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REASON FOR REJOICE

by

JENNIFER E. KARR
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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Major Professor: Susan Hubbard

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ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories features characters who face unexpected situations arising from ordinary circumstances. Most of the characters find themselves compelled to react in ways that may even surprise themselves. A young woman finds her first feeling of joy in a long time in the face of her mother's possible death. Best friends recall their years spent doing drugs and ignoring responsibility. When a woman confronts her fear of sex, she finds herself literally in another world. Rather than sticking with one form, several stories depart from traditional structures. One flash fiction piece is told in the first-person collective voice; another story evolves into magical realism; two are linked, and one story is told as an elegy. What matters are the characters, their struggles, and their relationships with one another.

This is dedicated to my parents, who always encouraged my writing; Nana, the great oral storyteller; Grandma, who supported my storytelling until the day she died; my brother Richard, who read every script I wrote for him when we were little; The Pantaleos, who have been second parents to me; my extended family—Christina, Blane, Gina, Gabby, Amanda, Ryan, and Rachel; and to Philip and James.

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THE SAD GIRL FINDS REASON FOR REJOICE

Adina drove past the large ornate house overlooking Lake Sybelia, and beyond to the tall buildings of downtown Orlando. Sometimes her nights called for lingering drives and ponderings at the lake. She parked at the edge of a cul-de-sac. For a while she didn't get out of the car, only let the windows down so she could feel the wind. Even the air tasted wrong, like sulfur and suffering. Like something dead.

She was able to walk through weeds and mud to get to a spot by the lake and away from houses. She felt an unease in nature, an unrest or imbalance. The breeze blew hard, making the hair on her arms stand up. The full moon reflected in the water looked less yellow-white than corroded brown.

And then she saw it. To the right of her car, next to a tall oak tree, lay a dead rabbit. She got out of the car to examine it. The cool air made her shiver; she had forgotten to put her sweater on. She kneeled next to the rabbit's body and sniffed the air. But she could already taste it—rotting meat, the pain this creature had felt, the curiosity in herself as she wondered why some other larger animal had killed the rabbit if not to eat it. The poor rabbit's body was soaked in dark maroon blood. Its eyes were wide open and black. Its limbs were stiff when she touched them.

She imagined the rabbit on a clear day hopping around, looking for bugs or whatever rabbits ate, drinking from the lake. She wondered again why it had been killed and not eaten. And the injustice of it all, of a meaningless death, made her eyes water. Adina hadn't cried since she was a little girl. Now it seemed years and years of pain and loss were welling up in her in

response to the poor, dead little rabbit. She fell from her knees onto the ground and cried loudly. It felt sort of good.

After a while she went back to her car to get her sweater. The song playing, “Lullaby” by The Cure, was her sister’s ring tone. Laryssa, her fourteen-year-old sister, should be in bed by now, Adina thought.

“Hello?”

“Adina, can you come home please?” Laryssa said. Her voice was lower than usual and seemed to vibrate over the phone lines. “Where were you? Why didn’t you answer earlier?”

“I left my phone in the car,” Adina said. “What’s wrong?”

She and Laryssa didn’t talk that much. They were seven years apart, which wasn’t really that much in the scheme of things, but it had meant a lot during their childhoods: a lack of understanding, time spent together, and normal sibling comradery. The disconnection between their ages had never been resolved, though Adina admitted to herself there was something more than that keeping them distant. She had always felt that they came from two different worlds because of their parents (Adina knew their mother before she went crazy, but Laryssa had only seen her after), and because Adina could be so introverted around her family. They didn’t even look related: Adina had stringy, ash-blond hair, dull brown eyes, dark yellowish skin, and constant dark circles under her eyes while Laryssa had pale skin, black hair, and radiant, large blue eyes. Laryssa was skinnier, too. Still, Adina felt an instinctual need to protect her younger sibling, and the fear in Laryssa’s voice, instead of worrying Adina, made her feel strong and ready for anything.

“Mom’s not okay,” Laryssa said. “I really think you should come home.”

Adina sighed and wondered what was going on with their mother this time. She couldn't go home. She had class in the morning, and she didn't have the gas money anyway to drive the hour and a half back to their mother's house in Malabar, the middle of nowhere, a town known for nothing other than an old preserved creek.

"I can't," Adina said. "I have class. No money. Can you just handle it?" Adina had borrowed twenty bucks from her roommate to go towards her rent money (she'd already sent a check for an amount that wasn't yet in her bank account).

"No," Laryssa said. "I think she took something. Maybe a lot of things. I don't even know what or how much for sure. Please, Adina, come down here."

"What about Dr. Davis?" Adina asked. Her mother's neighbor, Dr. Davis, was retired and kind. He occasionally watched the cat, Pepper, when her mother and Laryssa took a vacation.

"Dr. Davis moved two months ago, Adina," Laryssa said.

"If she took something, maybe you should call 911..."

"Mom would never forgive me. I don't think she would take enough to kill herself anyway. She's just freaking out, screaming that no one loves her, that she's gonna die alone. She needs you. Adina, I really need you."

Laryssa had said the magic words. "I really need you" was like a code word among family members. Adina sighed and said, "Okay, I'm coming. Try to get control of her while I get there."

"Okay," Laryssa said. "Okay, I'll try. But hurry."

#

Adina stopped at a gas station on the outskirts of town and put the twenty her roommate had given her in the tank. “Eighty-nine to go still,” she muttered under her breath. This better be worth it, she thought. Better be worth the worry and the money and the overdraft fee she would almost certainly be getting.

Adina’s father had died when she was nine. Until then, her mother had been there for her, always. Her parents didn’t always seem happy together, but they both loved to take Adina places like the zoo, the library, and Disney World. Sometimes they argued over who could spend more time with her. Once he died and it was just Adina, her mother, and her tiny sister, things began to change.

By the time Adina started college, she was paying for everything. Scholarships paid for some of her tuition, but not all of it. Her mother offered no help. Instead, she spent her money on pills—painkillers, Xanax, other downers. Sometimes alcohol. After so many years, Adina had begun to suspect that her mother wasn’t so sad about her father’s death as something else—something as yet undefinable. She wished Laryssa could have known the same mother she once knew.

She made it to her mother’s subdivision in just under two hours. Out in Malabar, just south of Melbourne, the yards were bigger and fewer neighbors crowded the neighborhoods. From outside the brick house, everything looked calm. What could be going on inside those walls? What things had gone on inside them years before? She felt glued to the road, unable to face whatever Laryssa had already been dealing with.

Adina tried not to think of the time her mother forced her to snort cocaine, or of the time she walked in on her mother in the bathroom cutting lines into her wrists. Living in the midst of so many Florida crystal meth houses, at least her mother hadn’t gone that route. She mustn’t

blame her mother forever, she reminded herself. Things happened, sometimes bad things, but Adina was okay, and so she had to let all that go.

When Adina tried to lift up her right foot, she found that she was not attached to the road in any way, and her legs worked just fine. She made her way to the front door and knocked, but no one answered. She saw lights on inside. Where was Laryssa? She rang the doorbell and knocked again, but still no answer. The door was unlocked, so she opened it and stepped in.. “Laryssa?” she called.

“Laryssa?” she tried again. She took her cell phone from out of her pocket and dialed Laryssa’s number. Laryssa didn’t answer.

“Mom?” she called. No answer.

#

Adina called Aunt Rosalee next. “Have you heard from Mom or Laryssa?” she asked.

“No,” Aunt Rosalee said. “Why?”

“I think something’s wrong,” Adina said. “Laryssa got me to drive home and now she’s not answering her phone. But the front door was unlocked.”

“I haven’t heard from either one of them,” Aunt Rosalee said. “I’ll keep my phone near me and if I hear from either one of them, I’ll let you know right away.”

“Thanks,” Adina said.

“Adina, honey, maybe you should call the police.”

“I’m going to look around first, and then I will,” Adina said. “For all I know, they’re both passed out in their bedrooms.” She hung up and called out for her mother again. She walked to Laryssa’s bedroom. It looked nothing like her old room, which was painted greyish-green like lima beans and had only one poster on the wall: Rob Smith looking emotionally

damaged. In Laryssa's room, her bright pink computer was on and her blog page was pulled up; her latest message to readers was, "DANCING WILL CURE ALL OF YOUR MALADIES." Laryssa's bedroom walls were each painted a different bright color: neon green, neon pink, bright cerulean, and sunflower yellow. Hanging from her ceiling were strings with circular pieces of colored plastic. Laryssa liked to tell everyone that bright colors kept the mind at ease.

Since Laryssa wasn't in her room, Adina made timid steps towards their mother's bedroom, past the pictures on the wall of the sisters, past the fake plants and vases that held nothing. The air smelled stale and tasted like burnt popcorn. She opened the door to her mother's bedroom. The bathroom light was on but not the bedroom light. On the left was her bathroom, the light on—her hair straightener on as always, make-up scattered about the counter top, a single toothbrush holder in a holder for four.

After flipping on the bedroom light, Adina saw her mother lying on a flowered quilt on the bed, a bottle of Jameson next to her, too many pill bottles to count lying on the nightstand. Adina moved past the tall oak dresser and stood beside the bed. For a second she couldn't breathe. "She's sleeping," she whispered to herself. She thought about all the bad feelings she'd harbored towards her mother, all the times she'd told her roommate and ex-boyfriend what a "bitch" and a "sorry excuse for a parent" her mother was.

Adina's mother's face was beautiful. Never, in her forty-seven years had she lost one ounce of beauty. She made people fall in love with her in ways that Adina never could. But her eyes were closed. *Sleeping*, Adina thought again. She put her head to her mother's chest but couldn't hear her breathing. She took her mother's wrist and felt for a pulse, but couldn't find one.

Finally, she grabbed her mother's body and shook it. "Mother! Mom! Mom! Mom! Mommy! Mom! Please, Mom!" she shouted.

She let out a scream, then wondered where the sound had come from. Somewhere deep inside her, or inside her mother, or inside Laryssa, or inside all of them together. She shook her mother more violently and pleaded with her to wake up. "Laryssa!" she screamed, finally, at her wit's end, tired of hating her mother, tired of begging her mother to wake up. No one answered.

Hands shaking, she picked up the land phone on her mother's nightstand. She dialed 9-1-1 and waited for the operator to ask what the emergency was.

At first Adina couldn't find words. She opened her mouth but nothing came out. It was like the recurring nightmare she used to have where a masked man kidnapped her and she couldn't scream.

"Is anyone there?" the operator asked.

"Mom," Adina said. "My mom. Dead? I think." She thought she was hyperventilating. The bills, the neon walls, the dead rabbit—what did any of it matter when her mother was lying on her bed, dead? Not dead, she told herself again. Sleeping.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, did you say your mother is dead?"

The voice of the middle-aged operator jerked Adina back to reality. "My mom swallowed a bunch of pills and alcohol," she said. "I think she might be dead. I can't find her pulse and it doesn't seem like she's breathing."

"All right, ma'am, we'll have an ambulance sent immediately. What's the address?"

"1086 Liveoak Circle."

Adina hung up the phone and tried to catch her breath. She took her mother's hand and held on to it, bringing it to her lips to kiss. "Mommy," she said. She remembered how her

mother would take her to the library and let her pick out books every week, how her mother would bring her to Turkey Creek and let her feed the ducks. She remembered how her mother looked at her father's funeral: shocked. Not so much sad, not so much relieved, but surprised and confused. Adina remembered hating her mother for not crying at her father's funeral.

"Mommy," she tried again. "Mom." She took her mother's hand but it was limp. She kissed her mother's hand again and held it to her own face. But where was Laryssa? Had her mother hurt her? If she wasn't in the house, had she gone to a neighbor's? Why hadn't she answered her phone?

The overbearing staleness of the room mixed with anxiety over Laryssa's well-being nearly drove Adina out of the house, but she couldn't leave her mother. She put her cheek to her mother's cheek; it was warm. She imagined that this was the mother she had grown up with. This was the mother who had cut the crusts off her sandwiches, who had seemed to favor her over her more exciting sister, who had told the boy in kindergarten who punched Adina that she wasn't afraid to kick a child's ass. Adina could still hear her mother's strong, quiet voice, *"Don't you dare ever touch my daughter again. If you hurt her, I will hurt you. Do you understand me?"* How her mother didn't get in trouble for that escaped Adina. She realized that for years the mother she'd grown up with had seemed dead to her. Seeing her like this was simply a physical symbol of a reality she had already refused to accept.

Adina threw up in the bathroom her mother had hidden cocaine in for years. She walked back through the house to the front door and left.

She ran away as fast as she could. How could she have said those things about her mother? Maybe her mother wasn't perfect, but hadn't she put dinner on the table every night? Or at least bought food so Adina could put it on the table? She never beat Adina or Laryssa. She

gave Adina moral support when she said she wanted to be a painter instead of a lawyer or doctor. What kind of daughter was Adina? For so long she had judged her mother, for so long she had been the morality police.

She found herself at Turkey Creek where her mother had taken her as a child, where they would read books together, feed the ducks, and talk. When her mother was pregnant with Laryssa, Adina had made her promise to not ever love Laryssa more than she loved Adina. And she never had.

“Adina,” came a soft voice. As Adina’s eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw her pale sister sitting under an oak tree, picking apart a dandelion.

“Laryssa? What’re you doing here?”

“Mom. She made me.”

“What do you mean? Why didn’t you call me?”

“She took my phone. She told me to get out. I told her I wasn’t going to, but she grabbed a knife and chased me out.”

“Why the hell didn’t you call me with someone else’s phone?” Adina asked.

“I was scared to ask to use someone’s phone,” Laryssa said. “She said if I told any of our neighbors what she did, she’d kill herself before the cops came.”

For the first time in her life, Adina felt as if she knew her sister. And she didn’t like what she had learned. Was Laryssa a coward? Did she put her own fears above their mother’s life?

“You were *scared*? Mom’s dead, Laryssa.”

