stripped it from the bed and placed it in the box. Her photographs and frames of old times with Ben and Jason and Brendan and Tim, back when The Springhouse was just built. Decorative cat figurines

that look like Boots, gifts from her mother she's kept because they were gifts. The vibrator she's stored in the back of her underwear drawer, but didn't pack with her clothes because in her mind, it made more sense to put it in the bedroom box than the clothes box. She's happier in the hotel room than she ever was in the apartment. The boyfriend had picked a terrible apartment. It was run-down, stinking of body-odor—body-odor that didn't belong to either her or her boyfriend—full of lightbulbs that would burn out every other week, even though they kept dutifully replacing them.

The hotel is safe, a Quality Inn on 4th Street downtown, with an all-night security guard at the entrance, and room doors on the insides of hallways, not the building's exterior. Which is one of the reasons she's had a few one night stands since she's moved in. She knows if anything makes her feel uncomfortable, if anyone tries to pull something on her she doesn't like, she can call the security guard and he'll sprint to her room to remove the offending culprit. So far, the men she's met have been respectful and gentle. They have been kind and understanding. They have been submissive, like her boyfriend was when she'd first met him. She retrieved her vibrator from the box for one man, for pegging, but he was ultimately too scared and ashamed of his own desires to follow through. She finds men in local bars or on Tinder, the easiest way, and asks them back to her hotel room. The first night she was out, she approached someone, a guy who resembled Brendan a bit, but after she did, he looked shaken.

“Are you propositioning me?”

“I know what I want.”

The man backed away.

She found someone else in the bar and brought him back to her hotel room instead.

She likes to have sex now like she's taking a test. As if she's trying to discover answers in another person's body, answers she already knows lie deep within her own brain, and if she concentrates enough on the question at hand, she'll be able to get everything right and ace the exam. It's a recent development, for her own protection, because she can't let herself go in front of strange men she's just met.

When she slept with Brendan, she had orgasm after orgasm. He'd understood her body and how to make it shiver whenever he would touch it. She imagines Pete might know this too, but she'll never know for sure. Her boyfriend tried. He'd made an acceptable effort, but to bring herself to orgasm, she'd had to blank her mind and think of nothing but her body—her own body—at the expense of everything else.

7. Books

The Catcher in the Rye. Breakfast of Champions. The Handmaid's Tale. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. The Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot. Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters. Save Me the Waltz. Dune. A few of the titles on top. They're out of order, but piled neatly on top of each other—it's the only box she hasn't shipped via Media Mail back to her mother's house. Brendan gave her *Breakfast of Champions* after she gave him *Slaughterhouse-Five*. She wrote "So you're turning a year older? So it goes," in his birthday card and gave him the book and months later he called her, after reading it.

"I get it now. The card," he said.

“That’s good. Did you like the book?”

“The way he handles time is genius.”

“I mean, isn’t that the point? The main character’s a time traveler.”

“He’s not a time traveler per se. Vonnegut just makes you think he is because of the unreliable narrator. It’s brilliant.”

Alana had no sense for Brendan’s writing terminology. He talked above her, on a different level with different meanings for the words she understood, but in a different way than he meant. His smarts, his brain, his ability to remember and recall important facts sometimes made her fall in love with him a bit more, back when she loved him. Even if she couldn’t engage on his level, she could appreciate how much he cared about the things he loved. “It just makes you think about war and hate and death differently.”

“Right? It’s so good. Have you read *Breakfast of Champions*?”

“No, never.”

The next week, she found a copy in the mail, along with her electric and phone bills. After she read the book, she mailed back to him a single sheet of paper without words, a symbol she knew Brendan would understand without explanation:

*

8. Technology

The Chromecast her brother bought her for Christmas, which her boyfriend was loath to let go of. Old hard drives with games, papers from college, and photos from long

lost digital cameras. Tangles of cables that moved from one state to the next to the next to the next, always in the same tangle. CDs she no longer needs due to Spotify and her phone and laptop. An old phone she dropped into the toilet a month before the breakup. She keeps her laptop out, on her bed beside her, and she will pack it away once she's ready to leave, but now she needs it. She watches *The Great British Baking Show* and eats Safeway-bought pastries when she can eat, though she doesn't eat much anymore. Her mind churns with plans of leaving Spokane.

Where will she and Brendan stop along the way? Will the sex be as good, all these years later? He has remained single. On her last trip home, he told her he thought he was meant to remain single, that there wasn't a woman out there who could become his better half. She'd been very close to saying "I think that reason is because that person is me," but she didn't. Instead, she sat next to him with an ache in her lungs, like she couldn't get enough breath, and when she felt tears burn, she excused herself to cry in the bathroom.

9. Assorted decorations and knick-knacks

The curtains that hung in the living room and bedroom. Heating pads to relieve her cramps. Doorstops. Candles, scents that range from a floral and huckleberry mix to a night rain and fresh linen. The print of Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, which she bought even though her boyfriend said that surrealism and surrealists were "bullshit." He paints landscapes and portraits and "classically inspired artwork," and believes that modern art lacks discipline, but she has never agreed with his interpretation. She pointed out that that surrealism comes from a real, philosophical reaction to the world, from a response

that is just as valid as his own reaction to the world, but he will not hear her because she has not put a brush to canvas on her own terms.

When she moves back to Maryland, she will lose contact with the boyfriend. Already, she has refrained from responding to his text messages and answering his phone calls. On the road, their contact will fall away completely. She will only be able to see Brendan. Perhaps, as she'd wanted to with Pete, she'll be able to rest her hand on his knee and inch it closer and closer to what she really wants. Maybe, on the road, she'll be able to open her mouth and get closer and closer to saying what she really wants to say.

She wonders what would happen if she left the boxes in the hotel room. She wonders what would happen if, after she picked Brendan up from the airport, they abandoned the plan to head east. If instead, they drove west, to the coast, in love with each other, and started lives together there, from scratch, just the two of them.

From her bed, she sees the boxes, stacked three by three, and knows better. She tells herself to stop living in a fantasy world. She focuses on *The Great British Baking Show* and tries to fall asleep to the proper accents murmuring through her speakers.

The Springhouse

Kelly

The risk wasn't in going to The Springhouse, the risk was in bringing an outsider, her coworker, Lindsay, to The Springhouse on short notice. As Kelly drove down Fry road in Jefferson, just south of Frederick, she kept the radio loud as Lindsay sang along.

Kelly never knew how nights at The Springhouse would unfold. Some would be slow and boring. The usual people, she and her boyfriend Ben, his brother Brendan, their friend Alana, Ben's longtime buddies Jason and Tim—would be low on energy and sit on the couch in the corner drinking cheap beer and shots of whiskey until Brendan went off to his bedroom inside the big farmhouse their mother owned and Alana would follow an hour later. When Kelly and Ben would finally retire to Ben's bedroom, they would still hear the creak of Brendan's bed through the walls, which they'd try to match with their own sex—if Ben's whiskey dick could manage.

Other nights, they had a lot of energy. Even at twenty-nine and thirty, they still played drinking games. They played truth or dare. They danced on top of the bar and climbed into the rafters swinging just-removed shirts. Kelly knew a psychologist would say they were the worst of the millennials—privileged and entitled and emotionally stunted, brains stuck developmentally at the level of teenager. But she was still one of them, wasn't she? She participated. Willingly. She removed her shirt and flashed the room when asked. She got naked when dared during truth or dare. She drank as much as the rest of them, especially when she didn't have to work the next day.

And Lindsay, a millennial just like her, had probably experienced Springhouse-like things with her own friends. Right? Wasn't that part of growing up? The college experience and beyond.

Kelly hadn't had a Springhouse-like experience before she'd met Ben. College, even at a party school like NC State, was boring. She'd shut herself in her dorm to study—she needed to keep her scholarship so she wouldn't have to take out student loans, so she wouldn't have to pay for her education—and she graduated summa cum laude, the top 10% of her class. Hadn't helped on the job market, though. Nothing had helped on the job market.

So she moved to Maryland, to the Washington DC area, where she'd heard there were lots of jobs. That rumor had been untrue. As rent rose, she moved west, to Frederick and found a job at Victoria's Secret, at the Francis Scott Key Mall, and kept applying to jobs in psychology, to jobs as an administrative assistant in psychologists' offices, but she never heard back. She made friends in Frederick. She stuck around. One of her friends knew Ben and invited her to a party at The Springhouse.

Tonight, she and Lindsay were heading to a welcome home party for Alana, who had been living in Durham, New Hampshire, then Spokane, Washington the past three years. Alana had broken up with a boyfriend no one knew and was home for good. Kelly wasn't sure whether she was happy to see her back or not—they'd only met when Alana returned on vacations—but the thing was that Alana had slept with Ben before Kelly had ever met him. Whenever the two of them got together, they flirted. Kelly put up with it because Alana would always return to the other side of the country afterward.

The car bounced over little hills and rounded curves. Kelly turned into the gravel driveway. “This feels like the start of a horror movie,” Lindsay said.

“Ah, but thine eyes deceive thee. It’s going to be a great time,” Kelly said.

“But we’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“Isn’t that’s what makes it fun?”

Kelly heard Green Day blaring as soon as she turned off her car, which meant Tim had control of the stereo. Shadows on the inside walls loomed, so she couldn’t tell who or how many people were already inside, but did it matter? She grabbed her case of beer from the back seat, handed Lindsay her bottles—one of rum, one of coke—and led her over the stone path into The Springhouse.

Ben stood behind the bar, pouring shots for everyone. Tim, also behind the bar, fiddled with his phone attached by a cord to the speaker system. Alana sat on a broken stool between Brendan and Jason, directly in front of Ben. This was their usual configuration. Kelly would take her place next to Ben behind the bar: three to a side, feng shui in harmony.

“Shots!” Ben grabbed two more glasses from the shelf behind him and filled them with a clear liquor, most likely vodka.

She put the beer on the coffee table and took Lindsay’s bottles. As she returned to the bar—not hard in a one-room springhouse—everyone held their shots in the air. Kelly scrambled to join in.

“Here’s to—” Ben glanced at Lindsay.

“Oh, I’m Lindsay, I work with Kelly.”

“To Lindsay!” He pounded his shot on the bar and downed it.

“To Lindsay!” came the response from everyone else, and Kelly joined on the tail end, dropping her hand to the bar, throwing her shot back. She finished drinking as the group finished.

“To me!” Lindsay said. She drank and made a face.

Kelly knew Alana was trying to make eye contact, trying to laugh at Lindsay’s amateurish shot-taking. She wouldn’t look at her, though—she wouldn’t let her friend tease her coworker, not when she’d promised Lindsay a good time.

