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*Western Washington University*

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**TRY NOT TO WORRY**

**&**

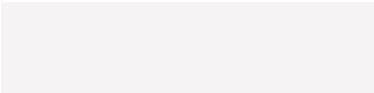
**THE PEOPLE PICTURED HERE**

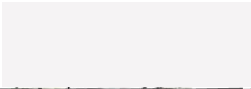
By  
Rachel Wolf  
Accepted in Partial Completion  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

  
Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

**ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

  
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## MASTER'S THESIS

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**TRY NOT TO WORRY**  
**&**  
**THE PEOPLE PICTURED HERE**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Rachel Wolf  
May 2008

## ABSTRACT

The non-fiction collection, *Try Not to Worry*, follows the Wolf family through the mental and physical decline of Alex Wolf, the family's third child. As Alex enters adolescence, he struggles increasingly with clinical anxiety, made worse by his perception of himself as inadequate. The third of four children, and the second son, he feels himself to be an appendage to what could be a complete family unit without his presence. Alex's troubles are seen only through others' eyes. His parents surprisingly are not given an essential role in *Try Not to Worry*. Even as they seek to solve Alex's problems through therapy and intervention, in his point of view they seem to disappear. Rachel, the eldest child, feels increasingly pulled back to the family circle even as she attempts to find her adult identity. Evan, the second child, empathizes with Alex's feelings of anxiety, an emotional investment that prevents Evan from leaving home, and Bridget, the youngest child, is left to quietly rebel against rules that no one has remembered to set for her. *Try Not to Worry* is the story of a family whose only defense against loss is to hold on to each other as tightly as possible, which is not always a good idea.

*Try Not to Worry's* companion piece, *The People Pictured Here*, is a fictional imagining of a family much like the Wolfs, but years farther along in their construction of an interdependent family dynamic. The Barlowe siblings are physically adults, yet their reliance on each other for affection, affirmation, and guidance holds them in a suspended state of emotional adolescence. *The People Pictured Here* revolves around Dominick Barlowe, who is locked in an unsettling intimacy with his sister Trisha, and her best friend Angela. Their triangle is physically manifested when Angela becomes pregnant with Dominick's child, and all three adults must decide what role they will play in the child's life. Macy and Christopher

Barlowe, the eldest Barlowe siblings, watch the actions of Dominick and Trisha with both amusement and trepidation, understanding that their siblings' lack of boundaries reflects Macy and Christopher's own unhealthy dependence.

Both *Try Not to Worry* and *The People Pictured Here* present families that are ensnared in patterns of emotional incest, in which loyalty and concern for each other often means self-neglect. The characters in these two pieces must ultimately decide how, and if, they can break away from their tangled family webs. Separation may be successful or disastrous, yet the siblings in these works are all traveling towards a time when severing their ties to each other will be the only way they can grow up.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# Try Not to Worry



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## Prologue

### Wooden Shoes

So they probably discussed the move ironically at first, like what if we just chucked this whole young urban family bit and went somewhere sleepy, got a dog, knew our neighbors' first names. Then, when an arsonist burned the church down and Sunday morning services were held, uneasily and ill-attended, in a school gymnasium, maybe that's when they actually started looking.

My parents' search didn't take long; a coworker suggested "that Dutch town up by the border, that one's supposed to be nice and small," and before the week was out we were headed north to house hunt. We arrived in the middle of the Holland Days Parade; the Klompen dancing children hooked my mother, and the bitter Dutch licorice convinced my father. "Look," their eyes said to each other. "What's not to love? There's a house here, in our price range, complete with a painted fence. Look, next door is a nice-looking family with appropriately aged children. Look, we've been talking about trying again; why not here? We could have another child here. Look at all the churches. The only hard part will be picking the best one."

I imagine the more time consuming details caused some small disagreements: work (can we transfer? Is it time to consider going back to school?), time frames (how quickly can we sell the house?), far away from the family (we'll come down at least once a month, we promise), and so on. But in the back of their minds they could already see it: happy people in a happy family, a family with smiles, with wooden shoes.

I remember sitting in the front seat of a moving van as it lumbered up I-5, knowing none of the details, full of simple worry for the safety and emotional well-being of the stuffed animals packed into the cavernous depths behind me. My hands clutched a Ziploc bag of chocolate-chip cookies to my chest, and I watched the pine trees grow denser as we proceeded north. I remember not knowing what would happen.

**I.**

**Bright Young Things**

## A Complete Set

When there were four of us, the rules changed. Evan and I became the elders, the ones with brown hair and brown eyes, so German looking. We tanned easily, had long limbs. And Alex and Bridget were the babies, chubby and golden and blue. They looked like the little Protestant cherubs in my music book illustrations.

A year apart, but we all forgot about that extra year that Alex had. They did everything together; potty trained, slept curled between the arcs of my parents' bodies in the waterbed. Alex didn't walk until well past a year, as if he was waiting for her to catch up, at least be able to crawl behind him as he stumbled, testing his legs. She was his tester, his Muse; he would turn to Bridget as he pulled himself up against the coffee table, and the weight of his head would throw him off balance. She would roll towards him, reaching out a chubby palm, and he would crawl back to where she lay half on, half off the blanket. Bridget cried often, but we all learned to recognize the particular shriek that she gave when Alex crawled out of her sight. It was a sound of loss, and a reminder. He always came back to her when he heard that cry, like she was calling out his name, over and over and over again.

## Bobblehead

“I sometimes wonder how he can hold it up,” the man chuckled, reaching down to fondle his youngest son’s head, “It’s at least half his body weight.”

His wife laughed, then reached to cover her mouth with her hand.

“Shh, you’ll give him a complex.”

“Maybe he’s an alien,” their eldest daughter suggested. “Don’t they have big heads? At least they always do on T.V. Can Catholics believe in aliens?”

“My teacher says that Christians don’t believe in evolution, but are we Christian or Catholic?” The couple’s eldest son looked up from his seat on the grass in front of the house. Their mother laughed again, and clipped another dead rhododendron from the bush under the picture window.

“Always so many questions, you two. By the time the babies learn to talk there won’t be anything left to ask.”

Her eldest daughter jumped up and ran to grab her little brother, who had pushed his father’s hand away and crawled unnoticed into a pile of beauty bark. She picked the boy up by his torso, and his limbs swam, loose in the air. She wrestled with him until his body turned towards her own.

“Alex’s head is so big, I bet it’s just full of questions. Poor Mom and Dad, you’ll have to answer them all.”

## Biting

Alex was never angry with anyone but himself. Bridget would fly into a rage, box him across the head with her hard little fists, bite him in tracks across his back. Her teeth broke flesh enough times for Alex to look like he had been whipped; sometimes the wounds would scar. And she knew how to be stealthy about it; she would look up so sweetly as I walked by, gently hand him a toy, pat his knee. Then the minute my back was turned she would pounce. The poor little thing, he must have known it was coming each time, but she moved so damned fast.

I always wondered why he didn't beat her back, push her off of him as one or the other of the older people ran to his rescue. The two of them were almost the same size, looked like twins; Alex couldn't have hurt Bridget any more than she hurt him. But he never laid a finger on her. All he did was flatten his body out on the floor as quickly as possible, to give her less to work with, I suppose. Then, when Evan or I pulled her, kicking and spitting, off of his back, he'd crawl over the nearest wall and bang his head against it, hard, taking his anger at Bridget out on himself.

We all joked about how we couldn't take Alex anywhere, he looked like an abused child with all the bruises and bite marks.



## Rites of Passage

I felt uncomfortable when my father was baptized; maybe we all did. The four of us sat in the front pew, arranged largest to smallest. The babies were usually allowed to draw during Mass, but not today. They seemed interested, anyway; Bridget leaned across the boys to ask me why all the men at the front were wearing dresses, and Alex sat forward on the bench, eyes bright, fingers tapping the rail in front of us. He and Bridget had heard about their own baptisms, loved to hear the story about how Alex didn't make a peep when he was dunked under once, twice, three times, but how when Bridget was submerged and started screaming, he had cried out like it was he who couldn't breathe.

My mother looked so proud after the water part was over. She held my father's hand as the priest anointed him with oil that ran down his face and turned his collar yellow. Dad's curly hair held the strong, thick smell of incense for days afterwards, and the four of us children would surround him every time he lay on the couch or collapsed into his favorite armchair. Evan and I would lift the babies up and we would all lean in as a unit to sniff my father's head. I breathed in, and tried to remember what it felt like to be under water, then rise up into a whole new world.

## **In the Jungle**

They almost looked frightened, but not quite; like they wanted to be frightened, to lose themselves in a fantasy of head-high grass and slugs as long as their tiny forearms. But they could see the house, their mother knew, because she could see them perfectly. The oldest girl held the youngest, and each had thin hair that fell in each other's eyes when their heads bobbed together in time with the older girl's steps. The two middle children, the boys, did not touch, did not look like brothers. The taller one was dark, all brown skin and red joints, freckles melding into piles on his legs and arms. The smaller boy was blond and fair, only colored on the cheeks and in the eyes. He was having trouble keeping up with the three ahead of him; his mother watched him trip over the uneven ground, treacherous hills and valleys obscured by new growth and old mulch. He walked on his hands and knees at one point, like an animal. When he got up, he was far behind the others, and as he brushed his hair out of his eyes, dirt fell in crumbs across his face.

## Try Not to Worry

Alex had a nightly ritual, right up until I left for college, maybe even for a while afterwards. For all I know, it lasted until he started to change. For all I know, maybe he still goes through the motions, alone in his bed at night.