“What?” Laryssa said. It was less of word she let out than a fleeting sound that reminded Adina of a bird.

“You left her and you didn’t tell anyone and she killed herself.”

“I, I didn’t know,” Laryssa said. Her face looked like a piece of paper crumbling. “I thought she was just doing the kind of shit she’s always done, you know? I thought if I just left her alone for a while, she’d be okay.”

“It’s not the shit she’s *always* done,” Adina said. “You don’t know her. You don’t know her at all. She used to be the kind of mom other kids wished they had. And you must have known something other than usual was going on or you wouldn’t have called me.”

“Shouldn’t we go back and wait for the police to get there?” Laryssa said.

“Not until I’ve had my say—”

“You’ve had it!” Laryssa said. “Obviously I could tell it was worse than usual.” She stood up. Behind her the water barely moved, nearly silent, as if it only existed in their minds. “I figured you’d get there and calm her down. She always listens to you more than me. I bet she’s not even ... You’re probably just being dramatic like always.”

Adina felt her legs moving towards Laryssa and she allowed them to. She wanted to slap Laryssa, wanted to push her into the lake, let her drown, but she didn’t. Instead, she began walking back to the house to face the inevitable.

She walked slowly, hoping that she might wake up from a terrible nightmare. If she could be granted that one wish, that none of this had ever happened, she would call her mother in the morning to tell her how much she loved her. But as her feet carried her closer to the house, she heard the sirens of the ambulance coming to take her mother away. When she grew close enough to see the flashing red lights, she stopped. Close behind her was Laryssa, wet clothes matted against her body. Laryssa stopped next to Adina. No longer did Adina want to punish her sister. Instead, she took her hand. Laryssa didn’t reciprocate the motion, but didn’t resist either, letting her hand hang limply in Adina’s.

“Are you ready?” Adina asked.

“No,” Laryssa said. She was crying. “So it’s true?”

Adina squeezed her hand to let her know that it was. They stood there watching the paramedics run inside. They watched while a man and a woman paramedic pushed her mother out on a stretcher. Adina expected them to cover her face out of respect, but they didn’t.

Instead, she saw the woman paramedic inject something into her mother’s arm. The man was putting something over her face—some clear kind of mask. It looked like he was giving her CPR by pushing her chest in, and then lifting up the mask to breathe into her. Laryssa looked at Adina. “Is she alive?”

“Maybe she’s just sleeping,” Adina said.

“Maybe they’re just trying to make sure there’s nothing they can do,” Laryssa said.

“Maybe she’s just sleeping,” Adina said.

Laryssa stared at her with confusion and surprise, as if she didn’t know her sister at all.

“Maybe,” Laryssa said.

“You don’t know her like I do,” Adina said. “She’s just sleeping. She’s going to be okay.” And Adina would have given all of the dead rabbits and distant sisters in the world for that to be true

FROST

Frost covered the tips of the blades of grass, making this wet land like a winter dream to me as he and I walked around my apartment complex. In Florida you're not used to seeing frost, to using defrost when you get in the car. Thin blood, they say. We have thin blood.

I looked up and I swear a snowflake touched my eyelash, then disintegrated, remembering its place. I didn't hold his hand, brown like the blanket my great grandmother quilted for me when she still lived in Poland, some far away land with a far away language, and far away disasters. Warm like the blanket she quilted for me, that I've never stopped sleeping with.

I dreamed I died. His voice was barely a whisper, audible over the five AM silence, backstroking towards me like a lone synchronized swimmer. *And you were there*, like honey freezing and melting, falling across my bread, an accordion of sweetness. *And you were still there after I was dead.*

No needles on the pine trees, and the branches of the old oaks reached out like octopus tentacles across the ashy grey sky, clouds saturated, dropping flakes and water, droplets trying to decide their future.

I dreamed I died too, I said. He took my hand, squeezed it against his, like a warm, brown blanket made by your great grandmother grasping a piece of blank white paper.

Does that mean-he began. He tried, like the grass, like the grass trying to stay alive in this tropical land, afflicted with winter, afflicted with winter like a dream I had where I hated the heat and I needed the snow, like real life.

But you weren't there, I said. *It was just me, alone, and all of the cars that smashed into mine.* We circled my apartment complex one last time and that was the last time I saw him until four years later.

Four years later I saw him on the street with a girl who looked like me. He saw me, locked eyes with me, held up his hand, and I ran, ran away as fast as I could down a busy street at night; it was winter and I wore only a light jacket with no real insulation, and I was warm. And my skin was warm.

NOTHING CAN HAPPEN AGAIN

When I saw Priscilla walking up to my outside table at the coffee shop, she was late. She looked the same as ever, though, still able to pass for nineteen at the age of twenty-eight. She wore boots that climbed halfway up her shins, with mustard-colored socks that went up about an inch higher, a black dress that sprouted out at the bottom almost like a tutu, and a mustard-colored pea coat, buttoned. She was the only person I knew who could dress the way she did and still look like a completely normal, lovely, and functioning member of society. I myself wore jeans with the cuffs rolled up a bit, a tank top, and some old Chuck Taylors.

“Ahhh!” she screamed, causing the two other outside patrons to jump and look up at her with a start. “*My Krista-y!*”

#

I couldn't help thinking about our past every time I saw Priscilla. We spent nights ingesting as much “trail mix” as possible—ecstasy, ketamine, and crystal meth—while also putting blue gel tabs of mescaline under our tongues and smoking pot to chill out when it was time to sleep. We'd done cocaine in bathrooms and driven around Orlando on ‘shrooms, terrified and amazed by the lights. Sat on the white wooden swing by Lake Eola, holding hands and staring out to the lake, the swan boats meant for two locked up at the dock, the sky so black when during Independence Day it was lit up with all of the colors in the rainbow.

#

At the coffee shop I stood up to greet her. She ran, practically lunged, at me and wrapped her arms around my neck, kissing my cheek. I squeezed her back. She smelled like ginger and

patchouli, the same as I remembered. I tasted her hair, rich with expensive anti-frizz product that reminded me of fruit and being clean. “Hello my love,” I said. She was one of the few people I truly felt genuine affection for and I knew she felt the same for me. While she went inside to get coffee, I tried not to let myself be excited by what the night might bring. I had to remind myself that she was married, with children, and I was engaged, whatever that meant.

#

The air was cool brushing past my cheek, so I was surprised to see Priscilla come outside holding an iced beverage. “Triple soy iced caramel macchiato?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said. Priscilla was lactose intolerant and so she always drank soy. The few months in high school when she’d worked in an ice cream shop had been interesting ones. She always joked that she was the only one working there who didn’t gain weight, because any ice cream she ate made her vomit thirty minutes to an hour later. She grew particularly fond of the cheesecake-flavored ice cream, with graham crackers and raspberry sauce put in it, one of the main reasons I believe she decided she needed to quit that job.

“What are you eating?” she asked, pulling out a pack of Marlboro 27s. She hit the pack against her wrist, uncoiled the wrapper, and chose one lucky cigarette from the bunch.

“You need to stop smoking,” I said.

“Oh shut up, you know you miss smoking.” She lit the cigarette and inhaled, a pleasant smile distorting her face.

My fiancé always hated smoking and so he told me if I smoked I wouldn’t be getting any kisses. It wasn’t the only thing I had to stop when I met him. I said, “This right here is a piece of lemon meringue pie on top of a blondie with a dollop of buttercream icing and caramel on the top. I think they call it ‘Liver Failure’ because it’s yellow. Want some?”

“Buttercream icing. No,” she said. She pulled out another cigarette and tried to hand it to me. “Just take one. I have mints.”

“Fine,” I said. I hadn’t had one in years and that first inhalation made me feel like all of the veins in my body were lighting up as if they were Christmas lights that first day after Thanksgiving.

I liked this new place we’d found ever since we’d stopped doing drugs and partying all the time. We got along so well that sometimes I forgot that we’d ever had problems at all.

#

Once, Priscilla and I had gotten in a huge fight over her abusive ex-boyfriend. Over what didn’t matter—we both eventually realized we had both been in the wrong; I had initiated the break up. It took us two months to start speaking again. Not long after, I met my fiancé and stopped doing drugs. Wanted to focus on school. Be serious for once. Or at least I thought that’s what I wanted after the tumultuous years we’d had. I didn’t see Priscilla much that year, but I got a lot of late night texts and phone calls asking if I still had contacts for cocaine. Somehow that had slipped my mind. Somehow among her pregnancy, her victorious return to college, her marriage, her publications, somehow it had all lifted from my memory like vapor disappearing under the stove light.

#

Priscilla’s abusive ex-boyfriend got her pregnant on purpose. At first he forbade her from getting an abortion. But then, seeing how serious she was about getting one, he acted like he was okay with it. They drove to the clinic together. When they got there, he pulled a knife out of his pocket, pushed it against her throat, and told her if she went inside he’d kill her. She turned the car around and drove home. Had the baby. I was there the day the baby was born.

I'm no pro-life nut, but that baby saved her life. And luckily for Priscilla's daughter, the abusive ex left after a couple months. Happy ending.

But her happy ending wasn't what I wanted. I walked inside and ordered two more beers. Did I pity her for her husband and children when I was a step away from having half of that myself? Did I pity myself? I would say: yes.

#

There was a time when Priscilla and I were eighteen and we were out at a pub that served underage kids. Afterwards, I went back to my apartment and she went to see her boyfriend. I smoked pot from a bowl my roommate's friend from out of town gave me. We sat with the TV on playing music videos or a comedy show; I really don't remember. The pot had a numbing effect on me unlike any other pot I'd ever smoked. Soon, I felt worried that I would pass out or fall over and so I went into my bedroom and tried to watch a DVD on my computer. The quality was bad but I picked a show that would comfort me, one with mainly women. The faces morphed into monstrous figures. Bright lights danced against my shadowed wall like demons on speed. I had the terrible feeling that someone was trying to rape me—but I was alone. In the dark. There was no reason to feel that way, I thought. My mind projected images of a faceless man crawling through my comforter, even though I'd locked my bedroom door, and the man, he was grabbing me, pulling me beneath the sheets ...

#

Priscilla said, "I'm impressed you can eat whatever that thing is and stay thin."

"Yeah, right. I hate how fat I'm getting," I said. "I disgust myself." I knew I wasn't *fat*, just not too skinny anymore, but everything felt different.

“You’re not fat,” Priscilla said. “But I understand what you mean. I keep looking at pictures and wondering where the definition in my chin went.” There was a time when I had been smaller than her. Now she was smaller than me.

A young man and his two friends, a tall blond woman and a short pimply man, sat down a few feet away from us. The young man had bongo drums and began to play them while the blond woman strummed her guitar. I wondered why they believed they were welcome.

“Being thin was a lot easier when we were addicted to cocaine,” Priscilla said.

I put my cigarette down. “Addicted? I was never addicted.” I chugged the rest of my beer and thought about going in to get another one.

Priscilla looked at me, casting her head down, making her eyes wide. “Oh come on,” she said. “Cocaine instead of food. Feeling like we needed it. All the time.”

“I never felt like I needed it,” I said. And I wasn’t lying. “I ate, too. I mean, I had no money because we spent it all on gas, clothes, and drugs. But, well, hey, don’t you remember? I bought the same things from the grocery store every week: apples, oranges, taquitos, and sour cream. And that’s what I ate. But it was food.”

“Oh,” she said. She lit up another cigarette. “I thought we were both addicted.”

#

That night, that terrible night, I left my room. Had to. I tried to be normal by cooking up a bowl of rice. The rice clogged my throat as I sat down on a chair six feet away from the couch where my roommate and her friend with the pot sat. My movements felt incremented; like they were photographs trying to become a movie. I would move an inch, stop, move another inch, stop, but the stops were brief and frequent. Nausea. I put the rice on the floor and fell down next to it. My throat was dry. “Is she okay?” someone asked.

“Water,” I tried to say but barely choked the word out. I had to say it three more times for anyone to hear. By the time someone brought me a cup of water, I could barely move. Thought I was going to choke. Imagined the news the next day, my dad seeing it, and the newscaster talking about a college freshman who died.

#

When Priscilla said, “Mike and the kids are away visiting his sister,” my entire face felt lit up like when I smoked that cigarette. Without a husband or children to get home to, it was much more likely that she’d stay out late with me, not wanting to be alone. She had always been afraid to be alone.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to you saying that,” I said.

#

Three years ago when I first witnessed her really being what I liked to call then, an adult. She’d been asking me to stay the night at their condo for some time, and I finally agreed. When I got there, she informed me we would be taking a grocery store trip before dinner. I’d just assumed she and I would go out for dinner while Mike watched the children, but instead, the two of them would be cooking dinner for all of us. I grabbed a small bottle of Jameson before I made the trip; possibly my subconscious anticipated such things. In the grocery store, I watched her reprimand both children for being loud, while she and Mike corroborated dinner plans, finally settling on shish kebabs and carrot cake for us and box meals for the kids that featured neon colors and a brownie for dessert. As I watched the normalcy of their lives, the type of lives I still considered insane, I realized something: Priscilla had become an adult, whether she’d wanted to or not, and though I had always known it to be true (is this phrase needed?), I was a child, and a selfish one at that. I can’t say that my relative freedom particularly bothered me, but it did make

me somewhat uncomfortable around them. When we got to their place, I spent a lot of time with the children, ages four and five then, while Priscilla and Mike cooked dinner together, moving around the kitchen with grace and ease, like dancers, proof that they had done so many times. I was a spectator by design, and internally acknowledged my place outside of their window. What boggled my brain so much was why the children were so interested in *me*.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the idea either,” she said.

#

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Not really,” I said. I had just finished my last bite of Liver Failure. “I ate too much sugar.”

“You are an indulgent person.”

“I prefer 'decadent'.”

“Well I’m not hungry yet either,” she said. She laughed, and her laugh sounded almost like a song of hiccups. “I really miss this. Having friends at all, I mean. But especially you.”