So Alana had slept with Ben, but Alana had also slept with Jason and Tim. She knew how she preferred Brendan, had picked Brendan to return to, how she joked about the others—how Jason had never even finished, how Tim had come too early for her liking. Kelly had never asked, out of shame, embarrassment, if Ben hadn’t been able to get it up for Alana like he couldn’t for her. If she said no, it was something she was doing wrong and she didn’t want to admit it. She didn’t want Alana to know Ben better than she did, though *she* was his girlfriend.

Kelly grabbed some beers, one for everyone who didn’t already have a drink, and set them on the bar in front of them.

“Thanks, beautiful.” Ben kissed her forehead.

Lindsay giggled. “You guys are too cute.” She popped open her can and took a huge sip.

An image of Ben and Alana and Lindsay in bed together flashed through Kelly’s head, but she pushed it away. She couldn’t understand why *this* image, why she felt so tense. Shouldn’t the shot have relaxed her? She popped her beer. Maybe she just needed

a cigarette. But as she smoked, her breath caught in her lungs. She had to force it out in little bursts, and needed to punctuate it with sips of beer. She couldn't even finish the whole thing, had to stamp it out in an ashtray on top of the bar.

“Up the River, Down the River?” Ben picked up a deck of cards.

Lindsay said she didn't know that one.

“You'll catch on quick,” Ben said. He turned to the other end of the bar. “You motherfuckers in?”

Tim and Jason, locked in their own conversation declined, but Alana and Brendan nodded. They played, first guessing color, then higher or lower, in between or outside, then suit. After that, Ben lined the cards on the bar, a line of give, a line of take.

Ben told people with eights to take two drinks. Lindsay drank.

Then he told people with jacks to give others two drinks.

Brendan told Ben to drink those two drinks. Alana told Brendan to drink two drinks for himself.

Maybe Kelly was just reading into it, but whenever Ben had drinks to give, he'd give them to Lindsay. Besides, after they'd given Ben their first two drinks, Brendan and Alana had split their drinks between Lindsay and someone else. It was just what they did when welcoming a guest to The Springhouse. But, still. There was something different about the way Ben looked at Lindsay. He stared at her chest. Her lips. Her ass. They'd both just bought the new Perfect Coverage Bra with their discount, and Ben wouldn't move from his place behind the bar. Was he hiding an erection, maybe?

One way to find out. She crashed into him, pushing him to the side, letting the back of her hand press into his crotch. Nothing. Oh, man. She *was* being paranoid.

Turning into someone who couldn't even trust her own boyfriend—where had that come from? They'd had plenty of guests before and she'd never reacted like this.

The game came to a close. Lindsay was significantly more drunk than when she'd shown up. So was Alana. So was Ben. But he turned to Tim and commanded him to put on "Waltzing Mathilda." The room broke into song, everyone singing together in a way that even Kelly had to let her fears fall away. She sang and as she watched Ben, who draped his arm around her shoulders, she knew she could, "Wait til his billy boiled," and he'd come a-waltzing Mathilda to bed, upstairs—with her—as it usually played out most nights. What did she have to worry about?

Lindsay

She wondered what Steve would think of the place. Burgundy walls trimmed with gold crown molding around the doors and windows. A homemade bar catty-corner to a couch, across from a beer pong table. A woodstove, old fashioned, next to a window with a "Men's" bathroom sign overhead. There was a frying pan on a nail in the rafters above the woodstove. Steve would point to it and say something about a roadrunner cartoon waiting to happen. He'd point out the smoke-tinged ceiling beyond the rafters and look to the guys in the corner smoking as those responsible for the stains. Steve didn't like smokers, his father had smoked while he was growing up and he'd hated it, but Lindsay never minded—she even smoked occasionally, especially in the month since Steve had left her.

It felt like longer than a month. It felt like two years had passed since they'd been together, since he'd told her he was leaving, moving back to Iowa. She wouldn't hurt so

much if it had been mutual, if she'd had some input, but it had been one sided, out of nowhere.

They'd had the breakup talk: he'd said it wouldn't work out long-term. He said she didn't have a college degree. Didn't have any career goals. Didn't have any plans, any drive, any desire. He said, "Any future wife of mine would have her own life, her own dreams, separate from mine. I don't see that with you."

"How do you know my fashion designs aren't going to make it big someday?"

"Do you have any idea what it takes to get the designs you put on paper to the runway?"

She didn't.

"There you go. That's why I can't be with you. You're just waiting for someone to hand you something. It doesn't work like that."

There were some things he'd never been able to be argued out of in the past, like which TV to buy for his apartment. When they'd gone to Best Buy together and she'd pointed out one she thought he might like, he scoured the tag and told her the stats were insufficient compared to the one he had his eye on.

Steve would probably hate The Springhouse. He'd probably demand to leave immediately. Lindsay decided she'd try to enjoy it a bit, just to spite her stupid ex. Somehow, Kelly had neglected to mention that all the guys at The Springhouse were super cute. It had been a month since she'd had sex—maybe tonight she'd break that cycle.

Jason was a classic version of handsome with dark hair and dark eyes and high cheekbones and a sharp chin. Tim's tattoos of classic video game characters covered his

arms. He had a mustache and goatee and seemed like the kind of guy who had been an emo kid back in high school, though Lindsay couldn't say that for sure. The brothers, Ben and Brendan, looked like brothers, both with dark brown hair. But Brendan, the older, was taller, with blue eyes and a beard. He seemed guarded. He held his hands together behind his back or in his pockets. Ben, Kelly's boyfriend, seemed quicker to smile, the life of the party, and had light brown eyes—he needed to be clean-shaven for his job at Fort Detrick, she remembered Kelly mentioning.

It seemed like she might be able to take her pick of the room. Well—except for Kelly's boyfriend—but the way he looked at her, he probably wanted her, too. But she would never. Kelly's boyfriend was Kelly's boyfriend.

Steve had both loved and hated when other men responded to her sexually. He loved it because it meant he had an advantage over them. He told her he could look at those guys who wanted her and say *mine* with his eyes and he'd instantly win their respect. He hated it because it meant other guys wanted what he had. He didn't want anyone else to want her in the same way he wanted her.

But had he ever taken her feelings into account? She wasn't just a thing. She was Lindsay and she was a person, too. She didn't belong to Steve. Or anyone. He couldn't say mine with his eyes—what kind of stupid thing was that?

She realized she was just staring off into space while the rest of the party held conversations with each other. “More shots?” She grabbed her glass.

Jason filled her glass and his own. Alana, the girl who was the reason for the party in the first place, offered her glass, and so did Ben. Kelly shook her head. It was

weird. She'd promised Lindsay a good time and now she was acting like drinking more would be the worst thing to ever happen to her. That's what they were here for, drinking.

She liked the way alcohol made her act differently. It made her more outgoing. It made her more likely to talk to a group of strangers, to open up to people she'd never met before.

They downed their shots, but Lindsay chased hers with a sip of coke, and Jason decided to focus his attention on her. "So how do you like Victoria's Secret?"

"I've seen a lot of boobs."

"On purpose?"

"I'm a fitter. Usually we measure for fit outside of the clothes, but some women don't know that and I walk into a changing room and bam, boobs."

"'Bam, boobs!' Can I be a fitter? I'd do a great job." He looked at her chest. "I'd say you're a D."

Lindsay laughed and searched for Kelly to laugh with her. It was the same joke most men made when they found out she fit women for bras at Victoria's Secret. But Kelly was on top of Ben, not paying attention.

"Well, you're halfway correct. A D what?"

"You mean there's more?"

Men. They could always get the cup size, but would forget about the band size.

"Well, there are two parts." She held her breasts in her hands. "The cup size." She brought her hands down between her breasts and drew a line beneath them. "And the band size."

Jason watched her hands as she moved them away from her body, resting them on her cup of rum and coke. From the corner of her eye, she saw that Ben and Tim had been watching as well. The room was hers, like a theater performance, and she was the star.

“Oh. Well.”

“So, then, what’s my band size,” she said. She knew to keep her voice low, barely audible over the blare of the music.

Steve would hate her right now. When she’d been with Steve, she’d never flirted with another guy, ever, because she knew how much he hated it and she wanted to be respectful of their relationship. She knew *she* hated it when Steve flirted with other girls. They’d had a talk, early on, about the fact that she never wanted to see him flirting with another girl. He told her he’d like her to do the same. And even though she never expected him to keep the promise when she wasn’t around, somehow she did it when he wasn’t around. Guys who weren’t Steve just weren’t attractive to her while she was with him.

Jason looked energized, electrified. Tim looked like he wanted to jump over the bar and join the conversation. Ben probably wanted to throw Kelly off of him and rip off Lindsay’s shirt, have sex with her in front of everyone, throwing all consequences to the wind. She’d forgotten how good she was at flirting, how naturally it came to her.

“Turn around,” Jason said. He rotated his pointer finger.

He wanted to look at her body, and she wanted him to. She wanted everyone to look at her body. The Michael Kors jeans she’d picked hugged her ass perfectly and her new boots—Kate Spade—had a three-inch heel that made her taller than her usual 5’4”.

She liked her shirt, a plain black shirt, an old one, because of its scoop-neck design that bared a “just right,” amount of cleavage.

“I’m gonna say 4,” Jason said.

Lindsay laughed at him. She tried to find Kelly to laugh at him too, but she wasn’t in The Springhouse anymore. Where’d she go? Alana locked eyes with her and laughed. At least Alana understood how dumb this guy was being about her bra size. She decided there was no way she’d be sleeping with anyone tonight. Not dumb Jason in his stupidity. Not Tim, who seemed afraid to approach her now. Not Ben who was already taken, even though he looked like he wanted to sleep with her anyway. Not Brendan, who didn’t seem to notice her at all, preoccupied with Alana.

Alana reached out a hand and pulled Lindsay over to her. “I like you,” she said.

Lindsay smiled. “Cool.”

“I don’t say that about a lot of people.” Alana poured some rum and some coke into Lindsay’s glass.

“Why not?”

“We get a lot of people in here who seem cool at the start, but can’t dance in the rafters later. You seem like you can dance in the rafters later.”

“What makes you say that?”

Kelly slammed the door as she returned to The Springhouse. The smile on her face was fake. The way she said “Oh, look, you two are becoming friends,” had a high, false ring to it.

“Tim, I think it’s time to make it rain men,” Alana said.

Kelly's smile pulled tighter, faker. "Oh, right. Of course it is! Let's do it!" She began clearing everything off the bar.

Ben

He'd already gotten naked and streaked around the springhouse on a dare. What more of himself could he expose? "Truth," he said.