It started with prayer time, when all six of us would gather in the boys' room at the babies' bedtime, which was eight o'clock for as far back as I can remember. We would kneel in a row from oldest to youngest, unless one of the younger children was being rowdy; then my mother would push her way between us to reinforce the solemnity of prayer.

We started with the Our Father, each of us saying a line while the others mouthed along. Afterwards, each member of the family would mention one thing that they were thankful for, and make one request for the following day. Bridget's request usually involved candy, while mine and Evan's often had to do with cancellation of tests and the possibility of having a friend stay overnight. Alex's request was often that he would not worry the next day.

As he grew older, Alex's fear of worry became a constant, an anecdote, and then a phrase to be counted on. As bedtimes changed and family prayer time fell by the wayside, Alex's request was the one part of the ritual that remained. Every night when he had climbed into bed, he would call out to my parents. Sometimes they didn't hear him the first time, and he would climb down from the top bunk and move to the partially shut door, then call again. They would hear him the second time and make a pretense of rushing to his door.

“What is it, Alex?”

He always climbed back into bed and pulled the covers up to his shoulders before answering them.

“I wanted to tell you that I’ll try not to worry tomorrow.”

My parents would then hug him at the same time, and while holding him and looking at each other, they would tell Alex that they were glad, that they hoped he would not worry the next day. They would go to their own room, then, and worry to each other in whispers, discuss what to do with their anxious little boy.

Sometimes Alex requested that Evan, Bridget or I join my parents in his room. I always felt special, and then slightly ashamed, when I heard him call my name after “Mom?” and then “Dad?” It was nice, in a way, to know that he wanted me specifically to know that he would try not to worry.

While I was attending college in Seattle and Alex started to get into trouble, I reinstated prayer time for myself. I lay in bed each night, much later than eight o’clock, and said the Our Father, and thanked God for some small miracle. I listed the things that I hoped would happen the next day, and the things that I feared might happen. And every night, I told God that I would try not to worry about Alex.

## **II.**

# **Separation Anxiety**

## Mementos

Alex had been in my room again, maybe several times since I was last home from school. I could have complained, could have raged, but I was more interested in exploring. The crucifix that hung over my bed had been re-hung upside down, secured with crooked nails under each side of the cross bar. The two bottles of wine, souvenirs from an ex-boyfriend's winery, were missing from the crate in the closet. In their place was a note that read, I.O.U. He had scratched out his own face from every picture on the bulletin board above my desk.

After poking about for a bit, I went to the wooden shoe that sat on my windowsill, exactly where it had sat for nine years, since we moved to the house down the street from the old one. I looked inside to see what he had left for me.

There was a razor, the kind that fits inside an Exact-o knife, but it was clean. There was also an earring, dangly, and several bottle caps. Inside each bottle cap was a pill, Lemictol, the kind I took for epilepsy a few years before. I wondered what he did with the rest of them, if he liked them, or if he didn't so he gave them back. There was also a Post-it note, folded over so the sticky strip held it shut.

I sat on my bed and opened the note. It said,

*Wish you were here. Except that I don't.*

I added the note to the row under the upside down crucifix, right above my bed. Because all the writing was on the backside of the notes, seven blank yellow Post-its now

looked back at me. I wondered if I should fill them up, write back to him. But I didn't know what I would write. Maybe,

*What happened between then and now?*

Maybe if I asked him, he would answer. Maybe the next note he left would tell me something. Or maybe not.

## High Noon

You looked at me like I was the crazy one, while you stood there clutching a steak knife, like who was I to be telling you -- the rational, sane person -- what to do. Your eyes mirrored my own, the same shape, the same history of small betrayals and familial injustices. The sun ran through the window and crossed both of our bodies, dissecting us into pieces and dividing the space between us into small sections of No Man's Land. And we stood and we stood, me with a wireless phone, you with your knife. We had chosen our weapons according to our strengths, and now it came down to who decided to draw first. And we were so close that we could have used our free hands to shake, and to agree to disagree.



## Intervention

The Helpers arrived at four in the morning, pulled up in a rented sedan, wore hiking boots and khaki shorts and tried not to shake in the cold of the Washington winter. They were unprepared, these people who were supposed to Help. They spoke soothingly to the man and the two women, who twitched with a nervous energy. Feet skipped out and in, fingers snapped silently until folded into elbows to hold them still.

The Helpers went upstairs alone. The other three people waited downstairs, looked lost, felt lost. They could hear shouting, then shrieking, then shouting again. The boy upstairs had only two stages of grief.

As the Helpers led the boy down the back stairs, the man and the women stood huddled and looked away from each other, anywhere but into each other's eyes. The Helpers packed the boy into the sedan, their shadows looming tall on the living room window. After they had driven away into the morning, the man and women made breakfast. They sat around the kitchen table as the sun rose, saying nothing, staring down at smiling eggs and cheerful strips of bacon.

## How to Clean a Room

Over the past seven years, I have cleaned a lot of places. I was not a particularly tidy child – but then again, what child really is? – so I surprised both my mother and myself by taking a job as a hotel cleaner during the summer before my senior year in high school. One year later I left for college in California, where I cleaned my closet-sized triple dorm room not for pleasure, or money, but to find a path to the door. After returning to Washington, I've cleaned retail stores (dusting produced flurries that settled down the arms of tightly packed clothes on the sale racks), a Catholic school (where the opportunity to choose my own hours led to wandering around an empty third floor at 4 a.m. with two waste bins in tow, and a slight buzz), and nine different residences. In every place that I've cleaned, a part of the ritual involves cleaning up another person's mess, which is a two sided coin. Every time I sweep, wipe, and pile possessions in neat heaps along a baseboard, I waver between disapproval of those who have left this mess for me, and a maternal sense of myself as needed.

In my experience, cleaning is done most efficiently when the overall task is divided into sections. If the overall task, for example, is to clean a kitchen, it is best to start from the top and work your way down. Begin by removing the contents from each upper cabinet. Usually these cabinets hold glasses, coffee mugs, mixing bowls, and dinner plates; make sure that each piece of table ware is free of water marks or crusted food remnants that the dishwasher failed to dislodge. Use a towel to handle each item, if you are worried about leaving fingerprints. Then, wipe down the inside and outside of each cabinet before

replacing its contents. Make sure no debris falls into the clean tableware you've placed on the countertop directly beneath the upper cabinets.

Continue working your way down each section, being careful not to stir dust and dirt upwards in a flurry, but down, onto the floor. When you come to the stove, or the dishwasher, don't skimp; one must be even more fastidious about cleaning machinery. Be sure to run a rubber-gloved finger through each groove in every vent, and don't forget to pull out the crumb tray from under the stove's fan; the crumb tray is a graveyard for burnt food bits. If you miss anything, say you forget to run the crisper drawers through the dishwasher, you risk decayed food, water streaks on glass, fingerprints in dust, and a feeling of incompleteness.

The day after Alex was taken away, my parents left to meet him in Montana. He and the interventionists got a head start, space and time to let them calm him down. I completely understood the reasoning behind this, explained by two sturdy young people in soft voices, at three in the morning. They stood in the dark cold of our living room in matching hiking shorts, and both the man and the woman had long hair tied in low ponytails. They looked safe, childproof.

After I dropped my parents off at the airport, I started the drive back north. It was a three hour trip, and I was too keyed up to enjoy the solitude; I blew a faulty speaker with generic rap music and smoked cigarettes with the window down all the way, so the rain spattered on my face.

When I walked in the back door of my parents' house, the party Evan had been throwing was dying down. I ignored the teenagers who furtively slid beer cans under

couches as I walked by; the standing ones parted like the Red Sea, fading through doors into back hallways, avoiding my eyes. I assured Evan that I wouldn't "tell," and he assured me that he hadn't been drinking, even though everyone else was. I admired his eagerness to throw his friends under the bus; he knew that I knew their names, their parents' names, their older siblings' phone numbers.

I headed up the front stairs and down the creaking hallway to Alex's room, gathering cleaning supplies from various cubbies as I went. Alex's door had been unhinged by my mother several months earlier, and Alex had taken to leaning it against the inner frame in the semblance of a shut door. In order to enter the room, one had to maneuver the door in quarter turns, being careful not to push hard enough that it fell backwards into the room. Before Alex mastered the art of the turn, my parents were woken several times a night by the sound of a heavy oak door hitting the ceiling above their bed.

I divided the room into tasks, following my standard method: top down, then scour the floor of the sum total of the room's waste. I recognized immediately that this room would be my Everest, and so I divided and sub-divided tasks until I felt like I was only seeing out of one eye at a time. Everything that could have been scary became merely interesting when approached with one eye.

Task One: dismantle the dresser. Remove each drawer and pry out the empty cigarette packs and airplane-sized liquor bottles from the spaces between the drawer backs and the dresser wall itself. Collect miscellaneous pills into a baggie, to be given to parents for examination.

Task Two: vacuum the sofa, pulling out items (half-burnt incense sticks, rolled bits of paper, cigarette butts) that are too big for the vacuum's attachment. Hope that the lice that inhabit the sofa are sucked up by the vacuum, not liberated to settle in someone's hair.

Task Three: decide which piles of junk contain actual mementos, and which are simply piles of junk masquerading as sentimental items. Sample questions to ask: was this CD broken in half in anger, or with artful, symbolic purpose? Does this stuffed animal only smell like marijuana by osmosis, or is there actually pot hidden somewhere inside of it?