“Where are your friends?”

She offered me another cigarette, which I took. It really was amazing how well Priscilla was ageing. She smoked a pack and a half per day and drank coffee and energy drinks all day long while working and taking care of children. She hardly looked any different to me than she had when we’d first met in high school.

“Pfft, what friends? You’re my only friend and you live thirty minutes away and I never get to see you. Everyone kind of abandoned me around the time I moved in with Mike. People don’t want to deal with someone who has kids.”

“That’s silly,” I said. “I don’t like kids—well, except yours of course—and I love dealing with you.” I made my voice deeper when I said “dealing.”

“Yes, but you’re my sister. No one ever wants to come over, and I can’t go out very much because I have two kids with me.”

Both Priscilla and I had sisters, but were much closer to each other than to them.

“I’ll be right back. I need a beer,” I said.

#

On that terrible night, I couldn’t drink the water alone and asked for a straw. It helped but not much. Soon I couldn’t move at all, but I could still see and hear everything. I heard my text message tone go off, but I couldn’t get to it. It went off again. Then it rang with a call. I wanted to answer, to scream for anyone to save me.

My roommate went to bed, leaving me with two of her male friends.

“Someone should stay with her,” Friend #1 said.

“I’ll stay with her,” Friend With the Pot said. I saw him make a sexual motion with his arms and his hips. My heart sped up. I was going to be raped. I never thought it could happen to me, and here I was, eighteen, about to be raped. I had always thought of myself as strong self-reliant. Childish and naïve, really. And give me some drugs and a bad guy, and I was nothing. The feeling was earth-shattering.

I heard static snow on the television. Saw the two men arguing over who would stay with me. Hated that I wasn’t in control of *anything*. And most of all, I felt nothing. It’s a strange feeling, trying to move your arms, legs, mouth, and not being able to. It’s a terrible thing.

I heard Friend #1 say, “Get the fuck out,” to Friend With the Pot. “I’m staying with her.” He pushed him out the door. I thought, *my hero*.

#

As I walked into the coffee shop I pondered her dilemma. She hadn't chosen to give up friends for a family; they had chosen to give up her. I ordered a Harp from the guy behind the counter, who looked a little like an actor in a TV series my fiancé and I had been watching. I noticed myself smiling at him a lot, as if in appreciation of his handsomeness, and his smiling back only made me smile more and I'm quite sure I heard myself giggle at one point. I told him to open a tab and took my beer outside. Priscilla had already lit up another cigarette.

"Seriously. Cancer," I said. "It's bad."

"Said the girl holding a beer," Priscilla said. "Liver cirrhosis, heart failure, high blood pressure, need I go on?"

"But I don't drink two packs of beer a day. Difference." I lapped up the stinging beer and felt calmed with every swallow. Neither of us spoke for a moment, taking in the fresh scent of new air that wasn't wet and hot and inconvenient. We were the only patrons left outside; many others had gone inside after complaining about the cold. I checked the weather on my smart phone and saw that it was sixty-eight degrees out. Perfect for a light jacket.

And then Priscilla said, "I just ... This is why doing drugs is better than whatever I'm doing right now; it gives you friends."

"Oh, sweetie."

"They might be shady and weird and you only hang out with them for an hour every few days, but it's still an hour that you're spending with someone." She stared out to the road, watching cars drive by, as the ash on her cigarette grew.

I had never liked the brief friendships we'd been thrown into during our "glory days" as we so lovingly and ironically referred to them—those first couple years of undergrad when we'd done a smorgasbord of illegal substances. I think I got into them out of sheer boredom.

Those years before you turn twenty-one, but after you've gotten used to smoking pot and drinking in hiding, can dull the senses. What to do when you first arrive at college? The workload isn't too bad—you're taking gen eds.—the small amount of bars that will serve you are seedy and generally involve way too many frat boys and their own types of drugs—and theme parks are expensive. So we took acid and walked around our own apartment complexes.

#

When Priscilla had called me to meet up for this coffee and bar trip, I'd been excited to see the woman I'd for so long considered a sister. I put the towels I was folding down and finished my glass of Glenlivet, the fruity caramel taste burning my throat in all the right ways. I made my way into the kitchen where the curry-based dish my fiancé was cooking seduced my nostrils. "Why so giddy?" he asked.

"I'm meeting with Priscilla tomorrow," I said. I refilled my glass. A reason to celebrate!

"Sure you are," he said. He used a fork to flip around a mixture of onions, green peppers, and red peppers. My stomach groaned again.

"Oh, she's not going to cancel," I said, not sure exactly why I was defending her. My fiancé had often seen me upset by cancelled plans, and I felt sure he was only trying to help me not get my hopes up.

We'd been together nine years and I still found him attractive, interesting, and, most importantly, I felt I could trust him more than anyone else in the world. This sentence comes out of nowhere.

“So will I be alone for dinner then?” he asked. He set the fork down and turned to me, put his arms around me, and his face up close to mine, where our noses were millimeters away. He smelled like the vegetables, curry, and chicken he was cooking. It made me want to bite his nose off.

“She said she wants to get dinner, too. So I suppose so.”

“One thing I haven’t missed about Priscilla—her stealing my Krista away.” He nuzzled his nose into mine and kissed me. His arms were strong and held me up as I groped at his crotch and bit his neck.

#

“That cashier is hot,” I said. For a while—too long—I’d had the strange sensation of wanting to consume men. Every man I saw I imagined sleeping with, dominating, taking control of. Something had made me unable to take control with my fiancé—who had only good in him—but desperate to take control of random men.

She lit up another cigarette. “Oh really? I didn’t notice.”

And the smile she gave me—the knowing, patronizing but loving smile she gave me—it made me realize that I didn’t really pity her. She pitied me and my dumb insecurities, my fear of marrying my fiancé who’d I’d been with longer than she’d known her husband, my fear of having children, of losing my life, of losing one-night stands and binge drinking, because that’s what I did after our tumultuous years. I don’t know how I finished school, got a job, functioned. And my fiancé only wanted me to be stable. That’s when I realized I wasn’t the stable one and I wanted to be. She had always been the one to worry about, the one with the real problems. Something had shifted. And I didn’t care about a husband, a job, kids. Just wanted to be stable in my head, like Priscilla. How had our roles reversed?

#

I saw the outline of her face against the hazy blue sky, the bit of fur we all have on our faces standing up in front of the full moon, which was as large as the steering wheel of a car. Her wide eyes caught the light and her cigarette smoke twirled north, then faded into the nothingness. Not even the moon could catch or recognize it.

#

After Friend With the Pot left, Friend #1 sat next to me and asked if I was okay. “You can’t move, can you? Don’t worry, I’ll stay up until you fall asleep. Then I’ll make sure you get to bed okay.” He patted my head. A couple of hours later, I was able to move, but couldn’t crawl to the bathroom fast enough before I vomited on the floor.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said, from the couch where he’d sat, watching TV and making sure I was okay. “We’ll clean in the morning. Just get to bed. If you need anything, let me know.”

Fifteen minutes later, from my place underneath my covers, I heard the front door open. Priscilla opened my bedroom door. Even in the darkness I could see that her eyes were wide and there were stars of light reflecting off their dark brown irises. She crawled into my bed and held my hand. “Kristy,” she said, but she couldn’t finish her sentence; she was crying. Something had happened.

“What, baby?” I asked.

“I called you ... ”

“I was detained. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said.

“You never hold back from me,” I said. The sun had begun its ascent, lighting up the room against our will. “Tell me what happened.”

“He hurt me,” she said.

“You don’t have to say anything else if you don’t want to,” I said. “But if you need to, then do it.”

#

I took a puff of my cigarette and sipped my coffee, enjoying the growing briskness of the air as time went on.

“Oh God,” she said, “remember how terrified I was of commitment? I still hate even signing phone contracts. It freaks me out.”

“I remember,” I said. “You were always the girl who desperately wanted to be married, but who hated the idea of commitment. A conundrum in the form of a girl named Priscilla.” I grinned at her. She was the only person I knew who at twenty-two would say, “I can’t believe I’m not married yet!” Yet, at the same time, she’d dump anyone who got close to her, feeling stifled and claustrophobic. I was always the girl who readily admitted a fear of marriage, commitment, and even monogamy. Some things changed when I met my fiancé.

#

“So,” Priscilla said, speaking loudly now, over the guitar and bongos. “Let’s go get drunk.”

But I knew she was only offering to make me happy. She knew that. We both knew it. At least she cared.

I thought ahead to us going out to Jamie’s Pub where I’d pound Irish Car Bombs and Jameson shots and Guinnesses. Priscilla would chug vodka cranberries like a champ and we’d

dance. We'd leave the pub and go dancing downtown—it was eighties night somewhere—where a collection of hipsters, trendy youngsters, urbanites, and people like us would dance and dance and dance. We'd drink PBRs to save money because they're always on sale somewhere. Two attractive men would pull us to the side and offer some of their blow. We'd be weary of foreign drugs, so we'd make them snort it first to make sure it wasn't laced with anything weird. Then we'd snort it too and we'd dance with them until we'd get too hot and would have to leave. We'd each have a one-night stand with the boys and drive home to my place the next morning where we'd sleep for hours or days or weeks or months.

#

It was always the same one hurting her. Only this time he'd tried to get her pregnant against her will. It wouldn't be the only time. I wanted to tell her that not all men were bad, that most were good, that his type was rare. I wanted to tell her that even though a man had tried to hurt me that night, another had saved me. I wanted to give the one who saved me anything he wanted—chocolates, a boat, my housekeeping services. Anything to show him how thankful I was.

The next day when I saw him and thanked him over and over again all he said was, “You don't need to thank me. Anyone would have done the same.”

“Only not *anyone* would have done the same,” I said. “The guy who was saying that ... stuff ... wouldn't have done the same.”

But really? I pitied Priscilla. What had happened to her was so much more than what hadn't happened to me. She had been violated so much more than me. That's why she held my hand all night. Why I breathed in her scent of patchouli and ginger, and his scent of body odor

and sweat, all night while she grasped onto me and I didn't know what to do. I never knew what to do. I could never grow up and just be a person.

She never let go of me.

#

My fiancé text messaged me, "*I miss you.*"

Only it wouldn't be anything like old times. Nothing can happen again.

"*I miss you too,*" I responded.

But I chugged my beers and we headed to the bar anyway, Priscilla holding my hand the whole way.

TROLL

Kiera has been playing *World of Warcraft* more and more lately. Late at night, after I've gotten home from a night drinking at Stacy's sister's apartment, fondled my boyfriend in his used Civic, and brushed the cigarette stains off my teeth, Kiera is slaying dragons and talking to Internet People about "DKP" and "PVP" and other acronyms I don't understand. Her hygiene has started to go to the same place her social life went weeks ago. The grease on her hair shimmers under her golden lamp light and new pimples have cropped up in the creases between her cheeks and nose. She's gone from wearing pencil skirts and V-necks to over-sized T-shirts and sweat pants. I'm not even sure where she got them.

Tonight it's important that I sleep because tomorrow I have a biology test and then I'm meeting Fred for our one-year anniversary dinner. Kiera has thoughtfully turned off the sound on the computer, but the glow and the flashing lights mixed with her intense mouse-clicking make it difficult to sleep. I know I should've bugged my parents more for an apartment instead of a dorm room. I put one of the pillows over my ear and close my eyes tight. I try to think about a deserted island where Fred and I can lie around and eat cake. Instead I just think about Kiera.

When I first moved here, she greeted me with a hug and so did her mother. My parents were too busy to help me move in, so it was comforting to have Kiera and her mother. We became fast friends, eating together at Taco Bell late at night, cheering at university soccer games, and taking notes for each other in the one class we shared—psychology. Even though my birthday was only one month into the start of the school year, she used her waitressing tips to

buy me a palette of eyeshadows from Sephora. I told her everything about my relationship with Fred, even the details she probably didn't want to hear, like how his scrotum is so wrinkly it looks like what I imagine an old woman's vagina looks like, and how we tried anal once but couldn't quite get it in. Even Stacy, one of our other dorm mates, grew noticeably jealous of our friendship. She silently tried to bribe each of us into liking her more than the other by introducing us to her twenty-one-year-old sister who could buy us beer.

I wake up and I swear I've been asleep for hours, but a look at the clock tells me it's four AM. I've been asleep an hour and a half. Lights from Kiera's computer flash and I hear her crack open a can, probably Red Bull as usual. Her body odor is beginning to waft over to my side of the room. "Kiera," I say, but my voice is barely there, my throat thick with sleep. I'd love to take a video of her facial expressions while she's playing this game. Right now she's jutting her bottom lip out, her tongue pushing against her top lip, and her eyes are varying between squinting and bulging. Her left hand is mashing different buttons on the keyboard while her right hand violently twists the mouse in various half-circles while clicking the side buttons. She spent seventy dollars on that mouse.

"Kiera!" I yell, sitting up in bed.

"Sec," she says. She moves her tongue across her lip, punches her desk and says, "Motherfucker!" Taking her headphones off and turning towards me she says, "What's up?"

"I have a test tomorrow. Can you cut the game playing early tonight?"

"I need more honor," Kiera says. "I need to hit two thousand honor tonight, and then I'll go to sleep."

"I have to be up in five hours."

“I’ll be done in an hour or two,” she says. “Don’t worry, Lea. You’re great at biology. You’ll do great.” She offers the quickest smile I’ve ever seen, puts her headphones back on, and turns back to the computer. I’m so worried about bombing my test and not getting an “A” in the class that I can barely even keep my eyes shut. If I don’t get an “A” in biology, my doctor parents might cut my funding. One semester in high school I got an “A-” in AP biology and they grounded me for nine weeks.

#

Fred keeps twitching in his seat like he’s on crystal meth or something. He’s not the most attractive man alive, with stringy brown hair, a long forehead, and eternally pale chapped lips, but I love his dark eyes. When we met, I was visiting the school, walking around the campus, when he jumped out of a tree. He was a freshman at the time and greeted me with, “There’s a beetle in your hair.” He picked it out and then offered to show me around campus, defending my honor from all of the beetles.