Alana sucked down the rest of her beer. "Tell us about your most embarrassing sexual experience," she said. Of course she would. He knew she liked making people squirm.

Good thing he had a stock response and he didn't have to tell them about the time he'd cried into his ex-girlfriend's arms after he couldn't get it up. It had marked the beginning of the end with her, though he didn't know it at the time. He'd always been able to get it up before, and the tears—an involuntary response—those were the most embarrassing part. Now that he was getting older, getting it up was proving to be more difficult, but he could always blame it on the alcohol instead of his own dick, or instead of the boring, predictable sex he and Kelly had after two years together. At least he hadn't cried since.

"Well, there was this one time, I was fucking a girl with nipple piercings. And that part was good. She could take a magnet and stick her titties together with the magnet and that was real good. Real good titty fucking. She didn't have to touch them or nothing. But then she tried to put the magnet up my ass."

He paused for laughter, though he knew most of the room had heard the story already. Alana had—he'd told her the morning after it happened.

“What’s wrong with that?” Lindsay said.

“What do you mean? Nothing’s going up my ass. Not ever.”

“A lot of guys like prostate stimulation,” she said. She looked at each of his guy friends for confirmation, but he knew they wouldn’t meet her eyes. Tim hadn’t had sex in about two months, and he would never be that adventurous. Jason had let one of his many girlfriends try it, but didn’t like it. When Jason told him the story, he shuddered a lot. And he didn’t want to know about his brother’s experience. He didn’t want to even think about it. There were some lines you just didn’t cross when it came to your family, and sex was one of them. Even if they had both slept with Alana, they never mentioned their experiences to one another.

“Anyway,” Ben said. “She really wanted to put this thing up my ass, and I kept telling her ‘My ass is off limits,’ but she wouldn’t listen. So I had to take it away from her. And then, thinking it would make her leave me alone about it, I swallowed it.”

He paused again for laughter, but none came. Kelly looked bored, but he couldn’t blame her. She must have heard this story a million times. At least Alana didn’t look bored. She was smiling and nodding along.

Now that she was home again, he wanted to sleep with her, but knew she’d never let him as long as he was still with Kelly. When he was with his ex, he’d wanted to cheat on her with Alana, but she’d always told him no. She always told him, “Break up with her, then we can talk.” Finally, when his ex broke up with him, they had sex. It wasn’t mindblowing sex, but it was good—he could get it up every time. But the added complication of Brendan fucking her every time now, plus the fact that he wouldn’t

break up with Kelly—he loved Kelly, he’d never leave her—it would be a while before he slept with Alana again.

“And then she just starts shrieking. ‘Oh my God! That’s a rare-earth magnet, you’re going to get sick, you’re going to die!’” He imitated a high-pitched voice, screaming.

“I didn’t believe her. Why would I? So I’m ignoring her and trying to kiss her and get her to calm the fuck down. But then, she sticks her fingers down my throat, trying to make me throw up. Like right on her.”

Once, he threw up on his ex-girlfriend after sleeping with her. He was drunk—she was drunk, too—but he had just finished and felt so satisfied, and then his stomach disagreed. It was mostly liquid and it mostly hit her stomach and chest. And they were already naked, so it wasn’t much of a mess—they just jumped in the shower. But she was grossed out, and who could blame her? No one wanted to get thrown up on. Especially after sex.

“So I pushed her off me and told her I’d take care of it myself. I went into the bathroom and threw up. But after I threw up, I masturbated. I came all over the goddamn magnet. *Oh yeah*. Of course, I washed it off before I gave it back to her, but still. Then I just went back and handed it to her and put my clothes on and left. No way I was doing anything more with her after that.”

“Right?” Jason said. “No one in their right mind would.”

“No way,” Tim said.

Lindsay looked confused. “I just don’t see how that’s particularly embarrassing.”

“You’d see it if you were a guy,” Ben said.

“But it just seems cruel. Oh! You got her! Aren’t you so smart?”

Ben felt himself blush. He didn’t want to blush. He ducked under the bar for another beer. He lit a cigarette. “Fine, then what’s your most embarrassing sexual encounter ever?”

“No,” she said. “You don’t get to ask me that.”

“I really like you,” said Alana. “In case that wasn’t already clear.”

“Nobody cares, Alana,” Kelly said. She stormed out of the springhouse. Ben sighed. Now he had to follow after his girlfriend instead of staying to see how the rest of truth or dare would go.

He followed her into the house. He followed her up the stairs. By the time he drunkenly opened his bedroom door, she was already tucked in to his bed. He could say, *Kelly, what’s wrong? Kelly, tell me why you’re acting the way you are*, but that’s what she wanted him to do. And he already knew the answer. It was because he was paying more attention to Lindsay and Alana than he was to her. Some switch had flipped and she was playing the jealous girlfriend. Probably because she realized she had something to worry about. He watched Kelly curl the blanket around her body from the doorway of his bedroom.

He *was* planning to cheat on her tonight. Sex with Lindsay would happen and Kelly would be right, but she didn’t have to know she was right. He could trick Kelly into thinking the bed-shaking from Brendan’s room was actually Brendan, when it would really be him and Lindsay. He’d talk Brendan into sleeping somewhere else with Alana instead of their usual location, though he didn’t know how Brendan could

convince Alana—she'd never let him cheat on Kelly if she knew that was the plan. So, he wouldn't tell them that was the plan. Wait, actually, would his brother be so easy to persuade?

As much as he didn't want to admit it, Brendan and Alana were probably planning on having sex in that bed tonight. Would Brendan give up sex so easily? If he were in the same position, he would never be that selfless. But his brother was much different. His brother had always tried to please their mother and their older sister, had always been a rule-follower, had always gotten straight A's in high school and college. He'd find a way to spin it. He'd leave the cheating out of it. He entered his bedroom and walked over to the bed.

His ex-girlfriend had never been jealous, which had made it that much easier to cheat. Staying faithful to her had been difficult, even though he'd loved her with everything he had. Love and sex were different. Even though he loved her, he still wanted to sleep with lots of women. He only loved his girlfriends. He loved Kelly. He loved his ex. Two loves in twenty-nine years. But he fucked many. Too many. It made him reconsider sleeping with Lindsay for a minute. But she was right there. And he wasn't going to leave Kelly—he loved her. More than he loved anyone else in the world. She was there for him when he needed a partner, someone to indulge his nerdy Civil War History habit. His canoe trips down the Potomac. His hikes up the Catoctin Mountains. She wanted to do the same things he wanted to do. She packed snacks and beers and remembered facts he'd spout off after reading them in random biographies or history books. No one else would be that person for him. No one else would put up with him the way she did with him. He sat next to her and rubbed her back.

“I’m not feeling so hot, so I think I’m just going to bed early,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “We’ll miss you down there.”

She flopped over, away from him, so he got up, left her there.

He lingered in the doorway. “Want the lights off?”

“I don’t care.”

Ben turned the lights off and rushed through the house back to the springhouse.

Alana and Lindsay were naked, sitting on the stools next to each other as he walked in.

“Praise the Good Lord!” Ben said after he closed the door. “Who do I have to thank for this?”

Jason took a bow. A timer on his phone went off. “And that’s time,” he said.

Lindsay and Alana dived for their clothes on the couch.

“What will it take for a few minutes more?” Ben said.

Alana bit her lip. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.” She glanced at Brendan, then looked back. “For you.”

His ex-girlfriend had never experienced The Springhouse. They’d broken up before he built it. Maybe it was because they’d broken up that he’d built it. A safe place at his own house where he could drink and smoke and fuck. No one had ever gotten a DUI or anything coming or going from The Springhouse. Most people just stayed the night. He’d handmade the bar. Before he’d put down a floor in the loft and walled it off, the entire upstairs had been open. Then Jason had bought a pack of glow-in-the-dark stars and stuck them up there and named it “The Spacefuck.” When they were younger,

it had gotten more use, but now nobody wanted to use it, they assumed there was dried spooge all over the floor—it was just a storage room.

The only time Ben used the Spacefuck was with Alana. It was brand new. He'd installed a 70's style shag carpet and it gave Alana rug-burn along her back, which had hurt her for days afterward, like a sunburn. He decided, after seeing her skin, never to use it again. Jason, on the other hand, didn't mind giving women rug-burn. He said, "it's something for them to remember me by."

Truth or dare was dying down. What to do to keep the party going? He went behind the bar and pulled Tim's music off the cord. The first playlist he queued up was his Disney playlist: *A Whole New World*.

Everyone sang along, taking large sips of their drinks. Not long after the Disney playlist, Ben noticed how Tim kept slurring as he tried to speak. He'd be heading to bed soon. Jason would follow soon after. He'd just crash on a couch in the springhouse.

He pulled his brother aside. "Hey, do you think it might be nice to let Lindsay sleep in your bed. Your big bed?"

"What about me and Alana?"

"Living room?"

Brendan's eyes were glassy. "I don't know, man."

"It would be the nice thing to do. She is new to the place."

His brother looked across the room at Alana. "I guess we'll figure something out." He finished the rest of his beer and tried to chuck it into the trash can in the corner, but missed.

And, just as Ben had predicted a few minutes earlier, Tim yawned. “I’m gonna go tits up,” he said. “Band room?” It was the room they called the extra room beyond the living room.

“Should be blankets in there from last time,” Ben said.

Jason was trying to touch Lindsay, but she kept pulling away. She didn’t want him. He was too drunk to notice how she didn’t want him. He’d been for her trying all night. Trying and failing. The one she really wanted was him, he knew it. And the way he’d get her: he’d show her to her room. But then he’d linger. He’d tuck her in. He’d ask her if she wanted him to stay.

Alana

Life was complicated for Alana so her time at The Springhouse was supposed to un-complicate things. Now that she had moved back home, life was a little less complicated, but still as fucked up. When Brendan had come to drive back with her from Spokane, she’d finally admitted she loved him after all those years. She’d said the words, “I love you,” as they shared a hotel bed in Fargo. And he’d said them back.

But they couldn’t be together, they admitted on the road as they talked about it the next day. He wanted kids. He wanted a family. He wanted a traditional life and a traditional future. Things she never wanted. She would never change herself and what she wanted for her future just to be with him, no matter how much she loved him. No matter how much she thought they should be together. They could sleep together and maintain a friendship and acknowledge their feelings for each other, but they’d never be in a relationship with one another. Alana knew someone else would come along and her

feelings for Brendan would fade, like with her ex-boyfriend, but she also knew she'd never love someone the same way she loved him. He'd always be special. Even if she fell for someone else, eventually.