Task Four: remove pornography from the walls, ceiling, and floor of the closet. Try not to look at the pictures with curiosity. Try not to read the script that accompanies some of the pictures. Try not to remember the captions. Try not to touch the mattress. Especially not the mattress.

In five hours the room was done. Seven bags of "garbage" were set aside in case my parents wanted to double check my decisions, while three small boxes of "possessions" were placed in the now empty closet. I was still unsure about my own criteria for deciphering between trash and treasure, so for the moment everything stayed. Except the mattress, which Evan helped me carry to the basement. We both wore gloves.

Alex didn't come home for a year and a half, but when he did he went immediately upstairs to his room. My mother followed him, explaining that while everything had been removed, they had saved what seemed to be important and kept it in the basement for him. She went on to say how careful I had been about cleaning; no traces would remain to remind Alex of the mess he'd created.

Alex turned to my mother in the doorway, and smiled. Smiled at me, standing behind her, where I could still see him. He went into the room and pulled out the drawer under his bed. After removing the drawer completely, he yanked out a recessed back panel and started to remove malt liquor bottles, one by one. I counted seventeen as the room filled with the smell of decayed sugar.

## **III.**

### **The Coming Night**

## After the Intervention

I was talking to Trish on the phone first, but when her battery started to die after two hours or so she suggested that I head on over. It wasn't a long walk, and the early evening was warm for November.

When I got there, I showed her the book I had found in Alex's room. A lot of the poems were garbage, both in subject and in form: torn in half, or burned around the edges or blotted all over with ink. There were some, though, written on pristine pages, almost as though those poems had repelled destruction.

"He couldn't ruin those ones," I said to Trish as she flipped through. She sighed.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but he's the smartest one of you all."



## Two A.M.

I rose up through layers of sleep as the call came through, and managed to answer on the fourth ring. My mother's voice came across the line as part static, part worry.

"Rach?"

"Yes, what's up?"

"Can you go to Evan's? His apartment's burning down and it will take your Dad at least half an hour to get there."

I agreed immediately without asking any questions. Out the door, down the steps, and ten minutes later I was pulling my worn down manual up a hill off of Lakeway. Evan stood in the dark several blocks away from the flames I had seen rising like a lighthouse as I barreled down the freeway. I parked the car and reached across to unlock the passenger door.

My younger brother climbed in, shivering, without a coat or shoes. We sat in silence for a minute before he turned to me with shining eyes.

"Why do these things always happen to us?" he asked.

I looked up at the point in the sky where the flames wisped away into smoke, and then into nothing, and then reappeared as stars. I remembered watching Alex pace back and forth on the sidewalk late at night, lit only by the ember of his cigarette.

## Look at Me

The second time the video ran, the girl watched her father watch the screen. The first time through, she had been entranced by the two children moving on the small television set, mugging for the camera, splashing bathwater into the lens. She had laughed along with her father when she heard her own shrill, bossy little voice in the background, echoing in from off-screen to mix with the children's babble. But the second time her father hit Play, the girl watched his face instead. His hands were raised a little bit above his lap, like they were still holding one of those heavy old recorders, filming the scene again. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a blond head bobbing onscreen, and a little boy's excited voice called out:

“Look at me, Dad! Look at me!”

## Chameleon

Rachel sat with four pictures in front of her, trying to choose the right one. The choices included:

A) Alex at age seven, on a family vacation to Wisconsin. In the picture, he is only visible from the waist up, and one sunburned arm holds out a crawdad to the camera. His eyes appear abnormally large in his head, giving him the appearance of a skeleton that is very pleased with itself. The sun slants across his face so that the top of his head and part of one eye are shadowed, and the rest of picture is almost blinding in contrast.

B) A thirteen-year-old Alex, sitting with several friends at a school picnic. Neither Alex nor his friends appear happy to have their picture taken. All four of the boys in the picture are wearing Assumption Catholic School uniforms, although they've modified the outfits in various ways: rips across the thighs, knots tied to bare one's midriff, a pink bandana tied around another's wrist. Alex himself has hair that certainly defies the collar-length mandate, and in the picture his head is lowered so that he must peer through chin-length bangs in order to see.

C) Alex at fifteen. He is clean-shaven, neatly dressed and wearing glasses that glint in Vermont's pale winter sun. His mother stands beside him with her arm around his waist, although Alex appears slightly uncomfortable with the physical contact. His left hand rests

on her back, but his elbow is bent at an awkward angle. His smile shows all of his teeth but no emotion.

D) Alex, age sixteen and obviously not aware that his picture is being taken. The camera is positioned behind a couch, and only the side of Alex's face is visible. Long green hair spills across his shoulders onto his faded corduroy smoking jacket. His fingernails are also green, as is his eye makeup. He appears to be taping a cigarette filter to the eraser end of a pencil.

Rachel sighed and fingered the picture mug she was trying to decorate. She selected the photograph with the crawdad in it.

## **Between the Times**

He dissolved so quickly it seemed like he had never left at all. When he stepped off the plane after two years away, he announced that he was not going back to the school in Vermont, and that no one should try to make him or he would kill himself. And that was that.

I saw him more online than I did in person. He would routinely post blogs asking for cigarettes, drinks, sex, company, and post more blogs to announce pleasure at having gotten what he wanted. Through his various net postings, I learned what concerts he would be attending, what girl he was dating, and what acts he would be willing to perform for drugs.

Not long after he dropped out of Lynden High School, he started a music project to occupy his spare time, and posted the results online. As part of the project, he documented his self-piercing of several body parts, focusing on multiple piercings around the belly button. He took pictures of every part of the process: mapping out the piercing locations, freezing the needle, inserting the jewelry, nursing the infection. He seemed particularly fascinated with the healing process; one series of photos ran all the way to Puss #14. There were shots taken so close that the camera automatically focused on certain chest hairs, and wider range portrait-style pictures of his emaciated body, upon which his swollen midriff seemed the smallest point of worry.

I couldn't look away. It was the most I had seen of my brother in years.

## Lost Boys

When your brother is a worldly sixteen, sometimes you know the same people, and sometimes those people ask questions.

*Rachel,*

*I was wondering if I might ask you... What exactly is considered wrong with Alex? I have spent a lot of time with him in the past three or four months and every single time I am around him he is polite, intelligent, calm, sincere, creative, warm, funny... I can't think of one bad thing to say about him. If it's confidential family stuff then you don't have to tell me anything. He's been quite frank with me about much of his past and why he was sent away before. I just wonder if there is something he isn't telling me or if your parents are the overprotective type.*

*I know that when I lived at home I had a lot of problems. My parents were scared I was going to kill myself or they thought I was gay or thought I was on drugs. The truth is that I was just a weird kid. Once I got out of their house I managed to become a much more balanced person. In retrospect, I think it was just hard living under the same roof with my parents when they didn't understand me at all. I wasn't that strange of a kid, they just didn't allow me any flexibility as a person. They had an idea of who I was supposed to be and when I strayed from their ideal then I was suddenly considered disobedient or rebellious. Deep*

*down I was always okay with myself, it was their disapproval of me that would throw me into bouts of depression.*

*Sometimes with Alex I have the feeling that he isn't really as afraid and full of doubt as he seems to be. I think deep inside he knows his potential and he doesn't want to squander it. He's really an amazing kid. Maybe being told over and over that something is wrong with him has made him start to believe it.*

*I am in no way questioning your parents authority or decisions and I am certainly not his doctor or therapist.*

*It's just that... I hang out with him and think "what a lovely person" and then he tells me your parents talk of sending him away and it just has me confused.*

*Is there an Alex other than the smart, creative, polite guy I know?*

*Sorry, I'm sure this has been boring to read.*

*I don't know if Alex would be upset with me or not for mentioning him to you in this message.*

*I just want him to be healthy and sane.*

*I consider him a good friend and just wish the best for him.*

*Maybe I will bump into you soon at a party/gettogether!*

*I hope you are having a good week.*

*Take care,*

*John*

In this situation, the older sibling is faced with two choices. You may spend a significant amount of time agonizing about how to compose a lengthy reply that incorporates both your own concerns for your brother, and your doubts about your parents' competence in discerning what is best for him, while being careful not to write anything that may offend either your younger sibling or your parents, should they somehow come into possession of the letter.

Or you may take this approach:

*Dear John,*

*I appreciate your concern, but go fuck yourself.*

*Hope all is well!*

*Rachel*

John is still waiting on a reply from me.



## The Coming Night

My mother calls to tell me exactly how it will happen. By the time I arrive at the house around midnight, she and my father will already have left. She doesn't specify where they will go, but I assume they will just drive around until everything is all over. Perhaps they'll head toward the bay, find a spot where they can get out and stand by the water, and wait for me to call.

I will park my car in front of the house, so I'm not blocking the driveway. I will go inside, where Alex may or may not be awake. Bridget will be away at a friend's. My mother is careful to remind me that Bridget does not know about the plan, as she is currently considered untrustworthy. Not in a bad way, my mother rushes to clarify; it's just that Bridget and Alex have been getting along so well lately, she might let something slip to him and then all hell would break loose. At any rate, she'll be at a friend's, so I won't need to worry about what I should or should not say.

After entering the house, one of two things may happen. If Alex is awake and downstairs, I will need to make an excuse for being there, in the living room, at midnight on a Saturday. My mother suggests computer trouble, something about needing to print a paper or email a student. I've used these excuses before, Alex won't suspect a thing. He will just stare at me for a moment through the lank hair that drapes across his face, then silently move the computer chair back and walk upstairs. Once he moves out of sight, I don't have to pretend to act normal anymore.