Once the waiter brings my chicken Marsala and his raviolis, I dig in but he just sits there staring at his food. “Are you ill or something?” I ask. Usually Fred eats with as much zeal as Kiera plays *World of Warcraft*.

“This no. You no. I. College relationships shouldn’t last longer than a year and I don’t think this is working and I want to go out to parties with my roommates and play the field and just see what’s out there I’m sorry.” He says this so quickly that I consider asking him to repeat himself, but I’ve heard clearly enough.

“Seriously?” It seems like I should have seen this coming, but I didn’t. He never asks to go out with friends and I never even see him flirt with other girls. Now I can’t eat my chicken Marsala, and I was very hungry for it.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “You’re too good for me anyway, you’ll find someone better.”

If I had a nickel for everyone who ever pulled a variation of the, “It’s not you it’s me,” card ...

“Well, fine,” I say. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“Well, you should know that I was planning on doing this sooner or later anyway because your penis is just not sufficient.” I say this loudly and then walk out of the restaurant, leaving him at the table, mouth agape.

I should probably feel bad about such an immature low blow, but I don’t because by the time I get in the car, I’m crying.

#

When I arrive home, I’m ready for a fight. I tell Kiera what happened (while she’s playing that game, of course) and I’m expecting her to tell me she can’t come out because she has to raid or whatever but she doesn’t. She speaks into the little microphone on her headset, “Hey guys, emergency, have to go, sorry.” I can’t hear their response because she’s wearing headphones.

“Let’s get you a goddamn drink,” Kiera says.

“Are you going out like that?” I ask. She’s wearing baggy grey sweat pants and a T-shirt that must have, at one point, been her overweight father’s. Her long blond hair is scraggly, wavy in some areas and straight in others.

She looks at herself in the mirror and says, “Good point. Give me forty-five minutes.”

While Kiera’s in the shower, I try to read a book or study and I just can’t focus. I sit down at her computer. The crevices between keyboard keys are filled with crumbs and I don’t

even want to count how many candy wrappers and empty Red Bull cans are scattered about her desk. Her *World of Warcraft* screen is still up. I never got into computer games because school was all my parents really cared about. Together we decided I would become a doctor, like them. While friends in high school were playing video games and going to the mall, I was working on my project for the science fair and practicing for the Quiz Bowl team, the only extra-curriculars my parents found appropriate.

I click the button that says, “Create New Character.” First I choose a class. The one called “mage” has a cool symbol that looks like a golden stick with glowing rubies on the end, so I go with that. Next, I have to choose a race. I consider the blood elf, an anorexic-looking race that I imagine is the first choice of many image-conscious girls, and then decide instead upon a troll. I guess I’m just in a trollish mood tonight. I give her blue skin and white hair with long braids that fall over both sides of her face. She’s actually kind of pretty, in a weird way. I find her almost ghostly. Lastly, I need to name her. There’s an option to choose one of their suggested names, but that seems lazy. I type in the name “Fredsucks” but delete it. “Fredhasasmallpenis” doesn’t fit; apparently there is a twelve letter limit. My love for biology spills out and I choose “Biogirl.” *I am Biogirl! I have come to poke you with my ruby stick!*

I enter the game. I have no idea what to do. I Google how to move in the game. I read enough to know that I need to steer with a mixture of four keys and the mouse. Once in the game, Biogirl is in a sort of desert and she is greeted by someone who wants to give her a quest. She has to kill Tiki dummies. I shoot fireballs at the targets until I’ve killed enough. There’s a sort of pleasure in killing the dummies. Soon it may have me killing living things.

I’m level five before Kiera laughs and says, “What are you doing?”

“Killing the sea witch,” I say. I realize I’ve been biting my own tongue for a while. I turn around and can hardly believe my eyes. Her hair is washed and dried, in a long ponytail and wavy, falling in front of her shoulder. Her face is clean and made up and she’s wearing a tight red dress and heels. I had nearly forgotten how beautiful she is. Since I’m already made up from my dinner with Fred, I leave the game and we head out to a restaurant we know will serve us alcohol. The urge to return to the game hits. I picture Biogirl slaying more NPCs (another term I learned from Kiera) and the tips of my fingers can actually *feel* the computer keys. I try as hard as I can to ignore it.

Kiera orders a cosmopolitan (I’m pretty sure she only orders that because of her obsession with *Sex and the City*) and I order a whiskey straight up because of my obsession with folk music. The server doesn’t ask for I.D., but they never do here. The place is kind of divey and smells like smoke and beer, but we don’t mind. There’s not a whole lot of places who will serve to eighteen-year-olds around here, so we take what we can get, and order some onion rings too.

“So he dumped you because college relationships aren’t supposed to last?” Kiera asks, sipping her cosmopolitan and puckering her mouth. “Sounds like bullshit to me.”

“Right?!”

“Real mature, too. So do you think he’s after some other girl?”

I hear a drunk guy scream, “Wooooo!” and the next thing I know “Only the Good Die Young” is playing on the jukebox.

“Who knows?” I say. I down my whiskey in two gulps. The warmth in my chest makes me feel like a superhero. “I told him he has a small dick.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did.”

Kiera sets her drink down and laughs so hard I think she might explode out of that red dress. “Immature, Lea, yes, but funny as shit. How did he react?”

“He didn’t, really. He just looked at me with his mouth wide open.”

“You know he’s going to be obsessing over it for, like, ever now. He might even be too nervous to screw some other chick for a while.”

I feel my insides tighten as she says this. He will be sleeping with other women. That wrinkly scrotum will be bobbing against some other girl’s vagina. He will love another girl before long, this I am sure of.

“Are you okay, babe?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I order another whiskey.

“Well, is it?” Kiera asks.

“What?”

“Is it small?” She’s grinning.

I shrug. “I’ve only seen two others. One was bigger and one was about the same. It’s probably average.”

“All the same,” Kiera says, “you definitely fucked with his head.”

I know this should make me feel good, but instead it makes me sad. I don’t want to hurt Fred. I love Fred. Even if we’ve split up and he didn’t give me a real reason after a year, I don’t want to hurt him. The truth is, regardless of how his penis stacks up against those of other guys, I always felt lucky with him. I’m one of the few out of all my girl friends who is able to finish during sex. He must be doing something right. I consider texting him, but the second I pull my phone out, Kiera grabs it.

“I know exactly who you’re about to call,” she says. “And as your friend I’m not letting you. I now have control of your phone for the rest of the night.”

A tall, overly buff guy walks up to our table. He looks like he could be on *Jersey Shore* with his tight T-shirt and fake tan. “Hey ladies,” he says. “Can I buy you drinks?”

“Are you hitting on my woman?” Kiera asks. She stands up and gets right in his face, her arms by her side, her hands rolled into fists, and her small arm muscles flexing.

“Huh?” He looks confused for a second, and then he grows the biggest smile I’ve ever seen. “Are you ladies looking for a threesome?”

“If you hit on my girlfriend one more time, I will kick you in the balls with my stiletto heels so hard you’ll never be able to jizz in an unsuspecting sorority girl again,” Kiera says. Even I’m a little frightened of her right now.

“Geez,” the guy says, “sorry.” As he walks away I hear him mutter, “Crazy bitch.”

I can feel my eyes bulging as I stare at Kiera.

“What?” she says. “Sometimes it’s more fun to screw with them than to simply tell them to fuck off.”

“Right.”

“More Billy Joel,” she says. “Let’s dance.”

“No, absolutely not,” I say.

“Have another drink and then let’s dance.”

“Are you going to kick me with your stiletto heels if I don’t?”

She nods. It feels good to be hanging out with her again. She’s pretty much my only friend, besides Fred anyway, and I’ve missed her.

*

I wake up with a raging headache and no saliva in my mouth. Kiera is in my bed with me. I vaguely remember asking her to sleep in my bed so I wouldn't cry last night. Somehow we both managed to fit on the twin bed. I wonder if this is what it's like to have a sister. She has one she never speaks to, and I'm an only child.

It's eight in the morning on a Saturday but I know I'll never get back to sleep. I get up and pour myself a glass of water. Two ibuprofen should do the trick. The glare from Kiera's computer screen draws me in. First I check my biology test grade. I know my parents will be calling later today to ask how I did. I got a ninety-four percent, which is good enough. I exhale with relief.

Now that that's done, I click on Biogirl and enter the *World of Warcraft*. As I kill and run from land to land, I lose myself. I become Biogirl, the troll mage, queen of the arcane. It's one in the afternoon before Kiera wakes up and says, "Dude, really? Let's get you your own account."

"No," I say. "I'm not really playing this game. I was just bored."

Kiera rolls her eyes. "That's how it starts. We're getting you an account. I'll buy it. Consider it a late Christmas present."

"Don't bother," I say.

"Fine, we'll get you the free trial."

"No point in that either," I say. "I'll be done after today."

"The point is that I want to play," Kiera says.

Over the next week, Kiera helps me level up. The game becomes a team effort. She tells me I'm surprisingly good for such a "noob." Since I'm playing now too, Kiera keeps the sound on and talks into her microphone more. There's one guy, a priest who goes by the name Drmatt,

who she talks to an awful lot. I can hear their subtle flirting and see Kiera forming some sort of bond with him. This is the type of thing I would have laughed at only two weeks ago, but it seems sweet now. Kiera has a crush on an internet man.

When I bring it up and ask how she'd feel if he were really ugly, she explains that she's not that naïve and that they've already exchanged photos and talked on Skype. She shows me his picture. He's tall, black hair, green eyes, the type of guy you'd expect to see on a soccer field or in a movie, not playing a video game. But then again, Kiera and I aren't exactly what you'd expect of gamers either. She says, "And he lives an hour away. We're thinking of meeting up."

"Not alone," I say.

"You can come," she says. "He lives with Belfimia." Belfimia is a blood elf warlock who likes puns. I tell her I'm down.

The night before we're supposed to meet Drmatt and Belfimia (their real names are Matt and Scott), I get a text from Fred. It reads, *Big mistake breaking up, meet me for pancakes?* It's one AM and I know he wants to meet at IHOP. Kiera is asleep, early for her. I know she wouldn't approve, but I sneak out anyway.

I watched enough movies to know that if someone texts you at one in the morning, they're just looking for an easy lay. I've got a whole speech worked up about how he has no regard for other's emotions and how he's gross and even something about women's rights and the fate the country by the time I get to IHOP.

It's bright, noisy, and cold inside. Fred sits at a booth, his hands folded together, his eyes red and watery.

"Were you crying?" I ask.

He snuffles. "No."

“Liar.”

“I was so stupid,” he says. “I kept telling my dorm mates how much I love you and how I could see us being together for a long time and they kept giving me shit. They kept saying college relationships aren’t supposed to last that long and that I was crazy for not putting myself out there in the, quote, best years of my life. But I realized they’re fucking idiots.”

“I see.”

“If you consider taking me back I’ll, I’ll, I don’t know, I’ll buy you some chicken and waffles right now.”

“I do enjoy chicken and waffles.”

He smiles. “So you will?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I imagine what Biogirl would do in this situation. Probably send an ice lance his way. “I have a date tomorrow with a warlock.”

“Huh?”

“I have a date tomorrow.”

“But...But...Chicken and waffles! I’ll get you a milkshake too.”

“How do I know your dorm mates won’t just influence you again?” I ask.

“I’ve learned my lesson.”

“I’m going on my date tomorrow,” I say. “Maybe I’ll call you afterwards.”

He orders me chicken and waffles anyway. In the game, food gives you health. As I eat my salty fried chicken and sweet waffles with Fred, I imagine my health bar filling up.

HAROLD

Harold watched the dancer. Surrounding him was darkness, and in that darkness sat other cigar-smoking, Jager-drinking men. Neon lights shone on the dancer. She was short-hardly taller than five feet, he suspected. She wore contacts that made her eyes look purple. Her breasts were neither too small nor too large. She was a thin but curvaceous woman, the kind he'd always dated—or at least dreamed about dating—before he met his now dead wife. She—the dead wife—had been tall and too thin, with dry lips and rough facial skin. He didn't mind that she was gone, but occasionally he missed her manly laugh.

When the song was over another dancer came out on stage and the pale short dancer left. Harold did not like the new one—her nipples were too big and dark and her face was long like his dead wife's. He could not see himself falling in love with her. Other men around him hooted and hollered and stuck dollar bills in her garter belt. He wanted to tell them not to encourage her. He wanted her to leave the stage. The dark club wasn't large and the stage was probably only six feet in circumference and two feet off the ground. Under the black light, Harold knew most of the women looked more perfect than they were—thinner, less C-section scars, and cleaner faces. A variety of music played: club, a remix of “In the Air Tonight,” and fast, hard rock. The liquor flowed so freely he could taste tequila and Jager in the air.

Unable to spend any more of his time in front of the dark dancer, he finished his Jager and put his cigar out, then got up from the table. He found a bouncer, a large man whose arms were crossed, and asked him if he could get a private room with the previous dancer. The bouncer told Harold that a private room would be a minimum of one hundred dollars and twenty

dollars per dance after that. Harold showed him the money and was taken through a doorway into one of the private rooms.

The room was dark and cold and smelled of fresh paint, but he couldn't tell what color the walls were. There was a small stage in front of a chair, on which he sat. The bouncer left him alone and told him the dancer would be in soon. He added, "Don't try anything funny; this room has cameras." Harold smiled and nodded. He had no intention of doing anything inappropriate.