Brendan took her out for brunch the day after the party. They hadn't planned it that way. He said she'd deserved it after what had happened. The hangover she'd gotten appreciated brunch as well, and her headache eased after she ate eggs benedict with crab meat—though in Maryland, anything could ease her headache with crab meat in it. They both lived in Rockville, Montgomery County, a half-hour's drive on 270—without traffic—near DC, where their jobs were located. They'd driven to The Springhouse together, and on the way back they stopped in Gaithersburg, at a Silver Diner.

As they ate, they talked about everything except the party until the bill arrived, then Alana broached the subject. “He should know better.”

“He does.”

“He's an alcoholic.”

“He knows that, too.”

“Then why doesn't he—”

“It's just the way he is.”

Ben was the way he was. They had been using that refrain for a while. Just like Tim was the way he was—too anxious to get out of his shell and move out of his parents' house. And Jason was the way he was—narcissistic and selfish, blaming his actions on PTSD picked up in Afghanistan with the Marines after high school. Yes, she loved them for who they were, flaws and all, but wasn't it time they took a critical look at themselves? How was it that she and Brendan were the only ones who managed to

have stable jobs in stable fields and only viewed The Springhouse as a chance to relax with friends after a busy week?

And yet, she came home because she thought everyone would be the same.

People had always been the same when she visited on vacations. Ben was reliably Ben—hormone driven, drunken, partying Ben. But Kelly was good for him. She cut down on his booze intake, encouraged new excitement of old hobbies he'd forgotten as he drank more often, like hiking and history, but he was bored with Kelly now, falling back into his old ways.

If she hadn't met Ben, she wouldn't know Brendan. And Brendan was nothing like his brother. They looked alike, except for Brendan's blue eyes, but Brendan was quiet, shy, reserved. She wondered what this would do to their relationship, though they were never that close to begin with. Would Brendan disconnect, like she was planning to do? Or would he be more direct? Would he tell Ben what he did was wrong and that he had to make it right? She didn't know—she wasn't going to ask.

"I didn't think Ben would try to rape her," Alana said.

Just as Alana had fallen asleep against the rug, Lindsay's screams woke her. At first, she couldn't quite tell what Lindsay was saying, but as she ran up the stairs in her bare feet, she heard them perfectly: "I said no. No means no. Get off me!"

Brendan followed her up the stairs. So did Tim. Ben had locked the door. Brendan and Tim ran against it with all their weight, and popped it open to watch Ben climb on top of Lindsay.

"I'm not going to let you cheat on your girlfriend with me," Lindsay yelled.

Alana noticed how much anger she directed at him. "What are you doing? Stop!"

Ben hadn't seen the door. He kept trying to keep Lindsay beneath him with his legs. Until Tim breached the threshold and pulled him off. Ben started yelling at Tim, then throwing punches at Tim, and Brendan had to step between them. Lindsay huddled beneath the covers on the bed.

Kelly opened the door across the hall. Alana didn't know whether she should protect her from seeing the aftermath of her boyfriend trying to rape someone or whether she should let her see everyone for who they really were, which is what she ultimately decided.

In the diner, Brendan was trying to form a response when the waitress brought their credit card receipts for them to sign. Alana signed quickly, waited to see what he'd say, if he'd try to excuse his brother's behavior. She slid her card into her wallet.

"I don't think he saw it that way."

She didn't care how much she loved him. He said the wrong thing. "Doesn't matter how he saw it. He still tried to rape her."

"No, I mean, that's the fucked up part about it," Brendan said. "Until last night, he didn't think he was doing anything wrong."

Alana relaxed. Brendan *did* know better. He wouldn't have tried to rape anyone. He wouldn't have pulled what Ben did. The brothers were distinct, different. She loved Brendan and had for a while. She would continue to love him, no matter how fractured her relationship with Ben became. Because she couldn't see herself remaining friends with Ben after the rape. She had to take care of Kelly now.

Alana had seen the way Kelly watched Ben, with her face full of confusion, as he punched Tim. Kelly still looked confused as she tried to intercede. Kelly tried to calm

her boyfriend. Alana stopped her, couldn't let her take the wrong side. She pulled Kelly away. "No. This started when Ben tried to rape Lindsay," she said.

Kelly shook her head. She looked from Lindsay, on the bed, to Ben, restrained by his brother on the floor, to Alana, then back to Ben. Alana watched Kelly's head rotate to the broken door. Then back to Lindsay.

"Like he could even get it up," Kelly said in a whisper. She turned, ran out of the room and her footsteps echoed throughout the stairway to the bedroom.

Alana crossed her arms and stared at Ben. Brendan let him up.

No one was sober enough to drive home. "I'll take the band room with Lindsay," Alana said. "Tim, you sleep up here."

Then they heard Kelly's car speed away from the farmhouse.

Elbows on the diner table, Alana let her head fall into her open hands. "I'll be taking a break from The Springhouse for a while," she said. Though she didn't want to, it was the right thing to do. When she planned her move back, she imagined attending Springhouse parties every weekend, bringing the old times back, relaxing with her friends. But the past needed to stay in the past. Her friendship with Ben would be strained until he grew up. She needed Ben to know what he did was wrong. She needed him to stop living his life the way he was living it. Needed him to understand how royally he'd fucked up.

"I'm going to have to have a talk with him, older brother to younger brother," Brendan said.

Before they left the diner, Alana used the bathroom. She and Brendan would go to Brendan's and have the sex they hadn't had at the party. It would be good. It would be satisfying.

She splashed water on her face, wiped it off with a paper towel, and applied a new coat of eyeliner. It was good to be back home, close to her family again, close to Brendan's arms. Maybe she would meet someone she'd love more than Brendan. But probably not. She would spend the rest of her life loving him and sleeping with him and being okay with the fact that they'd never call what they had "a relationship." On the way out, the paper towel missed the can. She stopped, turned around, and placed it carefully on top of the trash.

Larry and the Pretzel Stand

We all thought Larry was going crazy. He was getting rid of all his stuff. And we knew he was a hoarder already, so it wasn't like him to give away anything. Us kids, working at the Auntie Anne's Pretzel kiosk at the Francis Scott Key Mall in Frederick Maryland, could come to no consensus on the matter. He gave Lynn his truck to give to her son on his sixteenth birthday. He gave Robyn his turntable, his speakers, his records. He gave Mary his kitchen stuff—a fondue set from the 70's, spatulas, cooking trays, pots and pans that didn't match—and some towels. We watched him take his stuff, the things that would fit back there, to the back room and leave it for some intended person to find, all while we speculated about what he might be up to. Some of us said he was moving to Alaska. Others said he was finally getting therapy for his hoarding, that it was a good thing. Still, others said it was because Larry was just going completely batshit crazy and there was no real reason behind his actions.

Two weeks later, when he died, we found our answer. We'd heard that he hadn't come in for his opening shift one morning—none of us opened, we were kids, we worked shifts after school let out, we worked weekend shifts—and we heard that no one could reach him on the phone. We'd heard that Lynn, who'd gotten his truck, had driven to his house and found him dead in his bed. We'd heard that he'd only told the boss, Michelle, that he had lung cancer, though he'd never smoked a day in his life, and she promised she wouldn't tell the rest of the staff. We heard that he'd learned of his

diagnosis too late to do anything about it and that he ultimately refused any kind of treatment.

We hadn't expected Doris, the elderly woman working the day shifts because she didn't have anything else to do, to outlive him. She was sweet. She liked the customers and she liked our middle-aged coworkers, but man, did she have a motor-mouth. She wouldn't stop talking to us when we'd come in for our shift changes. Larry had hated her, we guessed, because she annoyed him too much, or maybe because of some long-standing fight that had happened before any of us started working there. We remembered the Christmas he'd made fudge, a large batch for everyone and a special batch for Doris, but Doris' batch had an added ingredient: a laxative. Some of us heard him recount his version of the day's events: "She was ripping off her apron and running to the bathroom without warning all day. She didn't even know why. But I did." We were worried he'd do the same to us if we ever got on his bad side. So we tried not to get on his bad side.

After his death, manager Michelle called us in for a meeting, about Larry and what happened with him, a meeting to plan his Mall Memorial Service. She glared at us as she said, "I know the rumor mill has been churning like crazy the past few weeks, but you kids are going to have to keep it down."

We knew. She didn't have to say it. But, we also knew it was rude to roll our eyes in the middle of a meeting about someone's death.

Our relationship with Larry had been complicated. He tolerated us because he needed us. He'd never given us any of his stuff—only our older coworkers—and he'd always treated us like we were the same kid even though we were clearly different people. Larry called all the boys "John" and all the girls "Jane." He thought we all went

to the same high school, though we came from schools all over Frederick county. When he would try to remember who to send on breaks, he'd get it wrong, and would have to rely on shift managers to remind him who was up for a break next. We knew he couldn't individuate our faces sometimes; we knew he couldn't bother to try.

Still, Larry was the one who performed all the necessary repairs on the shop. After the coke machine stopped working one afternoon, it was Larry who fixed it so Michelle didn't have to call in a professional. When one of us accidentally broke the wheelie-cart we used to carry supplies from the back room to the kiosk every night, Larry was there to fix the wheel. Twice he re-hung the neon lights—once when they weren't up to “mall code,” and once when Auntie Anne's corporate made us change our logo. Who would be there to fix everything now? The lemonade machine was starting to make a weird noise. Last we'd heard, Larry was going to be taking it apart to see what was the matter. We didn't know anyone else who could do that. Maybe Michelle, but she was never around. She was only the manager. She didn't do any work—she just told everyone else what to do. Larry was the best at listening to her. He'd do anything she asked without a fight.

It was after the memorial that we noticed Larry haunting the pretzel stand. First it was the lemonade machine. It had completely broken the day of his memorial. Unusable. But then, the very next day, it was up and running with no noise, like it was brand new. We asked if it was brand new. Lynn and Robyn and Mary said no, it wasn't. They'd just come in that morning and it had been fixed. We all knew it was something Larry would have done, if he'd still been alive. We started whispering about how Lynn and Larry had

worked together to fake his death. But then, when the mixer we used for mixing up our pretzel dough broke down and we had to bring in the back-up mixer for the day—and the back-up mixer was from the 60’s or 70’s and really shitty—somehow, our regular mixer worked like it hadn’t been broken in the first place the very next day. We, of course, asked who had fixed it—whether Michelle called in a professional overnight, or whether it had never been broken, whether we just *thought* it had—and they said that it *had* been broken, but that Michelle hadn’t had time to call anyone yet, it had somehow been repaired in the back room before Mary arrived for her opening shift. We wondered whether Larry was hiding in the mall all day: climbing up to the roof, tiptoeing through clothes racks, reading books at Barnes and Noble; and sleeping at the Sleep Number store all night: cranking those mattresses up to 9, mega-firm, so he could sleep comfortably after faking his own death. When would he come out and yell, “Just kidding,” with a goofy smile on his face?