If Alex is not awake, I will be free to occupy myself for a bit, watch TV, warm up some pizza, scrounge for household items to cart back to my bare apartment. Trisha and the others will be there by one, so I won't have much time to waste.

At approximately one a.m., Evan will arrive. He will park around the block and walk, so his un-muffled engine will not alert Alex. Trisha will come with her husband, Tom, and my uncle, Bill. They too will park in front of the house, where the filbert-nut hedge will obscure both of our cars. The three of them, a tall, heavy brigade, will cross the unlit lawn and let themselves in through the basement door, which we all know is the stealthiest entrance, and is also never locked. They will join Evan and me in the kitchen, where we will be seated in silence at the kitchen table, looking everywhere but up at each other.

We will all have assigned roles, my mother explains. Evan will be the driver, as he is the youngest participant and thus the only one trusted to stay awake on the drive to Oregon. Uncle Bill and Tom are obviously the muscle; between the two of them they should be able to restrain even the most unruly teenage boy. Trisha will be the voice of reason, as she is generally considered to be the most reasonable member of our extended family. And I, I will be the gatekeeper. My job will be to guard the front door with 911 pre-dialed into a cell phone. If Alex gets violent, I am to make the call immediately, before I am interrupted.

Couldn't my job be to stay home and sleep, I ask, but I am not serious. Originally I was slated to be the driver, but was let off when I pleaded a heavy work schedule. And my mother and I both know from previous experience that I am talented at calling the police. She knows that I won't hesitate.

Trisha and the men will bundle Alex into the car. Mom makes it sound as easy as one-two-three. But even she is unclear how this portion of the night will go: whether Trisha

will try to talk him into agreeing, how Alex will react, whether physical force will be necessary. Somehow, they will get him buckled into the back seat of Bill's SUV. The car will drive away, and I will shut the door behind them. Then I will call my parents to inform them that they may return home. That is the whole plan.

After my mother hangs up, I fall back asleep and dream through the plan again. In the dream I have a hard time remembering the different steps; I keep focusing in on objects or faces and forgetting what part I am supposed to play. From the start everything goes wrong.

When I arrive Alex is downstairs, but so is Bridget. They look watchful, well-rested; they both have knives in their hands. Bridget tells me, if you take him you'll have to take me, too. We go together.

I am unclear on how to respond, and look wildly around the living room for a script. But every time I turn around, the two of them are standing in front of me, glaring. I sit down on the couch and cover my eyes with my hands, tell them, okay, we'll call the whole thing off. Silence. When I uncover my eyes I am staring up at my bedroom ceiling and my mouth is dry.

When everything is happening, it almost feels routine, like everything that happens has happened before. On paper, the plan goes off without a hitch, although I realize how little time was spent planning for emotion. Trisha's face crumples like a discarded piece of notebook paper when Alex answers his bedroom door.

His face is flushed with sleep and his body is a collection of bones held together by patchwork skin. Razor scars cross his chest and reach down to disappear beneath the elastic of his boxers. He has connected some of the scars with black marker, and at some points the ink has bled into the newer cuts to form abstract tattoos. I see shock cross Tom and Bill's faces, and Evan looks like he's about to be sick. I pause to wonder what my face looks like, and then everyone starts moving at once.

I have trouble with the details. Alex is in the living room, then out, then back in again, and alternates between shouting and silence. He is almost in the car and then firmly ensconced in his room again, all in the space between my thoughts. I find that all I can handle doing is my job, to stand by the front door holding a cell phone, while the whole crowd of them move back and forth through the house in a swarm. And still I seem to always know what will happen next. I know, for instance, that Evan will start to cry when Alex hits Tom, and that Alex will cry when Evan does, and that I will not be able to cry until they are all gone and I am alone in the house.

What ends up being the worst part is that I don't say anything, even goodbye. Alex looks at me over his shoulder as he climbs into the car, finally resigned to the process, and all I want to do is walk over to him and curl my body around his like a comma, to hold him because he is shaking and looks so lonely. But I don't, and they all pile in the car after him and drive away. Evan is still crying as he signals and turns left at the stoplight.

After I call my parents, I sit on the front steps and press my hands against the cold brick, then cool my face with my palms. Every time I see Alex I wonder if it is the last time, and this night is no different. I picture him off at some school in Oregon, growing up, calming down. I wonder if I want to ever see him again, and decide that I'm not ready to

answer that question just yet. For now, it is enough to wait on these steps for my parents to come home.

## Epilogue

July 13, 2009

Happy birthday, tomorrow.

Thanks, I guess.

Where will you go when they let you out?

I don't know. Away.

I have something for you.

I don't want any presents.

It's something I wrote. It's about you.

It's not about me.

Yes, yes it is. See, here you are. And this  
part, this is about you, and all this stuff  
here.

That's not me.

Well who is it then?

I don't know, maybe it's who you think I  
am.

And who are you?

I don't want to talk about this.

So will you write it down instead? See, I  
left all this white space in the margins for  
you.

Then how about these blank pages in the  
back? There's even Post-it notes, if you  
want them.

What do you want?

But I love you.

But I love you.

I don't want to write in your margins.

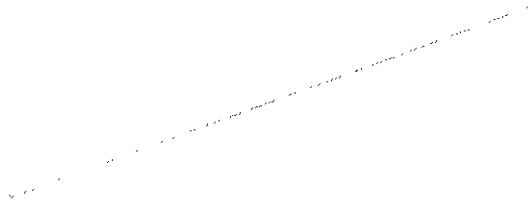
Listen, I don't want any of your white  
space.

I want you to leave me alone. I want to  
find my own white space.

Okay. Now go, please.

Then let that be enough.

# Post-its





# **The People Pictured Here**

## Trisha

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 - 10:00 a.m.

Dawn breaks over the townhouses with aggression, each separate spear of light slipping between the roofs at a slant. The Ballard district is not blessed with one of Seattle's seven major hills; instead its streets are cracked with rises every few yards, sharp slopes and pitfalls. The bottoms of the buildings were originally made to conform to the land's irregularity, but over time the ground has shifted and the buildings have shifted with it. Now Ballard looks like a graveyard of homes, all crooked and crumpling together.

I watch my cigarette smoke curl off to my right side and break against the iron porch rails. The porch is shallow enough that I can lean my chair back against the glass of the sliding door while also bracing myself against the guard rail in front of me. The rail creaks louder each morning, and I try to keep the bulk of my weight behind me, against the chair back and the glass.

Angela joins me outside before I can finish my first cup of coffee, which means that she will have finished the pot and not thought to brew more. I forgive her for these small inconsiderations as I imagine an old married couple forgives each other's faults; Angela and I have lived together for six years, and I know what is unchangeable about her by this point. She will always take the last cup of coffee out onto the porch and interrupt my reading without acknowledging it. There is something comforting, as well as annoying, in her ease with me.

"Do you have a lot to do before brunch?" Angela asks as she sets her coffee mug on the glass table and stretches. A group of construction workers on the roof of a building

across the street catcalls at her, although it must be impossible for them to see much of anything at that distance. Still, they must imagine the strip of smooth flesh that appears between sweatpants and tank top as Angela's arms cross above her head, the shoulder that is exposed when her thin robe slips.

“Just some errands, bank and dry-cleaning. What are your plans for the day?” Saturdays are always up in the air for Angela, who works weekdays during the lunch rush at Anthony's Homeport. The lunch rush is the best shift, she always reminds me; although the tips may be slightly better with the evening crowd, the gift of having both evenings and mornings free more than makes up for the slight drop in profits. The lunch shift takes up those middle hours of the day, the listless hours when everyone who does not have a nine-to-five job wanders around their homes looking for something to do, and avoiding doing anything useful.

“I might go to Dominick's later. First I need to run some errands myself.”

“Have you thought about how you're going to tell Dom?” This is the question we've been avoiding since yesterday, when she broke the news to me over a makeshift dinner, canned tuna mixed with mayonnaise in cereal bowls and spooned onto leaves of lettuce. Our version of rabbit food. After she told me, I reminded her that she wasn't supposed to be eating fish in her state, but she scoffed and called the advice an old wives' tale. This morning I bite my tongue about secondhand smoke, but am careful to turn my head completely away from her when I exhale, straight into the jutting side wall of the apartment.

Angela is silent, like she hasn't heard my question. She will probably stay quiet for five minutes or so, long enough for me to look down at my book and pretend to read. Then she'll either answer my question or go inside, I'm not sure. I look at her out of the corner of

my eye as I take a drag, and she's chewing on her fingernails, looking up at the construction men who have forgotten her and returned to their work.

When Angela told me the news last night, her words sounded like something I had heard before, like I had already had the conversation and forgotten to tell her about it. I almost interrupted her with a "yeah, you told me already, remember?" before I realized that she hadn't told me; I just knew, somehow.

"So I'm pregnant," she said, standing over the sink with the head of lettuce in her left hand. Her right hand slewed the water from each leaf before ripping it off and setting it on a paper towel next to the drain. The row of lettuce leaves looked attentive, like the choir from a Greek play, ready to echo each line in unison. I looked down at the tuna I was mixing, paused.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Have you been to the doctor?" I hoped not. She had taken home pregnancy tests before, all of which had been negative, but still, without a doctor there could be no proof.