Harold was not unaware of his stature in the world of sex. He was overweight and had a ruddy complexion, a bulbous nose, and small hands. He wore glasses and the buttons of his shirt often popped off on unsuspecting people. His breathing was often more of a wheeze, but he was proud of his hair. He had a full head of hair, however mousy and unappealing it might be. Women were not attracted to him and even if they were, he knew his performance in bed was barely acceptable. There was too much focusing on where the clitoris and the G-spot and the nipples were, making it difficult, if not impossible, for Harold to orgasm-much like his partners. It's not like there were many women to attempt to seduce in the computer repair field anyway, and the women he did work with tended to have husbands already. It had been five years since Harold had had sex, and he hated to admit to himself that that fact didn't bother him. A steady schedule of pornography, strip clubs, and masturbation kept his desires at bay, and was often more pleasurable than intercourse anyway.

The dancer walked in from a door he couldn't even see and made her way onto the stage. She wore a glittery bra and glittery purple panties. Her hair was long and richly dark. He wanted to run his fingers through it. He imagined it was soft, like running your fingers through

water. A sudden thirst overtook him, a dehydration that threatened to ruin his excitement. He ignored it.

“Hi, sweetie,” the dancer said.

“Hello,” Harold said. He looked into her eyes because looking at her breasts would be bad manners.

She swept her hair behind her back, smiled, and said, “My name’s Gem.” It was a lie, an obvious one at that. Now that she was closer to him Harold supposed she was in her early twenties.

“Nice to meet you,” Harold said because it seemed good manners.

“I’m going to start on stage, and then come down to you, okay darling?” she said.

“Okay,” he said.

“Each dance lasts ten minutes and costs twenty dollars, all right?”

“All right.”

The dancer jumped on the pole coming out of the stage. She twirled around and even hung upside down by her legs. She took her glittery bra off and threw it near Harold. He wanted to touch it but knew that would end the fun. In the private room, full nudity was allowed. The dancer threw her panties even closer to Harold; he watched them fly. He thought maybe he could grab them with his foot and sneak them into his pocket but then he remembered the bouncer’s warning. The dancer had a swash of dark pubic hair that he was thankful for. All of the fully shaven women in pornography made him feel like a pedophile. He liked a woman who looked like an adult.

“All right, doll?” the dancer asked.

Harold wondered if his face betrayed his lust. He didn't want her to feel threatened, but imagined she dealt with horny men every night. "I'm fine, thank you," he said. "Are you all right?"

The dancer laughed, but it was not a mean laugh. It was more of a giggle. She put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm fine, sugar. Thanks for asking."

The dancer spread her legs out on either side of his. He closed his legs so she wouldn't have to stretch. With her breasts in his face she moved her pelvis in and out. Harold was hard. He wanted to touch her, really just hold her, and her skin looked so soft, but there were cameras. He even felt that she might enjoy it.

"Are you paying your way through medical school?" Harold asked. He instantly regretted saying it. What was genuine interest probably sounded like condescension.

The dancer laughed again. "Something like that. Are you a doctor?"

"I'm in computers."

The dancer turned around and pushed her butt up against Harold. "That's really neat. Do you like computers?" she asked.

"They're okay," Harold said. "You're really good at this."

"Thanks, babe. And thanks for not being a touchy prick."

It was Harold's turn to laugh. "Do you get a lot of those?"

The dancer turned back around and put her breasts against his chest. Their heads were level. "You'd be surprised how many guys think they can just grope me."

Harold thought he must just be imagining it, but it seemed that the dancer was rubbing her crotch against his. Was this his reward for not being a prick? He closed his eyes and tried to picture his mother and his ex-wife and the president.

He opened his eyes. She was gone. Back on the stage. “That’s one, babe. Do you want another?”

Harold had an extra sixty bucks to spend, so he said yes. She came back to him and resumed her lap dance. “May I ask you a personal question?” Harold said.

“You can ask, I may or may not answer,” the dancer said.

“Do you have any children?” Harold asked.

The dancer paused for a second, then said, “I have one. A two-year-old boy.”

“Are you married to his father?” Harold asked.

“Geez, I’ve never had questions like these before,” the dancer said. “Usually it’s just, ‘What’re you doing later? Wanna party?’”

“I’m sorry,” Harold said. “I’ll keep quiet.”

“It’s okay,” the dancer said. “My boy’s father died. Afghanistan. Roadside IED.”

“I’m sorry,” Harold said. He could feel his hard-on shrinking.

“You got a wife, sweetie?”

“My wife died too.”

“I’m sorry,” the dancer said. “How, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“We were never sure. It was a supposed suicide, but the police never ruled out homicide. Inconclusive cause of death.”

“Christ, that’s awful,” the dancer said. “I’m sorry, darling.” Her dancing had slowed and her movements weren’t as liquid as they had been.

“She didn’t love me anyway,” Harold said.

“How come?”

“Would *you* love me?” Harold asked. He was being bolder than he had ever been and he could feel his cheeks burning.

The dancer shrugged. “I don’t know you well enough to answer that truthfully. You seem like a nice guy.”

“You’re someone to be loved,” he said. He looked her in the eye.

“I don’t know about that,” she said. “I’m just a stripper. Not a whole lot of respect for the career.”

“Your son loves you.”

“Yes.”

“And your son’s father loved you.”

“I suppose.”

“I could love you.”

The dancer laughed, only this time her laugh was brief and nervous. “How do you know I’m not an awful person?”

“Because you’re being so nice to me,” Harold said.

“Babe, you’re paying me twenty dollars per ten minutes. I have to be nice to you.”

“I can just tell,” he said. “You’re nice and you’re someone who could be loved by a lot of different men.”

“Ten minutes are up, sweetie,” the dancer said. She didn’t ask if he wanted another dance and he didn’t ask for one.

Harold stood up. “Will you tell me your real name?”

“Susy,” she said.

“What nights do you work?”

“Here? Depends. I work at a few different clubs.”

“Will I see you again?”

“I don’t know, darling.”

Harold left the strip club and walked along the cool street outside.

#

At work a week later, Harold sat in his cubicle thinking about an overstuffed salami and pastrami sub. One more code and he could indulge in a quiet, messy lunch. His computer screen glowed and the small coding was beginning to give him a headache. Fluorescent lights meant to keep workers awake and alert only served to exacerbate Harold’s eye strain.

Julie, a co-worker with a high, booming voice, walked up to Harold’s cubicle. She was a newer hire and about ten years younger than him. He noticed that she gave him more attention than all of the other workers combined, but didn’t seem to get much attention from anyone in return. Like him she was overweight. Still, she had pretty chesnut eyes, smooth-looking skin, and an infectious smile. She said, “Hey Harold.”

“Afternoon,” he said. He glanced at her, then looked back at his code.

“I’m going out for lunch. Want to join?”

Harold thought it might be nice to have a friend but he hadn’t had one in so long that he didn’t know if he could do it right. He considered going with her but the idea of keeping up a conversation with someone for a half an hour or more was too daunting. “No thanks,” he said. “I have a lot of work to get done.”

“I could grab you something and bring it back,” she said. “Missing lunch is bad for you.” She smiled wide, showing deep dimples.

Harold thought how nice it would be for someone to bring him a salami and pastrami sandwich. He looked to the floor and then up into Julie's warm chesnut eyes. "No thanks. I have a snack in my desk." He patted his desk drawer.

"Well, all right. Don't forget to eat, sweetie. I'll see you later."

"Thanks, Julie," Harold said.

Julie walked away, her pink skirt swooshing back and forth. No one paid her any attention except Harold, who watched her until she was out of his view.

He knew that he couldn't leave to get a sandwich now because Julie would be hurt. He'd have to go the rest of the day without food and without a break from the bright lights and small coding. As his focus faded, he daydreamed about the dancer from the week before. This time, though, he focused on her cute little nose and the way she smiled at him, like he wasn't disgusting. He wanted to see her again but wasn't sure of the days she worked and didn't want to waste a trip on other, lesser dancers. Maybe if he went on the same night as he had the week before, she'd be there.

On his way out of the office, Julie was one of the few co-workers left. She looked like she was concentrating hard on her computer. As Harold approached her, he considered saying something but felt his voice catch in his throat. It occurred to him that Julie's round face was the exact opposite shape of his dead wife's. He paused by her cubicle and with a raspy, unused voice said, "Don't work too hard."

Julie looked up from her computer. Her face was ruddy and she looked tired. She smiled at him anyway. "I'll be heading home soon. You have a good night, Harold."

"You too. Goodnight," he said. He smiled but she had already looked back to her computer.

Harold walked outside. It was overcast and a bit cold. He decided he would go by the strip club later. Maybe the dancer would be there and they could talk. If she wasn't, he could always ask another dancer when Gem or Susy would be back. If Susy was her real name, it would look like he knew her personally and he could probably get a response. He thought about her silky black hair and pale breasts. He wondered if anyone loved her besides her son.

Harold got in his car and drove home.

#

It was Wednesday and Harold figured his best chance to see Gem or Susy again. As he approached the club he felt self-conscious and wrapped his jacket tightly around his body, keeping his hands inside the pockets. He worried that someone from work might notice him, though the thought had never bothered him before.

Inside the club music blared and men hollered. Harold took a seat on a black leather couch in the back to observe. A blond dancer with translucent skin held the stage. A woman with short hair and a Polo shirt put dollars in her guarder belt. Harold looked around for Susy.

He spotted her, finally, giving a private dance to younger red-haired man with a large jawline. They were only about three feet away from where Harold sat. He watched her writhe around on top of the scruffy man. His eyes were glued to her breasts and his arms were held in the air around her butt without touching it. He was breathing like an animal about to mate. Harold scooted closer to them. He heard Susy say, "Huh?"

The ginger shouted over the music, "What's your name, baby?" His voice was rough and deep.

Susy whispered into his ear but Harold couldn't hear the name she gave him.

The ginger shouted again, “You got a boyfriend?” Susy shook her head. Then he said, “When do you get off work?”

Harold watched Susy look around the room. He could sense her discomfort and he felt protective over her, more like a father than a lover. He wanted her to cover her breasts up.

The man said, “Why don’t you come hang out with me when you get off?” He patted his chest. “Maybe I could give *you* a show.”

Harold shook his head. He thought that maybe Susy really had appreciated him. He no longer wanted to be in the club.

As Susy dismounted the ginger and walked away he shouted, “Aw, come on, baby!” He slapped her ass. She looked back with anger, then walked away quickly.

Almost immediately a bouncer with large muscles and a black beard grabbed the ginger. Harold heard him say, “Time to go, asshole.” The ginger tried to joke with the bouncer but to no avail. The bouncer pulled him up and dragged him out of the club. Harold tried to follow Susy with his eyes, but she had disappeared behind a door that read “Ladies Only.” He went home.

#

There was a short meeting to be had at work in the morning. Harold sat around a small conference table, his eyes still heavy with sleep. Julie walked in carrying donuts and set them on the table. “I’ll be right back, bathroom,” she said. She smiled at all of them.

As soon as she shut the door, a man Harold had never really spoken to said, “That woman is way too chipper all the time.”

Another man said, “At least she brings donuts. I knew it would be a good idea to get a woman in the office,” a middle-aged mustached man said. He laughed and elbowed the man next to him.

“I’d been hoping for spinner, blond maybe, with long legs and big tits,” an older man said. “She ain’t that, but she brings food. Not a bad trade.” All the men besides Harold laughed.

The one woman in the room rolled her eyes. She said, “You’re all pigs, but she annoys me and I’m hungry.” She grabbed a donut. She was an engineer and married to one of the senior executives. Another person Harold had never really spoken to.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Harold said. He left the conference room to find Julie. She was coming out of the ladies’ bathroom.

“Hi Harold,” she said.

“Julie, I think you and I should skip this meeting and get breakfast together.”

Julie laughed. “What’s come over you? You seem upset.”

Harold collected his thoughts. He had no desire to tell her the things that were said and wasn’t sure how to convince her that he wasn’t crazy. He’d never skipped out of work before. “This meeting isn’t important. Let’s go eat breakfast. Outside somewhere.”

“Harold, are you worried about the numbers? They’re not there to quiz us on anything. I’m pretty sure it’s just another silly meeting about getting everyone in the right mood.” She put her arm around him and led him back toward the conference room.

“Would you like to get dinner with me then?” Harold asked. “On Wednesday.”

Julie paused for a second. She looked at Harold like he was shiny and new. “Sure,” she said. “I’d like that.” She opened the door and led him into the conference room.

The men inside stopped laughing. Harold gave them all looks of anger. The meeting began a moment later. Harold looked at Julie’s full cheeks and long eyelashes. She didn’t grab a donut for herself and he didn’t touch them either.

After the meeting everyone went back to ignoring Harold, except Julie.

#

Though Harold had offered to pick Julie up at her house, she had insisted on meeting him at the restaurant. They met at a semi-expensive French restaurant miles away from the strip club. As they went to sit down, Harold pulled Julie's seat out for her. She wore a light pink blouse tucked into a mauve skirt that flared out at her knees. Harold noticed a bit more blush and lipstick than usual. He thought Julie looked lovely with her chubby cheeks.

When the tall, skinny waiter asked for their drink orders, Julie ordered a bottle of cabernet. Harold could feel excitement rising in him. He grinned and repeatedly adjusted himself in his seat. "Um, have you ever been here before?" he asked.

"Yes, I have," Julie said. She smiled and nodded as she said it. "They have the absolute best crème brûlée I've ever tasted." She looked around the room before saying, "So what did you think of the meeting this afternoon? I think they're giving us way too many meetings."

Harold laughed. "Yeah, I guess they are. At least each meeting is a break from work, more or less."

"They're getting excessive though," Julie said. "And I think Todd is vulgar."

"He's an idiot," Harold said. It was the most assertive statement he'd ever made.

They spent the rest of the evening discussing people from work. As the wine flowed, so did Harold's words. He hadn't spoken so much since junior high.

Harold invited Julie to his house. When they arrived she hesitated at the door then followed him inside. Both somewhat drunk, they stumbled into his bedroom. Harold kissed Julie. They tumbled onto his bed. Harold's normal anxieties about sex were dulled by the

alcohol. He thought things might go smoothly until Julie reached into his pants, grabbed him, and said, “How can I get you hard?”