One of our regular customers, Mr. Leon, who managed the Foot Locker across from our kiosk, came over for his usual order one Sunday afternoon whispering that he’d seen Larry after we closed, taking Sheila Shine to the sink basins to make them extra sparkly. Mr. Leon had been stocking shoes and saw Larry for a minute, just doing his job, like he did, and Mr. Leon turned away to keep stocking, but then he remembered Larry had died. He said that when he turned back to talk to Larry, to ask what he was doing there, poof, he was gone.

So then we told Mr. Leon what was going on as far as repairs and our theory about faking his death.

“Larry couldn’t have disappeared that quickly,” Mr. Leon said. “When I saw him, he was flat on his back, wiping the undersides of those sinks. The Larry we knew would have trouble moving from that position that fast.”

We all knew how Larry would drag himself up with a grunt from the floor whenever he’d have to bend over to get something. No one knew how old he was, really. Some of us guessed he was forty-five. Others of us guessed fifty-nine. Still, others guessed sixty-five. Mr. Leon had a point, though, everyone knew Larry’s joints had been hurting him and that he’d always had trouble moving up and down.

“Larry could only be a ghost or spectre or a spirit,” Mr. Leon said. He took his pretzel off the counter and ate a bite. “Think about it.”

Larry kept fixing our broken things. Like the cash register that one of us dropped off the cart on the way to the back room to count out for the night. It was superglued nice and tight the next day, though, and even though you could tell we’d dropped it, Larry had fixed it for us.

Mall maintenance—the guys who would take out the trash cans in the middle of the mall, who would keep the fountain at center court running, and who would prep vacant spaces for new leases—had always been friends with Larry, joking around with him before and after work shifts. Well, *they* even stopped by to say they saw Larry working in the kiosk after we’d all gone home. They said they’d seen him doing a deep clean on the oven after it had cooled off from the day’s baking. They said they’d been dragging out old wall fixtures and shelving from the Hallmark—the Hallmark store that nobody wanted to rent next—down the way to take to the dumpster and as they passed,

they noticed Larry, arm in the oven, scrubbing away. And then, when they returned for more junk, he was gone.

We had noticed that the oven was nicer, better looking, than it had been when we'd left the night before, but we'd assumed that either Robyn or Lynn had cleaned it that morning, before they'd turned it on for the day. They told us how they'd thought Mary had cleaned it after her shift was over. She said, "Are you nuts—the thing takes an hour to cool after you turn it off."

We said, "Well, it's a good thing Larry was here to do it for us, then."

Lynn opened and closed her mouth. Robyn crossed herself the Catholic way. Mary dropped the tongs she was holding. "Do not speak ill of the dead," Robyn said.

Were we speaking ill of the dead? We were just stating the obvious. "No, it's not a bad thing. He's dead, but he's still here. He's a friendly ghost, like Casper. Helping us out."

"Ghosts do not exist," said Robyn.

"Larry does," we said.

"Get back to work!"

We hated that they thought of us as liars. Outside of work, most of us were honor-roll students. We worked hard to get good grades and to apply to top-tier colleges so we wouldn't be stuck in Frederick for the rest of our lives. So we wouldn't have to work at a pretzel stand for the rest of our lives. So we wouldn't die working at one. We would not let Robyn and Mary and Lynn brand us liars, rumor-starters, mischievous kids. We would prove Larry's ghost was real.

First, we enlisted Mall Security. Darnell, head honcho in charge, told us he saw Larry once, but that he thought it was his mind playing tricks on him, that he was just so used to seeing him in there that he imagined Larry was in his usual spot cleaning up the pretzel rolling station after hours. Now that we were coming to him, saying that Larry was a ghost, he kind of believed us, but he wanted to see proof as well. He said he was more inclined to believe it was his own mind. We knew he still sometimes had flashbacks from his time in Afghanistan so we understood where he was coming from. Having hard evidence on video might help him believe it wasn't in his head. But still, we hadn't exactly seen Larry either. We'd just heard the stories other people told us.

It was easy for us to get cameras hung near our store. But the next part of our plan was the difficult one. We wanted to get a glimpse of him ourselves. And it was harder for Darnell to agree to that part of the plan.

Our kiosk was located under a skylight. Like, immediately beneath it. We wanted to climb to the roof at the end of our shift and lay our bodies on top of that skylight and stare down until we saw Larry's ghost. Darnell was scared. "There are seven of you," he said. "That's too much weight for that skylight."

"But what if we distribute the weight equally?" we said.

He considered.

"What if we only put a little bit of our bodies on the skylight and the rest on the roof?"

He considered.

"We'll do anything. We just want to see him like everyone else has seen him."

"I'll have to be there to supervise," he said.

“We agree to those terms.”

And so we went out after our shifts, one night, two nights, three nights. One full week went by and we didn't see Larry. Then we started breaking things on purpose to call Larry to us, but there were only so many things one could break in a pretzel shop before it looked suspicious to the boss. We wondered if Larry's ghost was frustrated, wishing he could make us fudge and watch us rip our aprons off on the way to the bathroom.

We wondered if Larry had a family, parents, siblings, people he'd left behind. We'd never heard Larry talk about a family the entire time we'd worked with him. One of us speculated that he'd once been a carnie and had a carnie family. We thought about Larry traveling all over the country, operating a Ferris Wheel or a Tilt-A-Whirl. But the image didn't fit the Larry we had known, the Larry who had collected things and stored them in his house and cherished them more than people.

One of us said that he'd worked at the Francis Scott Key Mall his entire life—we'd overheard Robyn telling Mary he'd worked at the Bavarian Pretzel Kiosk before it went under—we thought he considered the mall people his family. It was certainly true of the way he treated our older coworkers. We wondered if they knew more about Larry than we did. They must have known things about him that they'd never tell us. Mary and Robyn and Lynn spent more hours with Larry than anyone else did.

We wondered about Larry's life as we broke the sink, the hot water machine, the time-clock. We'd heard he had come from the Frederick Towne Mall, the one that had long-closed all the way on the other side of town. We thought he'd worked at the Auntie Anne's over there, transferring into our store when it went kaput. We might have

overheard Michelle saying something to Lynn about that, but none of us were certain. Still, we broke things to try to see Larry. Those broken things, old register drawers, mop heads, vinyl ad holders, were all fixed the next day, but we still didn't see Larry from our position on top of the skylight the previous night. We checked the video tapes. Nothing. Darnell spotted him on the tapes, though.

“There's your proof! There he is! Auntie Anne's uniform and everything,” he said. He told us we could take the tapes to Robyn and she'd see right away that Larry's ghost was real. He told us that Larry still had unfinished business on Earth—the Auntie Anne's pretzel kiosk at the Francis Scott Key Mall in Frederick, Maryland—but we didn't believe him.

One of us wondered if Larry had died a virgin. We couldn't imagine Larry having sex. We couldn't imagine Larry doing anything but working at Auntie Anne's. If anything, we thought his body had died and his spirit had carried on, doing what it usually did.

And, to add insult to injury, the mall security guys who had walked by on the inside said they'd seen him in there, working away to keep the store just as perfect as ever. We had to come up with theories. Maybe he'd show himself to everyone but those who worked at the store? Maybe he couldn't show himself to those who worked at the store? Maybe he was joking with us in his own way—he knew we were trying to prove his existence to Robyn and Mary and Lynn and he just wouldn't let us because he was mad we were breaking things on purpose.

The next step was to wait in the mall near the store after hours and hope he wouldn't notice we were around. We asked Mr. Leon to let us inside the Foot Locker after it closed, after the gate came down, and we would peer through the bars as though on a stakeout. We asked the maintenance guys to let us into the former Hallmark with them. We asked what would become of Hallmark, what it would turn into next. They told us they were still searching for the next store, the next renter.

One night, when Mr. Leon claimed to see him waxing the floor, we tried to see what he could see—we tried, really, but we couldn't. Then we noticed the difference the next day. Mr. Leon hadn't been wrong; Larry had waxed the floor. It shone and gleamed in the springtime sun, but how could we have missed seeing him when he was right there in front of us? Mr. Leon had seen him, ghostly and all, and we hadn't.

A few days later, we asked Lynn and Mary and Robyn to humor us. To watch the store with us with Mr. Leon. They grumbled about it. "You damn kids. If we do this, will you do your jobs and stop with all the 'ghost' talk?"

We knew we wouldn't, but we said yes, just to convince them.

And then it happened. Mr. Leon saw Larry cleaning the Icee Machine. Not a regular clean, either, a special clean only he knew how to do. He pointed it out to us, and we pointed it out to Robyn and Lynn and Mary. And they looked like they'd seen a ghost. Because they had. They'd seen Larry. The ghost of Larry. But we still hadn't.

How? How was it they could see Larry's ghost and we couldn't. We mean, it was great that they believed us and all, but we still couldn't see him.

Mary and Robyn and Lynn started treating us differently at work, though. They had a newfound respect for us. Stopped calling us "You kids," and addressed us by our

names. Sometimes, they even asked us if we wanted to roll the pretzels—a job they usually reserved for themselves. We hadn't expected Larry's ghost to do that for us.

But still, we were frustrated. Even though we had told everyone we were trying to see Larry's ghost for proof, our search became something different after everyone believed us. It changed into a new mystery. The mystery of why everyone else could see him but us.

One summer night, we brought tents, sleeping bags, a charcoal grill, hot dogs, s'more's ingredients, and camped out on the mall roof because we had Darnell's permission to be up there. We knew we weren't going to see Larry, so why not do something no one else could? School had just let out. We were making a little money before heading off to college. We had no worries or fears. That night, our conversation focused on Larry and all of our unanswered questions. Why hadn't he ever told us, or anyone, about his life? We wondered if we could play detective and look him up. If we could find records of Larry and his life as he lived it. But—where would we go? We didn't even know when or where he was born. We couldn't agree on his age. We didn't know if he was even from Maryland.

Maybe not knowing led to not seeing, like some *Angels in the Outfield*, sappy children's movie bullshit, one of us said. “If you build it, he will come,” another of us quoted *Field of Dreams*.

We also considered how Larry found us annoying. He put up with us but did not rely on us, we said. As we cooked hot dogs on the grill and sipped on lemonade, we

wondered. “Maybe we can’t see him because he doesn’t like us very much,” one of us said.

“He hates Doris. Can she see him?” we asked.

So the next time we worked with Doris, we asked her. She wore her Auntie Anne’s visor low on her head to cover up her gray hair. She wore old lady shoes, orthopedic shoes, recommended by a doctor.