"I went yesterday. They said I probably was, but ran the tests through last night and called me today to confirm. It's not very far along, I wouldn't have even noticed it myself. I was just in for yearly tests and stuff." I pictured the waiting room at the Department of Health and Human Services, where we both go because of our income bracket. If you fudge your information on the forms, round down slightly in every category, you can usually get away with only a fifteen-dollar payment, but I imagined that pregnancy must cost a lot more.

I pictured Angela sitting, thumbing through a large-print Reader's Digest, smiling at a small child in the toy pit, completely unaware. I snickered.

"Why is this funny?" She turned from the sink, hands dripping and red.

"I'm sorry, it's not funny. It's just, I mean, that's what every girl's always afraid of when they go in, isn't it? That the doctor will take one look and oops, guess who's pregnant?" I giggled again, couldn't stop. "That's what my mom always says about cancer, that if no one ever points it out, it doesn't hurt you. Like it needs to be noticed to grow. Maybe that's what pregnancy's all about. Just ignore it and it will go away." I covered my smile with my hand, which smelled like tuna fish.

Angela stared at me, then at her wet hands, then back at the lettuce filled sink. She started to laugh, a low, throaty sound that sounded a lot like crying. She laughed until her eyes teared up, and when she wiped the tears away the lettuce water on her hands made her cheeks wet anyway.

In the new light slanting across the porch, though, the situation doesn't seem as funny anymore. I think about the book I am reading, Ursula Hegi's *Stones from the River*, and how the heroine, a German dwarf, helps to hide her Jewish neighbors from the Schutzstaffel. The girl in my book knows everybody's secrets because no one considers that she might have secrets of her own, this short, unlovable woman. Maybe Angela will ask me to keep her secret, to help her hide this baby she is growing from my own brother. I keep waiting for her to say something, to tell me what the plan will be.

"I don't know what he'll say, so I don't know if I can tell him yet. I don't know how I would tell him." We both picture Dom in our heads as she speaks. My older brother, my

quiet, smooth partner since birth. I'm the one that should know how he'll respond, and yet I don't. I know how everyone else in the family will react; Macy and Christopher, the "grown-up" siblings, will scoff and roll their eyes at each other, remark how Angela's finally got Dom where she wants him, no way to escape now. Our mother will be delighted, wish loudly that our father could be alive see this, his first grandchild, even if it is part Angela's. But Dom, he might just stand there, all liquid eyes and smooth brow, then turn and leave the room as the door swings shut behind him.

But I don't say any of these things to Angela, who still stands against the porch rail with her robe flapping behind her like one thick wing.

"Maybe you should wait to tell him," I say. "At least until you decide the best way."

"And you won't say anything? Not to him, of course, but to Macy or Chris or anyone?"

"Of course not," I promise. "Just take your time." She nods without looking at me, stares into the street where a car is trying to parallel park. I finish my cigarette and drop it into the soda can on the porch table, hear the hiss as the cherry is doused. I swish the can around a little, just to make sure the cigarette's completely submerged.

"Try not to worry," I say. "I'm sure it will be fine."

## Angela

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 - 10:30 a.m.

After Trisha goes inside I sit on the porch chair and pull out one of her cigarettes from the pack, just to hold it in my mouth for a minute. The filter tastes like paper and dirt, but I keep it there, pressed between the dry paper of my lips. Paper to paper. I think about the things that I won't be able to do for months, now, things I never thought twice about before: dye my hair, sit in a smoking section, eat sushi. There must be a lot of other things that I can't do, and I will need to find them all out quickly, today, just in case I do one on accident.

I try to count the lies that I've told to Trisha. One, that Dominick doesn't know about the baby, and two, that the baby is still very young, and three, that I didn't know before yesterday. Oh, I knew, I think that I knew the minute it happened. An afternoon two months ago, all cold winter sweat and fading sun at the windows and moving in Dominick's single bed. I felt something crack inside me, like a castle wall crumbling on the failure of one small stone. And then I waited and waited until I couldn't shake the growing feeling anymore. I tried to ignore it, but it turns out a baby and cancer are not the same thing after all.

Telling Dominick was much easier than I thought it would be. My speech wasn't planned, wasn't even a speech at all, the words just came out one day last week. Just a simple turn towards the bed from the dark window, and, "By the way, I'm pregnant." And his face buried itself in the pillow, then lifted to look across the room at me, and then away again.

"How long have you known?"

“Just today,” I said, the truth. If he had been looking at me, the truth would have been harder to tell. He stands up and walks to the other window, the one that looks down onto the slanted street, where I could hear enough voices to tell that a large group is walking by, drunk and stumbling home, hand in hand in hand.

“How do you feel about this?” He asks, still not looking at me.

I paused, not sure if he was asking about the baby, or us, or maybe even the drunken mess below. I chose to respond to the baby part.

“I feel okay. I mean, I’m still trying to register, but it’s not like we’re kids anymore, you know?”

“What is that supposed to mean? What would be different if we were younger?” Dominick stared down at the revelers below, a display of the youth I had just reminded him we didn’t have.

“I guess we’re supposed to be able to handle this now, be responsible. Do the right thing.” And I chewed on my thumbnail and hoped that he would say, yes, let’s have this baby, it’s the right thing. And what’s more, I want to, he would say. I want to have this baby with you, and be with you, and the baby, forever.

But he didn’t say anything for awhile, and we stood at our respective windows until the voices below had faded away and it started to rain, splashing the glass in front of both our faces. And then he walked over and stood behind me and palmed my still-flat stomach, and then I went home to the apartment that Trisha and I share.



I met Trisha and Dominick on the same day, and from the start it was hard to tell who I was most drawn to, with whom I fell more in love. It's still hard to tell six years later, to differentiate between the ways I love them.

Trisha walked into our dorm room as I was spreading sheets across the twin bed that I had chosen after waiting for an hour for her to arrive. I didn't want to be presumptuous, to grab at the bed and the desk and the closet that I wanted without waiting for my roommate, but after wandering back and forth and stepping around boxes there was nothing else to do. And so I started with the bed, picking the one farthest away from the window, the one I wanted least.

My sheets were blue and made of a soft, t-shirt like material, purchased in one of those dorm room box sets that Target sells. I hadn't even washed them yet, because I knew that if I washed them while still at home I would have to sleep in them immediately, and they would be less special. And so when Trisha opened the door I was furtively trying to smooth out the thick ridges that had been left by the cardboard folded between the sheets. The creases embarrassed me, made it obvious how excited I was to be there, in that cramped little room that I would share with someone else, for the first time in my life.

I turned quickly and crawled backward off the bed as Trisha scanned the room and dropped duffel bags in a circle around her. She looked at me, but not in an appraising way; her face was open like the swinging door behind her.

"Hello, I'm Trisha." And her hand was already out in front of her as she walked toward me. I wanted to hug her, to sigh with relief at her friendliness, but another person was already coming through the door behind her. I looked past Trisha's shoulder and saw Dominick, stooping through the doorway although it was several inches above his head.

They looked like two versions of the same person, both with the same open face and smooth limbs, like a boy doll and a girl doll. And they looked at me together until Trisha grabbed Dominick's arm right above the elbow and gripped it hard.

"Look, Dom, this must be Angela." Her excitement was the opposite of mine, obvious, not embarrassed by her glee. I remembered myself and held out my own hand.

"Yes, hello, I'm Angela." And I shook her hand first, then the hand that Dominick slowly extended as though he didn't even want to touch me. Trisha's left hand still gripped his right arm and so it was the left hand that he put out, an awkward start, except that he was left handed anyway and so it felt right, to touch him first in a straight line between our bodies.

## Macy

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 - 10:45 a.m.

This will be a Barlowe day, I decide as I dress. Tomorrow and for every day after, the nameless people can all have my attention. My ear will turn sympathetically to their petty wants: affirmation of an order, acknowledgement of a relinquished seat on the bus, advice on which route to take through a crowded department store. I will answer with “no room for cream,” “thank you,” and “try the escalator near Intimates.” But today I will speak only to my family; today will be for Barlowes.

I bolt out the door fast, eager to be on my way. After taking the side stairs to Christopher’s apartment, I pass his partner in the upper hall. I murmur “good morning,” purse my lips to save my lipstick, peck Matthew’s left cheekbone. Every morning these asexual kisses are a reminder that Matthew kisses my brother, has sex with my brother, and I try to keep myself from imagining how they act, how they touch. I remind myself that Christopher and Matthew are not some generic attractive gay couple on television, on display for viewing pleasure; that it is inappropriate to be curious about how my brother acts with his lover.

After almost thirty years of living with or living near Christopher, I try hard to remember that we cannot share everything, because often I forget and have to be reminded. Each new person that comes into our lives is alternately appalled and intrigued by our interactions, Christopher and I and Trisha and Dominick. My siblings and I offer our most prized possessions for examination, admiration, and critique; lovers, lifestyles, bodies, and

small hurts are traded like chewing gum passed back and forth between schoolgirls. Each exchange strengthens our ties to each other as the gum grows hard between our teeth, but interlopers like Matthew remind me that we are grown-ups now, Christopher and I, and need to have boundaries.

So I don't ask Matthew how he and Christopher slept last night, and continue down the hall, moving more slowly now in order to catch my breath. Christopher will notice if I am winded, and playfully pounce. Better not to give him extra ammunition. As I approach Christopher's apartment, I shift the keys on my too-small key ring, keeping the blue fob in my left palm as my right hand fingers search for the three keys that will unlock Apartment 306, where Christopher has lived for the past several years. I number and name each key as I go: one, my deadbolt key; two, my door key; three, four and five, Trisha's apartment keys; six, the key to our mother's house; seven, the key to Christopher's car; eight, nine and ten are the keys to Christopher's apartment, and I can stop, let the others fall back into the bunch, noting again that Dominick has not, will not, give me a key for my collection. This is my family, counted out in keys: Trisha, Christopher, my mother, myself, and Dominick's play at independence.