Harold realized that, not only was he soft as a feather pillow, but Julie’s touch wasn’t changing that fact. He tried to picture Gem, up on the stage, naked on top of him. It helped a bit, but when Julie asked if something was wrong, the bit of hardness he’d achieved went away. She took charge. She pulled his pants down and used her mouth to get him up. It worked. Julie guided him inside of her. Instead of taking forever to finish like usual, Harold was done in an instant. Julie said, “Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” Harold said.

“Can you keep going?” Julie asked.

“It’s not hard anymore,” Harold said. “This never happens.”

“It’s okay Harold,” Julie said. “Would you mind terribly taking me back to my car?”

“Sure,” Harold said. He felt sobered. As he put his clothes back on, the polyester of his shirt felt sharp against his elbows and chest.

#

At work the next day Julie smiled at him when he arrived but didn’t say anything. He didn’t say anything either. His desire to have a friend seemed to have left him. Instead, his clothes still felt sharp as he made his way to the coffee room. He filled himself a cup and brought it back to his cubicle where he huddled closely to his computer. He wouldn’t be going out this week.

NOBODY, NOT EVEN THE RAIN, HAS SUCH SMALL HANDS

An Elegy

When I was little, I wanted to be a filmmaker. Dad provided the video camera, I wrote the scripts, and Eugene was the star. As a child who lacked a proper societal gender identity myself, I rarely cast Eugene as a male character. His favorite role was Wynona, the Southern belle who wanted to be a famous actress herself. She wore a frilly, lacy black dress that sprouted out at the bottom, with a curly blond wig on his head and makeup from the makeup set some distant aunt had bought me, not knowing I'd never use it on myself. For a five year old, Eugene's ability to capture the perfect Southern accent impressed critics (our dad and his mom) and excited me, as it brought my scripts to life. Before long, Eugene started asking if I could dress him up as a lady and write a film for him. As a suave teenager with brooding looks and just the right amount of angst, Eugene had girls flocking to him, and I never failed to tell them about this. The joke was on me, though, because it invariably made the girls say, "Aww," grab his arm, and like him more.

I helped Eugene write love letters when he was three. We were a family that read and wrote early, and Eugene especially had learned to love early as well. He was in love with a girl named Darla. She was the most popular girl in the preschool. Eugene, even at three, had dark circles underlining his frowny brown eyes. He carried the weight of a much older man in those eyes. I knew his attempts at attaining Darla's love were fruitless; he had no friends and was mainly considered weird by his contemporaries. This would benefit him in the future. But then, as we sat in the car on a long trip, in my seven-year-old mind, getting his hopes up would be

better than keeping them down. He wanted to tell Darla that she was beautiful, sweet, smart, and beloved. He wanted to marry her. By then, I'd been writing for enough years that I fancied myself a professional. Together, we wrote pages on the depth of Eugene's love; the importance of Darla's smile; the perfection in her being; and a future marriage proposal. By the end, even I had hope that she might respond favorably. Eugene gave it to her when we got home from our road trip; she never responded to him, but he refused to give up on love.

As the older sibling, I had a nasty habit of picking on Eugene. I was bigger, tougher, and stronger. I can't say that I don't regret pushing him around now. He was a sad child, and I fear I took advantage of that at times, like when I refused to let him play with my Legos or when I made the punishment for losing a game a smack to the face. Terms were different though when someone else picked on him. When he was in kindergarten and a second-grade boy wouldn't leave him alone, I punched the boy in the nose, making him bleed and cry. The boy never bothered Eugene again.

There was one time when Eugene and I fought together. We liked to play basketball at the neighborhood basketball court. Sometimes our neighborhood friends would join us, sometimes it was just the two of us. Eugene was never good at sports like I was, but he humored me and played them anyway. He let me beat him at every game for hours at a time without one complaint other than a slight drooping in his brown eyes. Eugene preferred conducting science experiments in his bedroom; indeed every birthday and holiday he asked for science sets. He loved chemistry. When two new boys moved into the neighborhood, one my age and one Eugene's, and showed up at the court, we invited them to play with us. The older boy, a skinny blond with white hair, sneered at me and told us that girls couldn't play sports. He said I would have to be a cheerleader. That was the first time I'd ever experienced sexism; it was the first

time I learned that such a thing existed. Truthfully, I had been laboring under the delusion that the sexes and the races had always been equal; that there had been black and female presidents, that no one saw any difference among us. Though it was usually me who defended Eugene, that was the first time he played the hero and he played it well. He told the white-haired boy that I was better than all of them at sports and that if I couldn't play, he wouldn't play either. The boy didn't like that, and stepped up close to Eugene, his face looking down into Eugene's eyes. I told him to step away from my brother, and he laughed, making some snide comment about not being afraid of girls. Eugene simply said, *You should be afraid of her.*

The second the white-haired boy pushed Eugene, I punched him in the cheek. He came at me and his little brother, who had been standing idly, jumped on Eugene. I screamed for him to get off my brother, but it looked like Eugene was handling himself.

Eugene and the white-haired boy's little brother wrestled on the black pavement while I ducked a punch from my opponent. I kicked him in the stomach, and he fell backwards, letting out a guttural sound. The little one ran at me from behind, wrapped his arms around my body, and tried to hold me there so the older one could get to me. Eugene ran as fast as he could at the little one, though, and head-butted him in the side, making him fall down and cry. I dodged the older boy's attack.

The older boy went for Eugene; he was just about to swing on him, when I jumped on his back and bit his neck. He screamed and we both fell down. Once on the ground, I punched his face. Eugene and I ran away when we saw blood. While we ran, Eugene grabbed my hand and wouldn't let go. He said, *Thanks, Sissy, for not letting him get me.* I told him he was the hero that day.

When I was in high school, I wrote a paper on e e cummings's poem, "somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond." When I fell in love with the words, I had no idea it was an elegy. My teacher mentioned that fact in passing, and I pretended to have known all along. To me, the poem was about frailness and fragility ("*in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me*"; "*nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals/the power of your intense fragility*"). I always considered Eugene fragile. Even when he grew up to six feet tall and had the muscle definition of a normal twenty-year-old man, he was delicate.

Sometime around junior high, Eugene's features became beautiful to the opposite sex. His dark, brooding eyes held depth to them. His small nose and full lips reminded them of popular boy band members. Nothing about Eugene's looks was flawed. Since Eugene and I have different mothers, Dad tried to claim our beauty as his own. In reality, Eugene and I never looked anything alike, both looking more like our respective mothers. Though we had all expected him to make it to his twenties a sad virgin, Eugene had sex with his first girlfriend at thirteen. She was a possessive red-haired girl who disliked when he spent time with friends or family. She was only the beginning.

Eugene dated a string of controlling girls who became obsessed with him and simultaneously abusive towards him. I think they loved what they perceived as weakness, but was really sensitivity and the inability to cause harm to others. His anger came out, though never at them, but at himself. After he and the red head broke up, Dad walked in on him cutting his wrists with a Mach 3 razor blade. He told Dad it was because he no longer believed in God and wanted to stop going to Youth Group.

As he progressed through high school, Eugene found more and more obsessive girls; it was like they could sense his sensitivity. For two years I kept the address of the girl who mentally and physically abused him, just waiting for her to turn eighteen so I could kick her ass. By the time I realized she was eighteen, Eugene told me she had moved away to college, gotten fat, and had become reasonably pathetic. I still never forgave her. It was bad enough that she hit him, but what she said to me will never allow me to forgive her. In a depressive fit, Eugene had cut wide, deep wounds into his left arm. I knew she was a big part of the “why.” She had forbidden him from speaking to me or from eating dinner with our family. She had spread lies around the school that Eugene had repeatedly cheated on her so that they would turn against him. She had effectively made herself the only person in his life, even after our parents forbade her from calling the house.

After Eugene cut himself more than ten times and could not feel his arm, I watched his blood spill out on the way to the hospital. In a manic swing, he insisted he felt great and only wanted to talk about the newest video game he’d bought. They threw him in a psychiatric hospital for three days where he met people far worse off than himself, including a girl who was addicted to drugs and cutting and wanted to be addicted to him. I was on the Internet, threatening the girl who had abused Eugene for so long, when I realized the depth of her anger towards him, though I didn’t understand it. This girl said, of my brother, *He deserved what he got*. I said, *So he deserved to kill himself? He deserved to die?* When she confirmed this, I told her she better not let me catch her near our property, and then I began my wait until she would be old enough that I could beat the hell out of her. Normally I wouldn’t have cared that I was of age and she wasn’t, but I was trying to get into college and the last thing I needed was an assault against a minor charge.

So when Eugene met Chelsea, I was skeptical. She was a “really nice girl” but so were the rest of them until they weren’t. On the first day I met Chelsea, I wanted to love her but felt reserved. Chelsea’s hair went past her butt and she had large nostrils; I thought she was very beautiful, like the wistful girls sitting in fields in fashion magazines. She played Nintendo games with us and she and I talked about books we liked. She was relaxed the whole night, and while she seemed attached to Eugene’s arm, she wasn’t afraid to talk to the rest of us, either. Over time, I grew to love Chelsea like a sister. We went thrifting together, borrowed clothes from each other, and baked peanut-butter-cup cupcakes together. She stayed with Eugene through his manic highs and depressive lows, only occasionally calling me to complain. I told her I would understand if she had to leave him.

There was a time when I wanted to leave him, just stop being his sister, when he would show up, and then stop speaking, and leave without answering his phone for months. I thought him inconsiderate and unloving. His lows turned angry and once he threatened his mother with sharp piece of wood he’d ripped from his closet door. When Eugene finally found medicine that helped him, and his lows turned into inconvenient but manageable mood swings, he was the man Chelsea deserved. They were so happy together and, more than anything, I was happy he’d found a good woman.

When Chelsea got pregnant, my son was only a year old. Thrilled that he would have a cousin close in age, I hung around them all the time. I went with Chelsea to all of the doctor appointments that Eugene had to miss from working. And he was a doting father-to-be. His hand could almost always be found on her belly, even before she began to show. Though Eugene had found a certain happiness in life, I think he saw his child as his real salvation. He told me once that he finally had a solid reason to live. He told me that being a father was more

reason to live than believing in God had ever been. He bought mounds of baby clothes, books, and nursery items. Eugene became the gatekeeper to their house. No one who even sneezed was allowed around Chelsea. Since I'd seen the extent that Eugene was a good uncle, I knew he could only be a sensitive, loving father. With my son, he could play for hours. He offered to babysit so my husband and I could sleep. Whenever Uncle Eugene came around, my son cried to be in his arms. I believed that Eugene's greatest job in life would be parenting.

Two weeks before Chelsea's due date, she called me, crying. She told me the doctor couldn't find a heartbeat and an ultrasound showed the baby had died. She was too afraid to tell Eugene. I comforted her and told her that she'd have to tell him somehow, and soon. This next part, I feel, is partially my fault, because I practically forced her to tell him.

Eugene blamed the loss on Chelsea. He had lost his salvation. He stopped taking his medicine. One night he scared Chelsea by grabbing her arm and pushing her onto the couch, and she left to come stay with us. I went over to speak with Eugene and he was drunk and cutting himself. I took the razor blade and the bottle of vodka from his hands and drove him to the psychiatric hospital. I told him he would have to stay or I would call the police. Three days later he came out, claiming to feel better. He apologized to Chelsea and they even discussed trying for a baby again. Poor Chelsea, she hadn't even had time to deal with the death herself. Months went by when Eugene attempted to mask the fact that he wasn't taking his medicine.

We all know what happened after that. What no one knew was that Eugene was still not taking his medicine. What Eugene didn't know was Chelsea was pregnant again. I don't know if there is an afterlife. If there is, Eugene is certainly watching. The happiness to be found in this tragedy is the daughter growing inside Chelsea. She will carry on those aspects of her father that I've never witnessed in anyone else. She will carry on his deep sensitivity, his selflessness,

his devotion to family, and his goodness. Never have I known a person as good as Eugene. He wasn't meant for this world. He had a hard time with life. It was the living that got to him. It's not as easy for some people as it is for others. He is the *snow descending*, blanketing, trying his hardest to love and to be loved. Because that's what Eugene represents: love. I have never known someone who was loved so much or who loved so desperately.

Today we're all here to mourn a loss in our own lives. But the loss of Eugene is more than that. This world was better off with Eugene in it. He may have been sick, but it's the world that made him that way. When the rest of us get beaten down, we build walls. Eugene had no walls; he felt everything. But we should still see beauty today; beauty in the knowledge that Eugene lived and loved and was loved; and we should see beauty in his child.

To me, Eugene will always be that five-year-old Southern belle, dancing around our backyard in the cool autumn breeze, coining the most perfect accent and making my scripts come to life.

BARGAINS

Earlier this morning, my boyfriend, Tom told me, “If you do the dishes, I’ll give you a back rub tonight.” I thoroughly weighed the pros and cons of this deal and eventually decided it was a good one for me, since I could easily pretend to have forgotten to wash the pots which still sit on the stove, bits of soup and broth caked on. When he gets home I’ll just pretend that I forgot. He’ll roll his eyes and say something like, “Sure you did,” and then he’ll wash them himself, and that’ll be that.

I sip my homemade latte, then open a can of tuna and pull out two slices of bread from the fridge. The espresso machine next to the fridge was a matter of bargaining as well. Tom didn’t want me to buy it. “A waste of money when we already have a coffee machine,” he had said, though it was technically *my* student loan money. And so I offered to do the dishes for three days if he would stop whining and let me buy it. After the first day of doing dishes, I offered to do something for him in bed that would benefit me as well, to get out of doing the next two days of dishes.

Muffy, the orange tabby cat we got from the Humane Society, purrs at my feet. “You can have some tuna if you promise to be a good girl,” I say, “promise!”