“Of course I seen him,” she said. “And I wish he’d just get on to Hell already.”

We could not formulate a response. We glared at her.

“You’re trying to tell me you can’t see him laughing at me over the glass there?”

She pointed to the corner where we rolled the pretzels.

We shook our heads.

“Dagnabbit. Son-of-a-bitch.” She brought down a pair of tongs hard on the island where we flipped the fresh-out-of-the-oven pretzels. They bounced off and clattered to the floor. “Goddamn you,” she said, glaring at what we assumed was Larry’s face in the glass, as she picked them up and tossed them into the sink.

“Why did he hate you so much?”

“He was born hateful,” she said. “He used me as his scapegoat.”

We begged her to tell us why she thought this way. Begged her to tell us more of what she knew about his life. The only answers she revealed were these: he never got along with his older brothers—he had older brothers?—we whispered to ourselves later; he left his hometown—somewhere in West Virginia—young, without a high school degree; he’d hated Doris when she’d been hired, a while after he’d moved from the

Frederick Towne Mall—so that one *was* true—because they were so different. She was so open and he was so distant, so closed off.

Before we left for college, Mr. Leon closed his Foot Locker. He told us he couldn't keep it open anymore because everyone bought shoes cheaper online. Plus, the mall had raised its rent. We were sad to see him go, but we were leaving too, so it didn't make much of a difference. Our shifts became fewer and farther between as we packed for college. One of us was heading north to Dartmouth. Three of us were going to be roommates at the University of Maryland. Another would party at WVU. Two would attend rival SEC schools: The University of South Carolina and Clemson. And the last would head west, to Colorado State.

We grew desperate to see him as our days with Auntie Anne's came close to an end. On our last day, we called together everyone who could see him. All our older coworkers, Michelle, Mr. Leon, the maintenance guys, Darnell and the other security people, and we asked them whether they'd been lying to us the whole time. We demanded the truth. We demanded justice. They laughed in our faces. They told us we were the ones who started it. If we hadn't pointed out all the fixing and the adjusting, no one would have ever noticed Larry's ghost in the first place. They said it was our own fault. They said it shouldn't bother us anymore. They said "let sleeping dogs lie." They said let Larry be Larry, ghost or not. We were not going to get answers—why couldn't we just accept it and move on. We had no response, no clue. We just wanted to see him. Just once.

And so we left, without a glimpse of Larry's ghost. We went to college. We majored in English and Business and Statistics and Political Science and Elementary Education. We graduated with honors, with high honors, with highest honors. Our breaks were spent with our families, with our friends. We never saw Larry or Michelle or Mr. Leon again. For all we know, Larry's ghost could still be there, at the Francis Scott Key Mall, in Frederick, Maryland, haunting the pretzel stand, laughing at Doris—if she's still there—fixing broken coke and lemonade machines, keeping the place up and running.

Would Have Been

Today Colin and Amelia are touring Rose Hill Manor, a museum built from the house of historical figure Thomas Johnson. Back in the 1700's, he was a delegate to the Continental Congress, the first Governor of Maryland, and an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. Now, the estate has a children's museum for Amelia to learn about history "through experimentation and role play," according to a sign outside the door. Colin remembers visiting Rose Hill Manor on a field trip as a child, remembers being bored, remembers not remembering the experience.

Because Colin's sister has a job interview, her first in a while, he is babysitting Amelia. Usually their mother watches her, but she is on vacation with their aunt in the Bahamas and won't be back for several days. He didn't know where else to take Amelia or what else to do with her. He didn't want to keep her in his studio apartment. There wasn't anything for a kid to do or play with in there. But Rose Hill is walking distance, just across the park that doesn't have a playground. Now that they're here, he doubts it will occupy her time better than he can. The place looks boring. Like a place for weddings, not children.

Amelia settles in for the tour with a group of other children. They sit on a rug in the parlor in front of a woman in period attire: a bonnet, a beige dress, something out of the colonial era. Parents line the wall behind the children. He takes his place with them. There are plenty of couples, some holding hands. Colin's kid would be five this year had

he not let the girl go through with the abortion. It was a one-night stand when he was twenty-five.

When she called him a month later and told him she was pregnant, he told her to do what she wanted to do, what she felt was right for her. If the girl had given birth to the child, would they have stayed together to raise her or him? Colin doesn't remember the girl's face. He doesn't remember her body. What were her breasts shaped like? Was her hair blonde or brown? Were her eyes dark or light? What had her skin tasted like when he kissed her? Had he gone down on her before sex?

Colin has tried to remember, to self-hypnotize, has tried calling the number in his phone, but ends up with some guy on the other end. The problem is that he slept with many different women that month and all of their faces blur together.

The blurred woman has light brown hair and hazel eyes and medium-sized breasts and her skin tastes like coffee and he did not go down on her before sex and he's sorry about it now. When he was younger, he did not go down on women as often as he does now. Maybe the girl who was a one-night-stand would not have been just a one-night-stand had he thought more about her and less about himself back then. Maybe they would have had the kid and gotten together and they'd be married right now, taking their own child with Amelia to Rose Hill Manor.

The guide is talking about something to do with the 1700's and Maryland as a colony and Thomas Johnson and the house. Her voice is low and smooth and he thinks she is probably a singer in a choir or a band, but he doesn't want to listen to her words, just the way she says them. Amelia is watching her. He's proud his niece can sit still and pay attention at only four years old. Colin's not-kid wouldn't be able to. If his not-kid

had been a girl, like Amelia, she would have been named Beatrice after his grandmother but he'd nickname her Bea and dress her in yellow-and-black like a bumblebee and make sure she knew she was the Queen Bee, not a drone, not a worker.

His not-daughter would look like some configuration of him and the blurred girl, with his brown eyes, his knobby knees, his dark hair. Every other part is fuzzy. Colin pictures a dark haired girl seated next to Amelia, a dark haired girl who can't sit still because he couldn't sit still. At five, he would have been crossing and uncrossing his legs. He would have been fiddling with pants zippers, petting his leg hairs, fastening and unfastening the velcro on his shoes. Colin's not-daughter might do those things as well. She may also be running her fingers through her hair, the carpet, Amelia's hair. She would probably spring up from her seat and run back to her parents along the wall, the guide's voice unable to keep her planted there with the other children. Her interest would lie in spinning in the black-and-yellow skirt, in making it flare higher with each rotation, parallel to the floor. His sister had done this when they were children. He recalls the way she would spin like a pinwheel, like a dancer.

Amelia's watching the guide, who has picked up some kind of old-fashioned loom and started working it. Do Amelia's hands ache to touch it? If his not-kid were here, he knows she would want to be first in line. The guide lets them form a line, but Amelia is patient, waits in the middle. His sister must be a good parent. Colin's sister could have had an abortion, too, but didn't. She chose to raise Amelia on her own, without a father, without a husband. Their mother babysits often, loves it, but his sister works part time at the desk of a tattoo shop. This job interview is for a real job, nine-to-five, with benefits, a salary, a potential to move ahead.

Colin would have been a good parent, too. Now that he is thirty and still single with no hope of finding someone to marry, he is letting go of the idea of having a child of his own. He's tried Tinder. He's tried OKCupid. Tinder has brought women who want parties, who are too young for him. The most promising woman, the woman he could have dated, Rachel, was twenty-five, but acted twenty-one. Their five dates were experiments in bar-hopping and sloppy sex: she increased the number of bars they'd pop into on each date. On the fifth and last date, they visited seven bars and she'd gotten too drunk for sex—but he refused to take advantage of her.

OKCupid has given him heartburn, acid reflux. No one responds to his messages. He has stopped sending them. It feels as if no one's ready to get married, to have kids, the same way he is.

The guide lets the kids explore the room. They play with the wooden toys in one corner, the butter churn in the other, the loom, the fake fireplace and its accessories. Giggles, shouts, and kid voices come from all corners and he watches Amelia run over to the wooden toys. Wooden dolls with linen clothes. What Thomas Johnson's daughters would have played with back in the colonial days.

Some parents follow their children. Colin stays against the wall, observes Amelia in her independence as she plays with a girl her age. If his not-kid were there, the three of them would be playing together. He pictures his daughter as the ringleader, the voice of the group, telling the other girls how to play and bossing them. Although his sister is older, he had bossed her around when they played together, always. Amelia has his sister's personality: reserved, chill, peacekeeping.

Amelia goes to preschool at the church he grew up in but no longer visits because he doesn't believe in God. She already knows how to read and she is learning how to write her name. Her favorite animal is the zebra, and has been since they visited the National Zoo and she lingered at the pen for most of the day, counting the stripes on the pair in the enclosure, watching them nibble pellets at feeding time, giggling as they licked salt sticks with their long tongues during training sessions. Her skin is softer than any skin he's ever touched before. Her hair is thin and smooth, but strong and tough. He picks stray strands off his clothes whenever he meets her at a family gathering and has trouble breaking each individual strand.

A group of boys by the fireplace uses the fake pokers and fire irons as swords. The guide tells them to stop, but they ignore her. Their parents step in and remove the toys from the boys' hands. What if his kid had been a boy? Colin imagines the boy to look just like him in his childhood photos and nothing like the blurred woman he's conjured.

The boy would be a copy or replica of him and him alone. There would be no features of the girl who'd had the abortion. He would be named John Henry after both of his grandfathers—first his mother's father, then his father's father. Colin's not-son wouldn't use the fireplace pokers and irons as swords, but would watch from the sidelines, knowing the other boys would get in trouble. He would pick them up afterward, after the hullabaloo, and use them as intended, to pretend to build a fake fire, to stoke fake flames, to pretend the fake fire would engulf the entire museum and that he was the only one who could save everyone. Was this what he had done on his field trip to Rose Hill Manor when he was here?

He looks back to Amelia, playing with the dolls, but she is no longer there. He surveys the room, every corner. The guide is gone, too. Has Amelia been kidnapped? By a Rose Hill Manor guide who only wants to take the cutest, the best children, who are not here with their legal parents, only here with their uncles who don't know what to do when a child is kidnapped?

Amelia must have been lured to another room of the manor by her enticing voice. Then taken to her car. He exits the room, back through the one he came in, has to find her, has to return Amelia to her mother. There is no excuse for losing her. Colin cannot say he was considering his child, imagining what *his* child would have been like that made him lose sight of the one in front of him.

But his child, boy or girl, would not have been swayed so easily. His child would know not to go anywhere with a stranger, even if that stranger is leading a tour and seems familiar. His child would be smart, even at five years old. Not that Amelia isn't. She is already reading, already writing her name. But she should know not to go places with strangers.