I reach Christopher's door and automatically insert each key, unlock each barrier, as I wipe my clean shoes on the spotless straw doormat. "Please go away" is woven in its center in cheerful yellow ribbon. I use my shoulder to push against the thick door and it swings open, gaining momentum. Still, it fails to hit the wall, bouncing instead against a rubber doorstop on the floorboard. Christopher had the doorstop installed two years ago when my entrance put a doorknob-sized dent in the wall. One day, I vow -- and mentally shake my fist

at the door as I cross the threshold -- one day I will push hard enough to defeat my nemesis, the doorknob, mark the wall with the doorknob once again, make my presence felt.

“Here are the things I have to do today,” I announce to the spacious entryway. Christopher is leaning against the chest-high wall that separates the entry from the sunken living room, looking obnoxiously well-groomed for a Saturday morning.

He is saying something about pants as I breeze past him. I brush the comment off and give Christopher a smacking kiss on the cheek, knowing it will ruin my lipstick but not caring because the gesture will make Christopher groan and rub his face, smearing sticky red up onto his high cheekbone. Basking in my cleverness, I follow my stomach to the kitchen.

Everything in Christopher and Matthew’s apartment, including the kitchen, is tasteful and clever, reminding visitors that they will never be as tasteful or clever as the handsome pair of attorneys that live there. Two pictures hang on the refrigerator, both framed and covered by real glass which has been broken repeatedly by Trisha and me, and replaced each time by a tsk-tsking Christopher. One picture is of my parents, taken shortly before my father’s death seven years ago. The other is of the four of us children, arranged under a Christmas tree and all struggling to smile while holding a family pet.

“Really, Christopher,” I ask for the millionth time, “who puts glass in a refrigerator magnet?”

“I do,” he replies, smirking, as I bury my head in the coolness of the fridge and hunt for dairy. Surprisingly, there is none.

“Yogurt? Cottage cheese? You promised.” I feel vaguely betrayed. I depend on Christopher to keep everything on hand that I won’t allow myself to keep in my own apartment, on account of my diet.

Christopher says something about soy and Matthew and lactose, but I don't listen, having already decided to be irritated with him for the next five minutes or so, or at least for as long as I can remember to act irritated. He says more things that I half-hear and half-respond to as I settle for a jar of pimento olives and wander with it into the living room. Harsh March sun streaks through the full-length windows and lays a dappled pattern on the white carpet. I collapse on the suede couch and glance at Christopher, waiting for the response I know is coming.

“I swear to God, Macy, if you spill olive juice on that couch, I will personally make you lick it clean.”

“Where do you come up with things like that? You wouldn't let me lick your couch if I tried.” I giggle, giving up on the irritation plan. Years ago, when I played at being a writer, I used to carry a little notebook with me everywhere just so that I could write down the ridiculous phrases, usually threats, that Christopher constantly produces. He has an endless supply, like candies from an old lady's purse, and every member of our family can recite choice selections. I dubbed them “Christopherisms” when they started cropping up during his high school years. To this day, my favorite is the one he yelled at Dominick when we found him, five years old and bare naked, covered in Christopher's expensive oil paints:

“You little brat, I'll squeeze you dry and make a fucking Dominick shade of blue!”

Dominick's innocent dark eyes had grown big enough to throw shadows across his cheeks, and instead of running like any wise child would have, he froze, a rainbow-colored statue, and waited for Christopher to make good on his threat. Christopher had let him off with a warning that time, and to this day he still keeps a picture of Dominick the Rainbow on the mantle across from the suede couch I am currently cuddled up on.

Christopher drops the banter about olives and perches on one of the white ladder chairs next to the fireplace. He squints, either gearing up for a question or in response to the glare of the sun on white. Tiny lines etch themselves at the outer corner of each eye. When Christopher's face rearranges like this, it looks lived-in, used but used lovingly. He is a Velveteen Rabbit in the stage right before patches of bare fabric begin to show through the plush. I suddenly remember many things about my brother: that he is thirty, successful but restless, and quite possibly unhappy although he would never admit it. To distract myself, I ramble.

"Trisha called last night. Apparently she has some big news about Angela. I tried to get her to tell me, but she wouldn't do it over the phone. Said she wants to tell us together, and to not say anything to Mom." When I pause, look expectantly at Christopher, he is focused on a sunspot bouncing around on the shag carpet.

"Christopher!"

Un-startled, he swivels to face me head on, feigning innocence.

"What's Angela's problem? I'm listening."

His response confirms that he definitely has not been listening. If he had been, he would have some catty remark about Angela's weight, her obsession with Dominick, her deadweight status as Trisha's roommate, her general failure at life, or some combination of these factors. Due to a long history of uncensored (but witty) remarks, every member of our family, as well as Angela herself and probably a majority of the population of Seattle, is well aware of Christopher's disdain for her, and his inability to pass up a chance to point out her shortcomings. Yet he has just missed a prime opportunity, which proves that he hasn't been listening, and so I glare at him.

“I’m sorry, my mind wandered off.” He theatrically hangs his head.

“Never mind.” I reply, short, clipped.

“No, Macy, I really am sorry. But I’ll obviously be hearing all of this straight from Trisha in about two hours.”

I know he is right, and yet I can’t help wanting him to listen to me anyway. I feel like a child, banging my head against the wall for attention from an adult with better things to do than cater to a spoiled brat. Christopher can make me feel like I’m about three years old without even trying, and resentment rises in my throat just like it always does. I swallow, and remind myself that I am the oldest child, the leader for life.

“Oh, so smart, little brother. Fine, be that way. You can just wait in suspense, then.” I rise to go, unwilling at the moment to let Christopher redeem himself.

“I thought you said she wouldn’t tell you anyway. Don’t be bitchy, it’s much too early in the morning. At least wait until we start drinking.” He stands too, smiles, and the light dapples his face so that he looks young again.

For a second I long to see myself the way Christopher sees me. Not to see myself through his eyes; no, I’m not sure I, could handle the intricacies of Christopher’s thought process. I have always imagined his mind as a labyrinth, the kind with more hidden components than visible ones, constantly shifting, testing, moving towards lofty and complex goals. But I feel somehow that Christopher’s gaze highlights my best parts, which is the way I want to see myself. Maybe someday I’ll ask him to describe myself to me. What he sees in me that makes him smile like that, all full of morning sun.

For now though, I leave him with a wave, knowing that I will see him at brunch in an hour.



## Christopher

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 - 11:00 a.m.

Macy burst through the door at 11:03 a.m. Whenever I explain this action to my friends, a dissenter inevitably points out that it is logically impossible to “burst” through a door that requires the unlocking of three separate locks. In response to this display of doubt, I invite the questioner over on any given morning, Monday through Saturday, and no one leaves disagreeing with my description.

“I’m not wearing pants,” I remarked to the door as it swung inward.

“I’ve seen it before,” replied Macy, as a blur of red lip-gloss brushed my face and headed towards the kitchen.

“Yogurt?” The top of Macy’s head bobbed questioningly at me when I caught up to her, while the rest of her body made itself at home in my refrigerator.

“No.”

“Cottage cheese? You promised.”

Her ponytail practically shook its finger at me over the refrigerator door.

“No, there’s soy something, Matthew decided he’s lactose intolerant yesterday.” I gritted my teeth in preparation for a high-pitched noise as her body quickly unearthed itself from the cool depths of the fridge.

For Macy’s last birthday I drew a caricature of this same general arrangement: refrigerator door ajar, hands (not fingers, entire hands) slapping hips impatiently, and an arrangement of facial features that resembles nothing so much as a tic tac toe board, slashes

of eyebrows crossing furrowed laugh lines that dissect a pursed mouth. I know her anger so well that it fits in my palm like a wind-up toy.

“Why are you rushing? It’s only eleven. We’re not meeting Trisha for another hour,” I commented, aiming for distraction.

“I’m not rushing, I have a few minutes but then I have to go. You know what they said last week about giving away our table. I’m pretty sure you laughed in the waiter’s face,” Macy said.

“Well, yes, he was being ridiculous. We’re in there every week at twelve, and nobody else even wants that sad little table. Besides, he would never give it away. He knows we would make a scene. Plus he wants to screw Trisha.”

“He’s gay,” countered Macy. She has been trying to convince us of this fact for two years, although the waiter’s habit of rubbing Trisha’s upper back speaks otherwise. I would tell him to stop touching my baby sister if Trisha’s mild embarrassment wasn’t so flattering to her complexion.

“No, he’s not gay, you’ve seen how he acts to Trish, all hands. Besides, I hit on him once at a party, and he didn’t go for it.” I placed my palms firmly on the kitchen island and leaned towards the refrigerator, anticipating a round of banter.

“Maybe he just didn’t like you,” Macy said coolly as she raised an eyebrow and emerged victorious from her assault of my refrigerator, green jar in hand. “I know, I know, that would be impossible for you to comprehend. Maybe he’s blind.”

“That would explain his inability to understand the difference between cinnamon powder and cocoa powder, I suppose.”