Muffy meows, a long drawn-out sound that would be annoying if repeated. “Good girl,” I say, dropping a bit of tuna in her dish. She runs to it, the little bells on her collar jingling, and smashes her face into the dish to get the tiny bit of tuna.

After I eat the sandwich, I sit on the couch. I have homework to get to, but I'll wait on it. I tell myself that I can have two hours of watching television if I make up that two hours by studying after dinner.

#

When Tom gets home I'm still watching television. He finishes with his accounting classes around six. There's a *Seinfeld* marathon on, and even though I've seen every episode multiple times, I can't stop watching. Something about the way Jerry, Elaine, and George won't negotiate even the smallest of things with their lovers intrigues me. As I hear him climbing up the stairs outside of our apartment, I jump up and turn the television off, then run into the bedroom and plop my laptop on my lap, so it looks like I've been working. "Everything you saw today, keep secret," I tell Muffy. She yawns at me.

"Blue Jay," Tom calls as he enters our apartment. That's his nickname for me. My real name is Jayde, which I hate because it sounds like a stripper name, and my favorite color is blue. Tom isn't the most creative of people, but he's sweet and I've quite taken to the name in the three years we've been together. We met at a circus, oddly enough, and I beat him in a game where we squirted targets with water pistols.

"Tomcat," I say. I'm not the most creative of people either.

"Blue Jay, you didn't wash the pots," he says. He is the most selectively observant person I've ever known. I get up from under my laptop and stand near him in the kitchen.

"Oh balls," I say. "I *completely* forgot."

He's already turning the water on and putting yellow rubber gloves on his hands. "What do you want me to make for dinner?" he asks. That little group of strands of brown hair falls

over his forehead, into his eye, and it drives me nuts. I almost stumble over Muffy, who's now between Tom and me, and push it back up onto his head.

"I'm going to the coffee shop to study," I say. "Remember?"

"Oh, right," he says. "Bring me back a sandwich. I'm just going to play this new game I got yesterday."

I'm glad he found a new game to keep him occupied while I study. He's an accounting major and has a lot of work too, but gets most of it done at school. He hasn't had a new game to play in a while, and I've been feeling he's bored.

"I'll bring you a sandwich if you give me an extra five minutes on that back rub."

"No way," he says.

It was worth a try.

#

As I sit at the coffee shop, attempting to study for my civil law exam, I can't stop staring at Corey Hart. His name really is Corey Hart, like the guy who sang "Sunglasses at Night." I know Corey's name because I've heard his friends make fun of him for it before. We've made a little eye contact that, if I was single, I would think was getting me somewhere. Though his name is Corey Hart, he looks like Corey Haim, the blond kid from *Lost Boys* who ran around with Corey Feldman, with dirty blond hair and nice lips. I wonder if his parents named him that on purpose. Maybe he was born the year the song came out.

After a few more minutes of attempting to study for my horrendously boring class (I was unaware when I applied to law school how much more reading that arguing there would be), I decide to make friends with Corey Hart. I walk up to him, get nervous, and change my tactics. "May I borrow a pen?" I ask. I hope there are no visible pens at my own table.

“Sure,” Corey Hart says. He reaches into his messenger bag and pulls out a cap-less black pen, the kind you get in a value pack. “I’ll trade you this pen for five minutes of your time.”

“Deal,” I say. I sit down next to him at his table, while he sips some sort of hot beverage. “My name’s Jayde, but I hate it,” I say.

“Not a fan of the color green?” he asks.

I picture him in eighties clothing and hair. I think he could make it work.

“What? Oh, no, just not a fan of the stripper association.”

“Could be worse,” he says. “Could be ‘Candy the Prostitute.’”

“So you’re an optimist,” I say.

We talk for another hour before I realize I really do need to get some work done. It turns out Corey Hart is working on a master’s degree in film, imagine that. He’s twenty-four (which puts his birth in the same year “Sunglasses at Night” hit the Billboard charts), one year older than me, and from Connecticut. I’ve never met someone from Connecticut in my life until now. I offer Corey my number, but save his in my phone as “Jennifer.” I don’t really know why I’m doing this, or what I plan on doing—probably nothing—but I haven’t felt so compelled by a person in a very long time. It’s not just his looks; there’s a mystery about him. He reminds me of a magician.

#

When I arrive back at home, I feel exhilarated. I even Google Corey’s name just out of curiosity, but of course all that comes up are pages about the singer. I haven’t felt that spark of meeting someone new and clicking with him so well in years. I think I’ll have myself a piece of decadent chocolate fudge cake—until I see Tom sitting at his computer desk. First I only see the

back of his head, the short waves of dark hair ending at his neck. It hits me that I've done something very wrong to someone who trusts me. In an attempt to make things better, at least in my head, I delete Corey's number from my phone and walk into the bedroom, stand behind Tom, and rub his shoulders. I'll be extra nice so the guilt will go away.

"Let's watch a movie or something tonight," I say. "Let's do something together." I want to show him how much I love him, even though I don't believe he's ever questioned it.

"I'm busy," he says, not taking his eyes away from the computer screen. Muffy sleeps on his lap. Gun shots and bombs are going off, but there's so much chaos on the screen that I can barely tell what's going on.

"Well if you want to play video games, we could always play something together," I say. Sometimes we like to play games together, especially old ones like *Mario Brothers* and *Star Fox*. I continue kneading his shoulders while he squints at the screen..

"Maybe later," he says.

"How about in a half hour or so?" I ask. "I'll give you a foot rub." For the first time it bothers me that I'm bribing my boyfriend to spend time with me. I feel dirty.

"I don't know," he says. "I'm busy."

And so, feelings hurt, I march out of the room, like a child throwing a tantrum. For a few minutes I sit, arms crossed, on the couch, stewing in my anger. I got the number of a new guy tonight, I'm the one who could easily be moving on here, and he can't even step away from his video game to spend some time with me? Muffy jumps on the couch and into my lap. She purrs and pushes her head up against my hand.

"Not right now, Muffy," I say. "Mommy's angry." I try to pick up my civil law book again, but the words might as well be in Russian.

The funny thing about anger is it tends to evaporate over time, and all you're left with is sadness and regret. By the end of the night, I'm drinking a glass of wine and watching *Late Night* with Muffy on the couch.

#

It's two days later when I get a call from Corey. I remember his number, even though I deleted it. I step outside to take the call. "How's my favorite stripper doing?" his voice says after I answer.

"Excuse me? Oh, right, because of my name. I'm okay. You?" I grab Muffy's bag of cat food and pour it into her dish while she cries for it the whole time. Before it's even in her dish, she's already trying to catch the food from the bag as it falls. Cat food smells terrible, like sweaty gym shoes.

"Great, fantastic. Just wondered if you'd like to get a bite to eat with me tonight," Corey says.

Part of me would love to, but I've made a decision not to be unfaithful. Besides, Tom and I scheduled a little date night tonight. He's going to cook spaghetti and meatballs for dinner and I'm going to bake a berry cobbler for dessert. We're going to eat a candlelit dinner, and then watch a movie, and finish the night off in bed. I even bought a special outfit for tonight—a blue lace teddy and blue stilettos.

"I'm sorry, Corey," I say, "but I can't tonight. I already have plans." I don't offer a raincheck because I'm not going to stray. It's strange, but throughout Tom's and my relationship, I've never before had feelings for another person. There's no point ruining a good relationship over what I'm sure will only amount to a brief crush.

"Okay, well, maybe next time," he says. "I'll catch ya later, Jayde."

After I hang up, I call out, “Tomcat!” to Tom. He’s playing that same video game, it sounds like.

When I look into Muffy’s knowing eyes as she sits on her hind legs staring up at me, I see Tom’s and my union. I see him denying every other woman’s beauty, much to the laughter of his friends. I see all-nighters spent drinking vodka and talking. I see my biggest supporter. I see a faithful, kind, loving man with a childish streak. Though not technically married, we’re practically spouses. Sometimes, though, I feel that Tom has become too comfortable with our relationship. Whenever I want to go out and do something, like hang out at the dance-pub or go bowling, he says, “That’s what single people do.” I’m not sure where he got such an idea, but it’s kept us from going out and having fun on multiple occasions.

The first year and a half we dated, we took each other out all the time. We’d try to one-up each other on who could plan a more perfect night. Once he took me out for a fondue dinner and dessert, and then to a small little Italian bakery for tiramisu and cannolis. “We’re going to four different places for dessert tonight,” he said. After that, we went to the beach and lay out on a blanket on the sand, holding hands and talking about constellations, the ring around the moon, and our future together. One day we would get married, get a dog, have a daughter, and I’d be a successful lawyer while he owned his own accounting firm. After the beach we went to a lounge and had dessert cocktails and crème brûlée. We spent the next few hours trying to stay awake by talking and driving around town, watching a movie and holding hands. Around five in the morning, when his favorite deli opened, we got the best cheesecake in the city. After that we fell asleep in his bed, me wrapped around him.

Since then, things haven’t exactly become less romantic so much as less passionate. He’s always had an affinity for video games, and that’s fine with me, it gives me time to get

homework done. This is the first time he's really put a game before us, and I suppose I'm not dealing with it well.

Perhaps it's our differences that got us stuck on trade-offs. He became unwilling to compromise, and I grew to love negotiations.

Tom doesn't respond, so I go ahead with my question. "Do you want to start dinner soon?"

"Um, not yet," he calls back over the sounds of machine guns and men dying.

"No, I didn't mean right this second," I say. I'm famished already. "I meant sometime soon."

"I'm not hungry," he says.

"It's almost eight o'clock," I say. "I'll get the water boiling for you and put the sauce in the pan so you can just jump in and finish, if you'll start soon."

"Don't do that," he says. "I'm gonna be a little while."

I squeeze my fists together, realizing that my frustration is reaching a much more annoying point than I would like. Even though he said not to, I take out a pan for sauce and one for spaghetti. I fill up the one with water and set it on the stove. After fifteen minutes of reading for my litigation class, I call out to Tom again. "Soon, darling?"

"If you're so hungry, why don't you just cook dinner and eat now?" he says.

I feel like I might cry with anger. I jump up from the couch and walk into the bedroom. "I thought tonight was our date night," I say. "You cook, we eat, I make dessert, we eat it. That's how it goes."

"Maybe we'll do it another night," he says, not looking away from his computer screen.

“But we had plans for tonight,” I say. The fact that his head is facing the computer and not me drives me even further up the wall. I tap my foot on the floor, a full tap every half second. “Are you really going to choose that stupid game over me?”

“I’m not choosing it over you,” he tells the computer. “I’m just not hungry. Go make yourself something. We’ll do date night another night.”

I stomp on the floor as I leave the bedroom. After waiting and studying for another hour, I give up on hoping he’ll come to his senses. I make myself a can of soup and put the outfit I bought for tonight in my closet. Later, when he would normally try to hit on me, he doesn’t. He plays his game until he goes to bed. It takes me a while to fall asleep because I keep tossing and turning, and my anger returns in bursts of wide open eyes and heavy breathing.

#

The next night, while Tom and I are in bed after another night of me studying and him shooting people over the Internet, I say, “Want to make a deal?”

“What kind?” He’s turned away from me, even in bed facing his computer.

I stare at the ceiling. “Since you’ve found a new girlfriend—your computer—may I find a second boyfriend?”

“Sure, Jayde,” he says. He’s nonchalant. “Whatever your heart desires.”

His voice tells me that he would never expect me to do such a thing. It’s like he can’t even fathom it.

But with his blessing, sarcastic or not, I answer the phone the next time Corey calls, three days later.

“Do you have plans tomorrow?” Corey asks. His voice is light and airy over the phone.

“I do not,” I say.

“There’s this huge antique market at Kilborn Park,” he says. “I want to find an old train set for my dad. He had one since childhood and the last time my parents moved, the movers lost it. You want to come?”

“Sure,” I say.

We hang up, and I tell Tom that I’m going out tomorrow with my new friend Jennifer, from school. I re-save Corey’s number as “Jennifer.”

All night, while Tom plays his game, I plan what I’m going to wear the next day. When I shower, I make sure to shave perfectly. I finally decide on a pair of red lace panties with matching bra, just in case things develop, a pair of dark blue jeans, a white tank top, and a spring green cardigan. I don’t want to look too dressed up for an antique market, but I do want to look cute. Tom doesn’t even notice that I’m picking out my clothes for tomorrow, which I never do, or that I’m spending an awful lot of time making my hair just right.

As we lie in bed before passing out, Tom says, “Let’s do our date night tomorrow. I’m getting kind of sick of this game.”

“So you only want me when your game’s no longer fun?” I try to hide my annoyance but it’s difficult. I’m breathing heavy and grinding my teeth and my eyes are wide.

“Stop with that, Jayde,” he says. “We’re together all the time.”

“You playing video games in one room while I study in another is not being together,” I say. “Besides, I already told you, I’m hanging out with my friend Jennifer.”

“Fine, choose your friend over me,” he says.

Instead of going into detail about all of the problems I have with what he just said, I offer him another bargain. “If I can sleep with another man, I’ll never complain about your video games again.”

“Sure Jayde, sure,” he says. For a second, before he completely turns towards his computer, I have a glimpse of his eye. It looks as if it might want to be suspicious, but hasn’t the energy.

#

Corey is yanking at the bottom of his shirt and digging his foot in the dirt when I meet him at the antique market. He’s wearing grey pants and a blue and white plaid shirt. When he sees me, he smiles and messes with his sleeve. Throughout the park are tables covered in old things—toys, clocks, clothes, jewelry, gadgets that I don’t have names for.

“What kind of train did your dad have?” I ask.

“A Lionel train,” he says. “He got it in the fifties, when he was really little.”

We walk along the edges of the set-up tables. When we come across a hotdog vendor, Corey asks if I want one. I don’t, so he buys a dog for himself, covered in relish and onions. It smells foul to me, but I try not to let my distaste show.