He wanders the manor, searching for her, calling her name. He is frantic trying to find her. The manor is empty, aside from people on solo tours who give him side-eye and strange glances. This would be easier if he had someone else with him. They could split up, cover more ground. A partner, a girlfriend, a lover. But Colin is doomed to be alone. He wants to fall in love with someone who wants to fall in love with him, who wants to marry him, who wants to have children with him. Why is that so impossible?

In one room there is a portrait of the Johnson family. The oldest daughter, in her late twenties, vaguely resembles the blurred girl he thinks would have borne his child.

Her skin is paler than the girl in his imagination, her ruffled collar high on her slender neck, but her hair color is the same and her lips are full, pink, like in his mind's eye. He approaches the girl in the portrait and touches her cheek, paint rough against his fingertips. If only he had thought to tell her not to have the abortion. If only he had thought to tell her they could raise the child together. What would have happened then? Where would they be now?

I'm sorry, he says to the woman in the portrait.

He imagines she says, Me too.

Colin thinks that the blurred girl, too, has been regretting the abortion these past five years. He thinks she has been seeing ghosts of the child they could have had in corners of museums, at family gatherings, on the couch of her apartment—wherever her apartment is these days. He thinks that the blurred girl has been trying to call his number but has been reaching some other voice on the opposite end. He thinks she has been blurring his face in her imagination as well.

When he has searched all of the downstairs rooms and finds himself back in the first hallway, he hears the guide's voice coming closer. In her songlike manner, she is telling the children something about dinner, something about the dining room, a room he visited in his search. The guide emerges, children trailing.

Amelia is in the middle of the pack. Her face lights up; she smiles when she sees him.

He smiles back. He doesn't let her see the worry, the fear he'd been feeling moments before. He doesn't let her see anything he'd been thinking about. He makes his face neutral, stoic. They pull aside from the group.

He bends to her level. Are you having fun here? he asks.

Not really, she whispers.

Me either, he says. Let's go get ice cream instead.

She takes his hand. They exit Rose Hill Manor the same way they entered. He plans to forget this visit just as he forgot his previous visit, but knows it will be more difficult this time. As they descend the stairs, he thinks about where to take her. The Tastee Freez he usually frequents, within walking distance, closed its doors for good several weeks ago. They will have to walk back to his apartment, get in the car, and find ice cream in a better part of town.

Mathletes

I'm onstage in the Karns Middle School auditorium, sitting behind a long table draped with our school's mascot—a beaver—between Chuck Joyce and Marylee Scott, my teammates. This is the third year we've made it to county finals, and my last chance to beat Farragut Middle, the school that makes it each year because they're the richest school in Knox County, rather than the smartest. My dad says their parents pay off the judges every year, but I'm not so sure I believe him.

It's also the last time I'll share the stage with Marylee, although that's not something I'm happy about. She's been my teammate since sixth grade and I'm not looking forward to high school without her and without Mathletes. Not to mention, I've kind of been in love with her since I met her. But that's a secret. I've never told anyone about that, not ever.

Across the stage, the Farragut team members—behind their anchor mascot—cross their arms and growl, like it's supposed to be intimidating. One kid, the kid on the right, has something green between his front two teeth, so it makes us laugh. Marylee hits my thigh every time she sees a hint of green. I hope he opens his mouth more often, but then I realize I should be paying more attention to the game. We are, after all, fifteen minutes into the first round.

“A cone has a radius of 1.2 inches and a height of 2.9 inches. What is the volume of the cone?” the judge asks.

As he speaks, I scribble my answer on the dry erase board I use because I am mute. I have been mute since I was three years old and found my mother's dead body on the bedroom floor, or so my father has told me.

I've been told it was very traumatic, that I cried nonstop for days and couldn't sleep—at least, not until our neighbor came to help out—but that once she left, my sleep problems returned. I've been told that I never spoke a word again after I saw my mom's body, but to be honest, I don't remember anything. I just know I don't talk and that I've been to doctors all over the state of Tennessee, but they haven't fixed me yet.

So far, the neurologists say that my frontal lobe is the cause of my continued mutism and that I need to take lots of medications in order to talk, but the otolaryngologists say that my vocal chords have never fully developed because I was so young when I stopped talking. They say my vocal chords need physical therapy.

Before anyone can buzz in, the auditorium doors swing open, blinding everyone. Of course it's my father and Jeff, surrounded by a swarm of loud, buzzing fathers. Dad and Jeff are drunk, most likely, because they have this strange habit of tailgating all my competitive events—Dad says it's because I don't play sports—and he shows up late because he's too hammered to remember what time anything begins. This is the fourth—and hopefully last—time it's happened this school year, which is hard to say, because it's only March and the chess team hasn't really started its serious competitions yet.

I buzz. Marylee reads for me. "Four point three seven inches," she says.

We've practiced and practiced this routine so many times after school in Mr. Henderson's room. And on Saturdays, when our classmates are at football or baseball or basketball practice, trying to make the high school teams. But we're Mathletes. Our team

is a bicycle: I'm the wheels and the frame, Chuck is the gears and the chain, and Marylee is the person on top, pushing the pedals and steering the way.

There is a screen behind the judge. It projects the questions as he asks them, which helps me answer faster. When he says: "Determine the product of $800.5 \times (2 \times 10^6)$," I can see it before I hear it. Then, I can write 1.601×10^9 before he's finished speaking, and buzz the answer before he gets the words out.

My father yells, "That's my boy," from the auditorium and adult voices shush him in a chorus of hisses: *shut ups* and *quiet nows*.

But Marylee reads my answer and we're awarded five points. We start to prepare for the next question, but I am not ready. She's still smiling at me. The stage lights have caught her eyes and made me notice them. They're that specific blueish-green color that doesn't really have a name, a color I call Marylee-blue, but can't look away from. And her hair is glistening in the light, too. It's halfway between brown and blonde, a shade I never see on anyone else, because no one can compare to her.

I feel like my stomach is riding the Tennessee Tornado at Dollywood, but the rest of my body has remained onstage. Her hair hits her shoulders at a right angle and I want to touch it, to sweep it away. Here comes the next question, something hazy projected onto the screen, but I'm not watching it—I only see the way Marylee's neck, glimmering between strands of hair and tinted gold under the stage lights, looks perfectly sculpted for carrying her head atop her shoulders. It's the most beautiful neck I have ever seen.

When Farragut Middle buzzes and the kid with the green thing in his teeth answers, I am still staring at Marylee. As the team is awarded five points, she places her hand on my thigh and squeezes, which makes me realize I have been zoning out. The leg

she did not squeeze hits the underside of the table and my kneecap stings through my jeans. She points at the kid and laughs. I pretend I have been paying attention and fake a laugh along with her. Damn. Okay, Purness. Get a grip. Pay attention to the math. You are a Mathlete, you are not here for Marylee. You are here to beat Farragut. You are not here for shenanigans.

Another question flashes on the screen: “Solve both using elimination. $-6x + 10y = 6$ and $6x - 9y = -9$.” The judge is halfway through the word “elimination,” when I have my answer scribbled on the dry erase. I’m concentrating again.

I buzz and Marylee reads, “Negative six and negative three.”

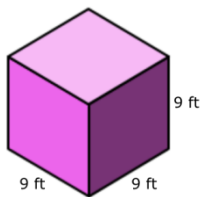
“Correct!” the judge says. We gain five points. Once again, we’re tied with Farragut.

Marylee high-fives me, then high-fives Chuck behind my back. We’re on the second-to-last question of the first round. We’re all smiling, but I know I have to concentrate.

“If ya’ll will focus on the screen,” the judge says. The previous question is still displayed. “The penultimate question of the round is mostly visual.”

The screen changes to a cube:

What is the surface area?



Although I know this is Chuck’s forte, I scribble *486 square feet* on my whiteboard and flash it at him just to make sure he knows, too. He nods, buzzes, and

answers all at once, so gracefully—the way this competition is supposed to be. Not like me: the loser who needs other people to answer for him.

Marylee reaches across my body to high-five Chuck. Her shoulders touch my chest—they're so soft—and I can smell her hair—it's clean, but not flowery, like other girls'—and I have the urge to take a big whiff and hold it in my lungs, the way my father holds cigarette smoke in his. I'm not supposed to know he smokes cigarettes—he technically quit after Mom died—but whenever I see him pacing our trailer, a curl of white smoke following him, I know he's sneaking them again. I want to close my eyes the way he closes his the first time he inhales off a cigarette—his first one in a long time—and smell Marylee's hair.

She lingers over me a little too long, but I want her to stay there. Is there another question on the screen? Is the judge saying something? I slap myself in the face. Concentrate on math, Purness. Luckily, I haven't missed anything. The screen flips. The judge starts on the final question of the round. It's about prime numbers. I've never obsessed over prime numbers, like a lot of other mathematicians. They love primes. And I get why: they're the building blocks of all numbers. The building blocks of the world. I just don't care. That's blasphemy in a mathematical sense. It's just one thing that makes me feel like I shouldn't be a mathematician when I grow up. Like, maybe I'm not meant to be a regular mathematician, even though I love numbers and solving equations and problems. I don't get obsessed with primes. I can't figure out how to care.

“List all prime numbers from 2 to 31.”

I shake my head. Chuck writes on his scrap paper. Marylee writes on hers. I try to write on my whiteboard, but all that comes out is 2, 3, 5, 7, 11. Chuck has up to 19 and Marylee has up to 29 when Farragut buzzes.

The kid in the middle, smirking, says, “2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31.”

“Correct. Five points to Farragut!” The judge says. “And at the end of the first round, we’ve got Farragut in the lead by ten points! Let’s take a ten-minute intermission.”

We were so close. Marylee is the best on the team at primes and I have no business pretending I would have been any help. Maybe if we weren’t so slow to react. Maybe if we weren’t celebrating so much from the previous question’s victory—then she would’ve been faster? I can’t worry about it now. I just know we have to do better in the future.

I don’t want to walk offstage because I don’t want to see my father right now—I am already too distracted—and I want to take the break to focus on math. On my whiteboard I ask Chuck to bring me a water.

For the ten minute break I mill around backstage. Vestiges of the school play, wood planks, costumes and tools, are piled in corners. I wish I could be in a play, but that’s one of those things I can’t do because I am mute. Sure, I could play Townsperson Number 5 and walk around in the background, but I would never be able to stand up in front of an audience and pretend to be someone other than Purness Campbell, the guy with the disability, the guy with the crazy father, the guy whose mom died when he was a kid.

My classmates are used to me by now, but they don't want to get close because they're afraid of my father. I don't blame them. Sometimes, I am too. But they also don't see the father who drives me to countless doctor's appointments and hires me tutors when I don't grasp a certain concept in class or who makes sure we're fed, no matter what he has to pawn. He has his problems, but he's also my father, and I would be screwed without him.