Macy crossed in front of me and stepped down into the sunlit living room. Knowing this to be a signal for the start of brother-sister gossip hour, I seated myself across from where she had stretched out on the white suede couch, long limbs akimbo. The lid of the jar she had appropriated popped loudly and the faint smell of green olives permeated the otherwise odorless room.

As Macy talked, my mind started to wander. Although her eyebrows were furrowed in concentration and she was illustrating her monologue with vague air sketches, I knew that I would hear everything she was saying for the second time over brunch at the Matador an hour later, pleasantly supplemented by our little sister's observations.

Inevitably, she caught me in the act of tuning her out and I was required to rush in and appease her hurt. After apologizing, I turned towards the picture window and stretched in friendly dismissal. "I'll see you in an hour or so."

"Try not to be too long, I want to talk to Trisha as soon as possible," Macy said, eyeing me warily, daring me to idle, then popped up and flounced toward the entryway. She yelled a goodbye over her departing shoulder and shut the door hard. She didn't pause to relock the three locks from the outside, and I knew without watching her through the peephole that she was already hurrying down the hall, rushing towards the stairs, the lobby doors, the streets of Seattle, the next stimulating thing. I collapsed in her warmed spot on the sofa, exhausted by her energy.

In the hour between Macy's departure and our brunch appointment, I try not to speculate about Trisha's big news, but fail. As I do the dishes and rearrange the newly lactose-free refrigerator, I consider calling my mother to alert her that something is on the

horizon. Maybe Macy, Trish and I are the ones in the dark; maybe Angela's already told Dom about whatever it is and he's spoken to Mom.

The likelihood of this is slim, however. I can't remember the last time that Dom voluntarily told our mother anything, or Macy and me for that matter. Whatever we hear about our brother comes through Trisha, his twin one year removed. His arrogance annoys me, although Macy points out that he and I share this trait of holding ourselves aloof, posturing at being above it all. But at least I can laugh at myself, recognize my glossing-over of my faults to confront the outside world. Dominick is the real thing, in that he doesn't recognize how much he needs us to reflect himself back in true form.

Before I can leave for brunch, Matthew arrives home shedding piles of files from work. We conjecture for a bit about what Trisha's news could be, but I am already exhausted from the conversation I am about to have with my sisters, and tell Matthew so. Instead of more talk, we go to bed together, leaving the windows open to the sun and smatters of rain that appear every few minutes. Some drops make it through the screen in the wide bedroom window and bounce across the ledge to land on our bodies, sheet-less in the humidity and warmth of our lovemaking. As Matthew kisses the bones along my pelvis, lightly, I picture dust rising from my skin to mix with the rain into clay, into little gray people who make love to each other in the air. I fall asleep for a moment, and in my half-dream the clay people have families, go to work, pray to a clay god that they imagine, a deity less real than even themselves, these people born of the dust of my aging and the cool rain.

"Wake up," Matthew calls to me, his voice filtering down into my dream to issue from the mouth of the clay god. "You'll be late to meet your sisters."

## Trisha

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 - 11:15 a.m.

It just so happens that the first errand on my list this morning is a stop by Dominick's apartment, and I don't feel guilty not mentioning my visit to Angela. He is my brother, after all, even if he is also her lover. And she won't be out of the shower and dressed for at least an hour, so there is little danger of her catching me there.

I have to drive to reach Dom's place on Capitol Hill, which means that I won't be able to stay long if I want to make brunch on time. As usual, I will try to convince him to join us, but on this particular Saturday I really hope that he doesn't come along. I know already that I will tell Macy and Christopher about the pregnancy, even though I've promised Angela not to. She and I have lived together for six years, but my siblings and I can't keep secrets from each other, and she knows it. She will expect me to tell them.

I drive up Dom's street slowly, narrowly avoiding the cars that line each side, seeing myself reflected in each window. I can see both Angela and Dominick in my own face, all three of us thin and brown. The hair lines all three of our faces the same way, like smooth wooden frames around pictures. In college, people who met the three of us together always thought that we were three siblings, two of us maybe twins, the other very close in age. There was always mild astonishment in friends' faces when Dom and Angela kissed, or he and I held hands, as it took them a minute to reassess and try to understand who went with whom, which of us were lovers and which of us were family.

I pull into the steep driveway of his apartment building and park behind the Volvo Dom has driven since he was eighteen. When my father died, my mother considered selling

the car but couldn't, remembering how much my father had loved it. The light blue paint has rusted away and been covered in silver tape time and time again, but the Volvo refuses to stop running. Dominick vows every time the car coughs and starts that he will never pay to have it fixed, so they remain locked in a battle of wills, year after year. I pull my Hybrid right up to kiss the crooked bumper.

Dominick stands three stories up on his own porch, smoking and leaning over the railing. He smiles down at me but his eyes are lost in the glare of the sun.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Can I come up?”

“Course. I'll come let you in.” He flicks his cigarette down to land about a foot away from me, and I grind it out with the toe of my sandal. We've always smoked the same brand, so that neither of us has to worry about running out when we're together.

When I enter his apartment, it smells like sex, paint, and wood shavings. His one-bedroom has the feel of a loft about it, but of course no artist with Dom's salary can afford a real loft on Capitol Hill, one with knocked out ceilings and room for air to create a breeze, a space with high windows. Dominick's apartment is cramped, but three full walls are hung with white, unmarked canvases, and every window is open to the morning. Yet still the smells hang heavy, don't want to leave their familiar place.

After locking the door behind me, Dominick gives me a long, close hug and then pads into the kitchen, avoiding my eyes. I follow, catch his hand as it swings a cupboard open. I can tell already that he knows.

“Hey.”

“Hey what?” Wrestling his hand from mine, he reaches for a wide glass, fills it with wine, then tilts the bottle toward me, offering.

“Yeah, sure, pour me a little. It’s past eleven, after all. I talked to Angela this morning.” He pours me a full glass, and the cold fog from the liquid immediately beads the bowl of the cup.

“Hmm. What did you talk about?” Dom still won’t look at me.

“You know, don’t you?”

“Nope. She and I don’t talk much.” He replaces the bottle and slides past me into the living area, where he grabs a brush and soaks it in his wine glass. He walks over to a canvas near the open southwest window and paints wide Chardonnay strokes across the unmarred surface. The colors from a painted canvas on the ceiling bend down to reflect in the liquid that runs in streams down the stiff, unrelenting surface.

“That’s a waste of good wine, you know.”

“Who said it was good wine?” He gulps from the glass, shakes his head, smacks.

“Mmm. Not good at all.”

As he continues to dabble with his alcohol, I wander over to the fourth wall, vibrant, where finished canvases hang alongside unframed photos and magazine clippings. Some reviews of his work are here, but only the bad ones; Dominick claims that good reviews are not motivating, don’t encourage improvement. I just think he lacks confidence in his talent, but of course he scoffs at this accusation if I say it out loud.

Next to a painting of what appears to be a mud puddle there hangs a picture of the four of us, not posed like the one on Christopher’s mantle, but more colorful; it looks like a

picture that is supposed to be a picture, even if it wasn't arranged with wide smiles and faces focused on the camera lens.

The background of the photo is an almost florescent green that blends into itself, so that you have to put your face right up to the wall to tell that the green is tall grass. The four of us stand spread out near the center of the picture, meaning that the camera person must have been above us and quite far away. Christopher is farthest afield in the grass, a shirtless sunburned seven-year-old with a walking stick in his hand. The camera has caught him mid-swing, parting the grass in front of him with an explorer's fervor. Macy stands a few feet closer and a head taller than Chris, and holds my toddler self in her arms; I peek and mug over her shoulder, not looking at the camera, but instead back at Dominick who is down low and to the left. He is the only child turned toward the photographer, giving a shy smile and a half-wave. The four of us are so stark and happy against the brilliant green background that we could be dolls, arranged to look like real boys and girls.

I turn around from the picture to face Dominick, who is still at his canvas. He has switched from wine to acrylics, and outlined a hand holding a picture in glossy black.

"Don't paint me."

"I'm not painting you. I'm painting the picture, which your hand just happens to be holding."

I check my watch.

"I need to get going soon. I just came by to pick up my camera and invite you breakfast. Did Angela really not say anything to you about anything?"



“Well maybe if you were more specific,” Dom calls over his shoulder as he rummages through a wicker basket and emerges with my Nikon. “She’s been her moody little self lately, but nothing out of the ordinary. Is something wrong with her?”

I take the camera from him and frown, an expression which he mimics back to me. I reach up to push the hair out of his eyes, exposing a streak of black paint high on his forehead.

“No, she’s fine. I’m sure she’ll talk to you about it sometime. Nothing important. Do you want to come to brunch?” He grins, and the shock of dark hair I’ve just moved falls back across his face.

“So the three of you can mother hen me? No, thanks. I’ve got some work to finish up today.”

“Ah, yes, your wine painting. Good luck with that. Oh, and call Mom back, she said to tell you.” I hug him, feeling the way his ribs jut out on his back, pushing the skin farther than his spine dares to stretch it.

“Sure, I’ll get right on that.” And he gently shoves me toward the door. After he closes it behind me I hear the locks click back into place, one after the other.

## Macy

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 - 11:45 a.m.

Seattle smells open and fresh on early spring mornings like these. I always appreciate the little things this smell does for me; it is like a close friend that knows what touch or word I need before the desire even articulates itself in my own mind. The breeze that carries the smell this particular morning lifts my silk scarf to caress my face with unpossessive tenderness, and then wanders off to revel in another lover. For someone who craves the freedom to leave, or stay on a whim, this weather is kind.

I look for my siblings on the damp streets of Ballard as I walk. I rarely pass them on the way to brunch, but when I do it is on mornings like this, when the newness of the world is most striking and all of us feel the need to be up early, talking, doing. The four of us respond to the same pleasures, like the smell of concrete after it rains.

Dominick is on the agenda for breakfast today, as he almost always is. Because he never chooses to attend these meetings, he is dissected weekly over black coffee, cigarettes, and pastries. But today there is also the problem of Angela, whatever news that Trisha has to bring us about her roommate, Dom's lover.

Trisha arrives late, more breathless than usual, and I suspect that I don't want to hear whatever news she has. She pulls a dingy plastic chair up to our tipsy table and lights a clove with the matches she pulls from beside my coffee. Inhaling deeply, eyes closed, she slumps uncharacteristically back onto the low headrest.

“Why are you smoking those? They'll scratch your lungs.”

“Oh hush. I like the way they taste. I’m sure one pack won’t kill me. Want one?” I laugh, shake my head, and notice our questionably gay waiter make a beeline towards the kitchen to fetch Trisha’s (by now, lukewarm) eggs. I don’t know what he’d do if forced to serve them to her hot, bring hot pads maybe, but the situation has never come up. His complete apathy towards customer satisfaction is the basis of his charm, for us.

“So what’s Angela’s big problem? I’ve been speculating about it all morning.”

“We should wait for that until Christopher comes. He is coming?”

“Yes, I just left his place an hour ago and he was dressed and groomed, so he should be here soon.”

“I’m starving. I’ve been trying a protein diet. Eggs are good protein, right?” Trisha sits up and pushes her box of cloves in my direction, forgetting that I’ve declined. I navigate the crushed gold lining and pull out a slim brown cylinder that smells faintly of cinnamon. After smoking a clove I always feel like Christmas is just around the corner.

“What? I mean, yes, they are, but you don’t need to diet. This sounds like an Angela idea. Did she tell you to diet?” I inhale and the clove’s crackling fiberglass sounds my disagreement with what I assume is Angela’s prognosis.

“Of course not. But we’re both trying to bulk up, and I thought protein was the way to go. I want muscle, and she wants to gain weight.” Trisha avoids my eyes in an obvious way, inviting the pounce that she knows is coming.

“And why does she want to gain weight? That doesn’t sound like her.”

“I don’t know, we haven’t really discussed her reasons.” Trisha looks coyly to the side, pretending to search for a distraction. “Let’s wait for Chris. Where are my eggs? Damn waiter. I need coffee.” She raises a limp limb to gesture for service, and smiles up at

me from under her lashes. Sometimes I think that this is all a joke to her, knowing other people's problems.

## Christopher

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 - 12:15 p.m.

I approach my sisters from the inner lobby, watching them talk through the glass. The panel distorts them, and Macy appears again as a caricature of herself. She is animated and gives the impression of having at least two of everything: necklaces, mouths, braids. My sister is never at rest. Even when she sleeps her limbs twitch constantly and she murmurs in low tones. At rest she is a swiftly moving river under a deceptive layer of light ice.

Trisha is winter-pale, and made more so by the sun that reflects off of the windows and onto her plate. The brightness of the dishes and chairs around her compliment her skin tones, highlight her pretense at aloofness. I blame her attempt at a brooding demeanor on Dom; since childhood she has imitated him like a shadow that yearns to be attached to its owner. But their posturing is always interrupted when they catch each other's eyes, letting grins break like escaped rainbows and disrupt their deliberately furrowed brows. And Macy and I watch these performances, year in and year out, with a mixture of amusement and unease.

I emerge from the inner dining area after pre-diagnosing my sisters' moods. Macy will be fixated on something, lecturing and cajoling Trisha to come around to her way of thinking; she will bring me in to support whatever point she is driving home. Trisha will not even attempt to appear attentive, and so will spur Macy on. She will do this on purpose, anticipating the moment when Macy's logic begins to take liberties and Trisha can point out its inconsistencies.

Immediately upon sitting down, I realize that I have guessed incorrectly. Instead of entreating Trisha, Macy is griping about the small injustice our decidedly straight waiter has just committed.

“I ordered her eggs over forty-five minutes ago. Christopher, you were right, he can’t be gay. He just put her order through. Attentive service, my ass.”

“Now Macy, no one at the Matador has ever claimed to provide attentive service. That’s why the food is overpriced and we love coming here. And you have a very nice ass, as I’m sure everyone here has noticed without you shouting about it.” I smile sideways at Trisha while shaking a clove from the pack on the table. “Sister, why would you bring these and worse, let me smoke them? I’ll get lines and Matthew will leave me.”

But Trisha is not interested in bantering, and her voice is urgent as she leans in. Her forehead almost meets Macy’s across the small table and I feel compelled to join the huddle. Our hair mingles: my straws, Macy’s frizz and Trisha’s dark smoothness disguise our common genes in case a passerby might seek to create a link and implicate us all in the secret I suspect we are about the share.

“Angela’s pregnant.”

Even in my shock, I wonder if I should gasp dramatically; I decide against it.

Macy sits back, defeated.

“So there’s that.” Trisha’s eyes dart quickly from Macy’s folded hands to what must be blankness in my eyes. “Well?”

“Are we sure it’s Dom’s?” Macy’s futile grasp for a fire escape strikes all three of us and we giggle hysterically, horribly, in unison.

## Dominick

March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006 - 12:30 p.m.

After Trisha leaves, I continue painting, drinking my plaster-tasting wine now, filling in the black strokes with gray and grayer. The painted hand remains bare, a simple combination of brush strokes, but in the picture it holds I flesh out two women, their backs to me, their arms around each other. They lean over another picture, a picture of two more women's backs, and so on and so forth, revolving into picture within picture within picture. A spiral, a circle inward, until all I can paint are dots within dots.

I place the monotone canvas in the center of a larger canvas, and switch to vibrant color, greens and blues. I paint outward across the larger canvas, three other people watching the women: Macy, all hair in her face, and Christopher, contained, watchful, and myself, a long mess of limbs. And beyond them is my mother, a caretaker, and farther out my father, with dirty wings sprouting from his abdomen. And out and out into swirls of blue and white into atmosphere, and dots of the faces of the whole world watching them watch us watch the women, arms around each other.

I wish that I could explain to Trisha how thankful I am for her and her love, the kind that settles so firmly on Angela and me and the baby that we all know I know about. Somewhere deep inside my painting the baby is buried, and so I once again dip my brush into my wine glass to soak up the alcohol. I place the last dot of my Chardonnay there, in the middle of the middle of the smallest picture of the women. They hold the dot baby between them, like the smallest secret.

I have never been able to stray very far from Trisha. My family tells the story of her birth, a piercing cry and an emergence from the womb that left my mother ripped open, gutted by my sister's fierce will to be out and of the world as quickly as possible. Macy swears that when Trisha was born, a faint cry was heard in the waiting room, and I stretched forward in Macy's arms, toward the swinging delivery room flaps, reaching to comfort my baby sister.

And from that day on, it was the two of us. We shared everything: our bed, our baths, our nightmares and sleep sweat. I refused to go anywhere without her and so I was confined to the floor and the crib until she could walk too, come with me. When I learned to talk, I whispered secrets into her tiny ears about the way the world worked, and what I saw. I told her stories about the stain over our shared crib: how it came from the drops of water that the angels carried through the atmosphere when they arrived to kiss us goodnight. She grew up believing that angels were like the water nymphs in Greek legends, fluid and filled with holy water that dripped out of their pores and filled the footsteps they left behind, marking their presence with stains. I would have told Trisha anything to make her happy.

Except for today, when I can't tell her anything with the weight of Angela between us. She isn't just mine anymore, hasn't been since we met Angela together, six endless years ago. The delight that Trisha felt in Angela ripped through my body as she grasped my arm in her dorm room, stared at this tall brown girl that could have been our twin, we all three looked so alike. She pinched me, hard, cried:

“Look, Dom, this must be Angela!”



And when I looked, I felt like I was looking in the mirror from behind Trisha, but off to the side so that I wasn't reflected. Angela was tall, with shocks of glossy brown hair falling across her face and wrists that I could have fit my fingers around, to touch each other on the opposite side. Her bare knees were skinned red and knobby, and her elbows were dry. Sweat glistened around a burn mark on her upper left shoulder, and I had to hold my hands stiff by my sides to keep from pushing Trisha's sleeve up to check for the same scar on her shoulder, there next to mine.

Angela held out her hand and after a minute, spent refraining from touching my sister's shoulder, I reached out my own palm. When she touched it, I felt both women's warmth flowing through me like a battery current in closed circuit, back and forth to each other. I felt ill, like being between two of them was too much for my stomach to handle, and I stepped away, fled backward through the open dormitory door.

And six years later, here I am ready to flee again. I pack lightly, a few shirts and jeans, the one pair of slacks I own. I have a harder time deciding which pictures and paints to take with me; after I am through, I have a backpack full of clothes and a duffel bag three times as big for my other supplies, the lid of each tube and jar of paint tightly secured with masking tape. I am meticulous in my packing, calculated. No space is wasted. When I pick up the duffel bag, the canvas is stretched square by the tidy arrangement of jars.

My plan is simple: head south down Highway 101 until the Volvo stops running or I stop being able to pay for gas. Then I'll see what comes next.

Although I should be rushing, I don't. Angela could show up at any moment, her own suitcases packed. A vacation, we decided days ago, time away from my family to figure