For once, I want to go to the state Mathlete competition in Nashville instead of Farragut. If our team bands together and we keep our bicycle in good shape, I think we can make it this time. As long as the questions continue to focus on algebra and geometry, we've got this.

Marylee finds me. She is wearing a blue shirt and a black skirt that comes to her knees, even though she usually wears jeans. It must be a special occasion skirt for today's competition. She smiles in a way that one corner of her mouth is higher than the other. I try to smile back, but it's so goofy. All gums and teeth. I think I just look like my father and stop. She takes my hand and leads me back to the table.

We are the only ones there. Marylee cracks open the study guide in front of us and tries some practice questions. I sit back in my chair. Her bra strap, white and lacy, sticks out behind her shirt and rests on her shoulder blade. It is at an approximately sixteen-degree angle to her shirt. An acute angle. An acute angle on a cute girl. Man, am I glad I am mute and do not make stupid jokes out loud. She might think I'm obtuse. Okay, Purness. Stop it. Now is not the time for jokes. Or girls. Or anything that you cannot multiply or divide or take the square root of.

Chuck returns and hands me a bottle of water. As I feel its cold soothe my throat, I know I must focus—I must dedicate my mind to math and the competition ahead. The Farragut team sits, chairs scraping the stage, and they resume their glares. The right kid has discovered the green thing between his teeth, and Marylee pokes my thigh to point this out. Math, Purness. Two times two is four. Four times four is sixteen. Sixteen times sixteen is 256.

We begin the second round. I focus on the math. I don't let anything come between me and the questions. Not Marylee and her soft shoulders, her sweet-smelling hair. Not my dad and his screams of "That's *MY* son!" every time Karns Middle answers a question correctly, even if it's Chuck or Marylee with the correct answer.

I am a laser pointer, zooming between the diode and the target, to pinpoint precision. Ten questions in and Karns leads Farragut by ten points. Fifteen questions in and Karns leads Farragut by twenty points. I'm all math—I don't even look at Marylee. We end the second round and Karns is leading. The twenty-point lead isn't enough to assure our victory, but as long as we don't make any major mistakes, we might win. We don't take an intermission this time.

In the third round, there are only five questions. They're big ones, though. They're worth ten points. Last year, our team lost because we gave incorrect answers to a few of the last five questions. Mr. Henderson says these last five are like SAT questions: it's better not to answer and keep points than to risk an answer and lose points.

Marylee is bouncing. Her leg's going up and down, bam bam bam, a constant wiggle next to mine and her skirt is slipping up and up her leg until it's all the way up

and I can see her pink underwear. There's a question on the screen behind the judge, but I haven't heard anything he said. Some numbers are there. Maybe words, too? I don't know. I just know I need to put my dry erase board in my lap right now in case she sees what just happened to me.

She's looking at me. Oh, god, she's looking at me. Why is she looking at me? Is it because of my dry erase and it being in my lap? Chuck buzzes in and says something but I'm not listening, but then Marylee looks past me at Chuck. And then I watch her grimace. I guess we got it wrong. When she looks back at me, she shakes her head.

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

I write "Sorry" on my dry erase and wipe it clean. 256×256 is 65,536. $65,536 \times 65,536$ is 4,294,967,296.

The judge opens his mouth. This time I am ready. "Simplify: $(-x^2y^2)(xy^2)$."

" $-x^3y^4$." I write and buzz. Marylee reads my answer off my lap. I should probably move the board, but what if she sees?

We are awarded ten points. Marylee grabs me and hugs me. The dry erase falls to the floor. Now she can see. And if she can't see, she can probably feel. I dive for it, under the table, under the beaver mascot.

That's what my father calls them in those porno magazines, beavers. Last year, he decided a brand new porno mag would make a great birthday present. "You're turning thirteen. You're going to be a man now. Even the Jews say so," he said.

I can still remember, even though I'm trying to block it out, how he called me into the living room to open presents, and how, once I opened the magazine, he flipped it

to the centerfold. “Take a look at this beaver, Purness,” he said and shoved it into my face.

Which is what’s under Marylee’s pink underwear and what made me react the way I did. I’m just not going down “right” this time. Oh God. No.

I shake my head. That’s something my father would say. It’s disrespectful to Marylee as a woman and a Mathlete. And besides, now is not the time for bad jokes, Purness, you goddamn idiot.

I have missed another question, searching for my dry erase. We haven’t lost points, but we haven’t gained any either. Farragut has gained ten. A ten-point difference: these last two questions will be critical.

“Find the last two digits of 2^{1000} ,” says the judge.

Easy. “Seventy-six.” I write and buzz.

“Um... ssssiix—” Oh no. I wave my hand in her face. I try to stop her from talking. I usually write my sevens with a mark in the center. Did she miss the mark in the center? She’s going to say the wrong answer. She’s not looking at me.

“—teen?” She says it. The wrong answer. We lose ten points. I let my head fall to the table. Our bicycle is falling apart, but there’s no time to get it to the shop for repairs.

The last question comes. “What is the smallest prime number with two sevens in it?”

Goddamn prime numbers again. Why? Prime numbers are for the nerdiest of nerds, the geeks that I make fun of, and I don’t make fun of anyone because I am mute. Sure, I’ve memorized Pi to the hundredth digit, but prime-goddamn-numbers. Just, no. I

feel every muscle in my back tense up. My grip on the dry erase marker tightens. Am I even breathing right now?

Farragut buzzes. The kid in the middle smirks. “Two hundred seventy-seven,” he says.

I want to throw the marker across the stage and hit that stupid kid right in his stupid face, but I don’t. My breath comes back to me and my muscles unclench. Marylee looks just as angry as I feel, her jaw tight and her lips pulled into a tight circle.

“Ten points,” the judge says. “Farragut wins today’s match and advances to next week’s state championships!”

I bang my head on the table again. Marylee stands and runs her hands across my back, as if she knew how tense I felt seconds earlier. “I’m so sorry Purness,” she says.

I turn around and shake my head. Mouthing “No,” over and over again, I want to be sure she knows the loss isn’t her fault.

I stand up—thankfully, the swelling has gone down—and I pull her close. We’re embracing, together in a hug, and she’s whispering in my ear. “I should have known it was a seven.”

This is one of those times that I wish I could speak because I don’t want to pull away to write something that will make her feel better. Instead, I stroke her hair and finally inhale and hold the smell in my lungs—it reminds me of one of dad’s bathroom candles, the one labeled *Spring Rain*—and I slide each of my fingers down a strand of her hair, which feels like the smooth side of ribbon.

Marylee might be crying and I don't want her to cry. I move so I can see her face and then I kiss her. Her lips are chapped, but they taste like Arby's curly fries and Coke, so I keep kissing her. I kiss her until my dad and Jeff jump onto the stage.

"I'm going to get them richy-rich sons of bitches," he says. "Oh, I'll find 'em. And damn if my name ain't Clyde Campbell, I'll stick it to 'em."

"Yeah, we'll get 'em for ya, Purness" Jeff says.

Marylee and I break apart. I face my father and raise an eyebrow.

"Well. I mean—you know what I mean. Right?" he says.

I nod and raise my index finger. He interprets it as "one minute" and turns his back to talk to Jeff, giving us some privacy.

Marylee smiles at me, but then she looks at my father and backs away. She's scared of him, just like everyone else. I don't want her to stay here now—she's got to get as far away from me—from me and my father and Jeff—as humanly possible. I pick up my dry erase from the table. "See you later," I write, faking a smile.

"Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow," she says. Blushing, and looking down at her feet the whole time, she exits stage left, the opposite direction of Dad and Jeff.

Now I want to growl at my father the way Farragut's Mathletes growled at us at the start of the competition. I wish I could spend more time with Marylee. I want to run after her and follow her wherever she is going; I don't want to be standing onstage with my father and Jeff Koontz, who are both probably still drunk from tailgating.

My father has his hands on his hips and a frown on his face. "Now, just how did you manage to lose that badly this time?"

I shrug, frown, and shove my hands in my pockets.

“It’s on account of that girl, ain’t it?”

“Purness and Mary sitting in a tree...” Jeff starts.

I give him the look that means *I want to stab you right now*, which he interprets correctly and stops singing.

But my father’s not done talking. “Purness, you know I expect more of you. You ain’t supposed to let girls get in the way of your intelligence. I know I been telling you to pay more attention to girls, but right now? You got math to do instead.” He glares at me.

Jeff’s silly side-grin, like he’s going to back up everything my father’s going to say, makes everything worse. As if I wasn’t angry enough. As if hadn’t lost the competition.

My father is scolding me for being interested in Marylee, when he’s the one who gave me a porno for my thirteenth birthday. I don’t even know what’s going to happen between me and her tomorrow when I get to school and see her standing at her locker. Did I give her a good kiss? Did she like it? Are we going to do it again? Or was it just a one-time thing? Does she like me back? Will she be my girlfriend now? I can’t solve for x to answer any of these questions.

I do the only thing I can think to do, ignore my dad and Jeff and run back to the table for the dry erase board. I leap off the stage and take off after her.

Marylee stands just outside the school entrance waiting for her parents to stop talking to Chuck’s parents. I like the way she smiles when she sees me. Her cheeks have been flushed pink from the cool spring air and her hair dances around her face in the

breeze. I wipe off the dry erase board and write the question I've been meaning to ask her for three years now. "Do you want to go out with me?"

When I show it to her, I stand next to her and our shoulders touch. She reads it, she looks at me, and then she looks behind me, to make sure my dad's not following me around this time.

"I'm not sure," she says.

"What do you mean?" I scribble.

"I really like you, I do, but my parents think..." she looks at her parents. Her mother wears pearls and high heels. Her father's dressed in a suit.

She grabs my arm and pulls me out of their view, pressing me against the brown brick of the school. "I don't really care what they think, though," she says and kisses me again, this time tasting of root beer.

When we break apart, I write, "So, is that a yes?"

She shakes her head. "My parents would never let me. They think your dad is crazy."

"He is crazy," I write.

"So we can go out when your dad isn't crazy."

Great. We will never be able to go out. "Can I kiss you one last time," I ask on the whiteboard.

She smiles. "I hope it's not the last time," she says. But I know it will be. We kiss again, and I run my hands through her hair, down her neck, around her bra straps through her shirt. There's so much more of her that I want, but because I'll never be able to change my father, I have to let her go.

I'm the one who stops the kiss. I'm the one who backs away. "If your parents change their minds, let me know," I write.

"I will," she says. "You're a really good kisser."

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