“No thanks,” I say. To my surprise, he eats the hotdog rather daintily, taking small bites and managing to not make a mess. We continue walking through the market. A little boy and a little girl argue over an old action figure while their parents sip glasses of wine and let them. I can hear people haggling at each table, it seems.

When I see an old Nintendo Entertainment System, the original kind, I consider buying it for Tom. Well, for me too. I have no idea what happened to the one I had growing up. He and I love playing old games together. I just want things to be okay with us.

“I miss playing Pretend,” Corey says, watching two children swordfight with tree branches in the middle of the market.

“Let’s play right now,” I say.

Corey finishes his hotdog and throws the wrapper in the next trash can we come to.

“What do you want to pretend?”

“It’ll have to be something grown up,” he says. “We can’t swordfight without getting some awkward stares. How about you be my wife tonight?”

Normally the thought of being anyone’s wife would scare me. But since it’s just Pretend ... “Sure,” I say. “How long have we been married?”

“We’re newlyweds,” he says. “We got married two weeks ago after having met each other. In fact, we eloped to Vegas and got married by Elvis.”

He links his arm with mine and we walk through the market with our chests puffed out, like we’re important now that we’re married.

“There!” he says, pointing at a table covered in toy trains. He looks like a little boy, skipping, with me attached, to the stand. An elderly couple sit behind the counter, talking to a mother and her son. When they see us, the woman smiles. She lets her husband handle the mother and son.

“Hello there,” she says, her smile kind.

“Hi,” Corey says. “My wife and I are looking for a Lionel train, circa 1958.”

“We have a mint condition 1958 Lionel,” the old woman says.

When she pulls it out of the box, I’m amazed at how life-like it is. “Honey, I shrunk the train,” I say. I giggle at my own joke when Corey doesn’t laugh. He’s too involved with the Lionel. I stand there idly, thinking how attractive Corey is, while he haggles with the old woman on the price of the train. With a charming wide grin, he offers her significantly less than the asking price.

“You’re cute,” the woman says, “but I’m not stupid.” She winks at him and offers a price closer to the original.

“You wouldn’t embarrass me in front of my new wife, would you?” Corey says. I can feel my face turning flush.

“Fine,” the woman says. “Take another ten off that.”

“How about fifteen?” Corey says. It almost looks as if he’s fluttering his eyelashes at her.

The old woman sighs and shakes her head like she’s on stage. She turns to me and says, “I hope he doesn’t take advantage of you like this.”

Corey hands her the money and thanks her for the train.

We put the train set in his car trunk and walk around the lake adjacent to the park. I pick flowers while we chat. Somehow we get to the ex talk, rather early if you ask me. I ask him what happened in his last relationship. He tells me that his last girlfriend cheated on him with his best friend—for a year. He hates cheaters. I tell him that my ex cheated on me, too. I picture Tom sitting at that damned computer. Only, I can’t look at Corey when I say this. He’s so open, and I’m hiding so much.

When he takes my hand in his, I don’t flinch or pull away. He seems so shy, suddenly, and I like that I’m making him nervous. His anxiety comforts me. “I want to film you by this lake,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

He laughs, and his hand squeezes mine. “I mean I think I could get some great shots for this project I’m working on for school. You sitting and thinking by the lake. You contemplating life with your feet in the water. You having a twilit stroll around it.”

“I’m not that interesting,” I say.

“If you let me, I’ll buy you dinner tonight.”

“Deal,” I say. I’m not in the habit of letting men pay for my dinner, but a deal is a deal.

“I like you,” Corey says. He says it so suddenly, like the words have been waiting inside his mouth for days to finally burst out.

“I like you too,” I say. “How could I not like my husband?” And I think, *Well Tom, you’re the one pushing me towards this.*

We eat dinner at a small pizza diner by the lake. On the walls are pictures of old, famous Italians like Frank Sinatra, Kaye Ballard, and John Fante. The table cloths are standard red-and-white checked. A small candle sits on the middle of the table, its flame dancing in the light breeze.

“Is it weird I brought up my ex earlier?” Corey asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know. My last relationship lasted three years. I’m out of the dating scene. I don’t know the etiquette anymore.”

Our server brings us colas and breadsticks. We each order slices of pizza.

“How long ago was that one?” I ask.

“We broke up three months ago,” he says. “What about you?”

I try to think fast of an amount of time that wouldn’t sound too little.. “About two months ago,” I say.

“I didn’t feel ready to date for a while,” he says, “but I’ve felt ready the past month or so.”

“Same,” I say. I excuse myself to use the restroom. Once sitting on the toilet, I look around the room, hoping for some possible good outcome for all of this. Even if I manage to

break up with Tom, I'll eventually have to admit to Corey that it didn't happen until after we met. He hates cheaters. He won't want me anymore. I steady my breathing and stare at myself in the mirror. I smile and bat my eyelashes.

When I get back to our table, Corey is holding a small bouquet of flowers. They look like the ones from the lake, which I left sitting under a tree. He hands them to me.

"How did you smuggle these in without me noticing?" I ask.

"That's my secret," he says. He gives me the same sparkling eyes that he gave the old woman selling trains.

After eating pizza and discussing music, movies, and books, we walk back to our cars.

We're standing there and I'm wondering what's going to happen. Could this be the moment I stray from Tom? I don't think I can do it. I back away from Corey..

"Did you have a good time?" he asks.

"I did," I say. I purse my lips and pull them in, hiding them from his view.

"Me too," he says. "Again, soon?"

"Absolutely."

He pulls me into a hug, but nothing else happens. I'm left standing by my car, shaking slightly, watching him walk away.

#

I decide to give Tom another chance before pursuing anything further with Corey.

I can already feel my heart pounding with anger, though, when a few days later, I see the back of Tom's head, him facing that damn computer screen. He's talking to other people over the Internet, which infuriates me more. I grind my teeth, thinking about how he could choose to spend time with people he's never met over paying attention to me. It's a feeling like rejection

and shame and degradation. *I am not as good as voices over the Internet. He's cheating on me in front of my face.*

"Tom," I say, trying to keep my voice emotionless and firm.

"Hmm?"

"Can we please have dinner now? You can talk to your friends later."

"I'm not hungry—holy shit! That was awesome, Rax," he says. I don't know or care who the hell "Rax" is.

A voice emanating from his computer speakers says, "No way, Klond, yours was way better." I also don't want to know Tom as Klond.

"Darling," I say, unable to keep the anger from my voice, "maybe if you start cooking you'll get hungry."

"Just go eat by yourself, you don't need me there," he says.

"Listen!" I say, "I've had enough of this. You're choosing people you've never met over me. Big, smelly, pimped, racist people. This is not going to continue this way. Now come out here right now and spend some goddamn time with me."

"Go away," he says. "I'll spend time with you when I'm hungry."

"Fine, go eat your Klondike bars and chat with your new BFF T-Rex or whatever. I'll remember this, though." When I leave the bedroom, I slam the door. My cheeks feel hot.

And then I hear a girl's voice over his speakers say, "Klond, you're a fucking wizard." I stomp back into the bedroom.

"Really? You're playing with a girl, too? You'd rather talk to her than me? *I will* remember this."

He says nothing, just sighs, and before I know it, I'm outside taking a long walk by myself.

#

After two days' loneliness, I decide to see Corey again. I *want* Tom, you could even say I need him, but I'm not getting him. Watching our three-year relationship dissolve into faux gunfire and body-less voices is hard enough. Seeing Corey is helping to soften the blow. Part of me still hopes, though, that Tom will change. I've taken to lying on the couch, pretending to read articles on my computer while really my eyes are glazed over.

"I'm going out to dinner tonight with that girl, Jennifer," I say, when Tom looks through the fridge for food.

"But I was going to make something for us tonight," he says. "I put the game away." He smiles sheepishly. The disappointment I feel when he says this tells me I might be starting to like Corey more than I should.

"I already made plans," I say. I pick up Muffy and press my face into her fur. "Das mah kitteh," I say as ridiculously as possible. She looks at me like I'm mentally handicapped.

"Fine, choose your friend over me again."

"I'm sure you'll find something to occupy yourself," I say.

#

I meet Corey for a picnic in the same park where the antique market was held. He brings the food and several stout beers.

"I hope you like what I made," he says. He unfolds a large blue blanket and lays it on the ground under an oak tree. I sit across from him, the wicker picnic basket between us. The air smells sweet tonight, like jasmine.

“As long as you didn’t bring lima beans, I’m happy,” I say.

Corey’s eyes widen, and he bites his bottom lip. “I made my mother’s famous lima bean casserole,” he says.

“Oh ... Well, I’ll try it ... ”

He grins. “I’m kidding. Lima beans are gross,” he says. “I made lobster bisque for our first course.”

“This is a multi-course meal?” I ask. “Impressive.”

Corey pulls out two soup mugs and two spoons. I taste the bisque and roll my eyes back in happiness. It’s the best bisque I’ve ever tasted, somewhat creamy with just the right amount of saltiness. “God, are you a chef?” I ask.

“I’m the oldest of five siblings and I have two working parents. They made me help out by cooking a lot, and I actually really got to like it.” He smiles at me. I can tell he knows he’s impressed me, that most women are impressed by a man who likes to cook.

“I can hardly make a turkey sandwich,” I say. “My b—my ex-boyfriend did all the cooking and I never learned how.”

“I can teach you,” he says.

“You’d get fed up. I’m pretty food-illiterate.”

“I have patience.”

Once we finish the bisque, Corey pulls out two square Tupperwares filled with salad. The lettuce is dark, topped by onions, cucumbers, broccoli, dried cranberries, and apple slices. “There aren’t any tomatoes,” I say.

He puts his hand to his head and says, “I knew I forgot something! I hate tomatoes and so I never include them. I meant to put them in for you, though.”

“No,” I say. “I hate them, too.”

There are a few birds still awake, tweeting and dashing about. Oak trees in the distance look like shadows on the dark blue sky. I say the one thing that’s bothering me: “Do you play a lot of computer games?”

“Just Solitaire,” he says. “I like some console games, I guess, but I’ve never been a big video game person. I prefer outdoor games and music.”

“Outdoor games and music, huh?”

“Soccer, baseball, football even. And yes, I enjoy a music show here and there.”

“Is there anything you’d just die over if you had to live without?”

Corey thinks for a few seconds and makes a show of it by scratching his head and looking up in the air. “You’re gonna call me a total hippie.”

“You’re a pot head.”

“No, no, no. Love. I know it sounds lame and like a line. I just, well, growing up was kind of hard for me. Even though both of my parents worked, they had crappy jobs and didn’t make a lot of money. With five kids, what’s already not-a-lot-of-money stretches pretty thin. But they were always so encouraging and supportive. When other people told me to be a science major, my parents encouraged me to do film, like I wanted. Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No,” I say.

“You’re missing out,” he says. “Siblings are the best. There’s always someone on your side. You always have friends if you have them. There’s always someone who knows the intricacies of your childhood and who can relate to you.”

“Well, now you’ve got me all jealous,” I say.

Corey laughs. “I guess what I’m trying to say is I could live without most things. Well, not food or water, obviously. But if I never watched another baseball game, I’d miss it but I wouldn’t cry about it. I’d cry if someone hurt my little brothers or sisters.”

“Well, that’s a reasonable approach to life,” I say. As it gets darker, he pulls a lantern out of his messenger bag. He lights the small tealight candle inside.

“Ready for the main course?” he asks. When I nod, he pulls out two more Tupperwares. Inside are stuffed peppers and chicken breasts. I haven’t eaten this well in a while.

“So, what could you just not live without?” he asks.

I don’t hesitate before saying, “My hair straightener.”

He laughs. “I’m serious.” I grab a few locks of my hair and say, “This doesn’t look like this on its own. I’m like the crazy hair monster after I shower. And love too, I guess.”

“You guess.” He grins.

“I can’t top love,” I say. “You’re really making me wish I had a brother or sister now.”

“One day you’ll meet mine,” he says. For once his face is serious. There isn’t a grin to be found. His phone rings, but he silences it and puts it away.

“You can answer,” I say.

“I don’t want to,” he says. “I’m already talking to the person I want to be talking to.”

For dessert he made chocolate cake with chocolate icing. “I just had a hunch you liked chocolate,” he says.

“Is it because I’m a woman?”

“Yes. Does that make me sexist?”

“Mostly I think it just makes you smart,” I say.

When we're almost done, I'm still craving more. "Give me an extra bite of your piece and I'll bring cookies next time."

"How about I just give you an extra piece and you bring yourself next time?"

I want to ask him what he's playing at, but don't. After we finish eating, we each have a mint and lie down on the blanket together. While looking up towards the moon, he holds my hand. We turn towards each other and right there, on a blanket on the ground, Corey and I have our first kiss.

#

A week later, Tom and I are sitting on the couch watching TV. I don't even ask Tom if he wants to have dinner with me. Instead, I just say, "I'm going out with Jennifer again."

"Jennifer again!" he says.

"You're probably not hungry anyway."

"Maybe I am." He smiles at me and moves his eyebrows up and down.

"How about I let you play your video game without complaining about it for the next week," I say. "If you let me go out to dinner tonight without trying to make me feel bad."

"A whole week?" He grabs Muffy out of my arms and lets her down onto the floor.

"A whole week." I'm thinking about how much I can hang out with Corey Hart all week. Part of me hopes Tom won't take the offer, that he'll tell me he doesn't need that much video game playing. Then I won't have to hang out with Corey to be less lonely.

But he does, he takes the offer, and I decide at that moment what I'm going to do.

"Remember the guy I've been seeing behind your back and having sex with?" I say.

"Mhm," Tom says. He's feeding Muffy.

“If you let me fall in love with him and leave you, I’ll let you play video games without me interrupting them forever.”

Tom doesn’t say anything at first. The corner of his mouth twitches and he doesn’t look at me. After a minute of silence he laughs and says, “Okay, Blue Jay. We have a deal.”

I look down, then up, and breathe deeply. It’s not a deal I ever wanted to make, but now it feels unbreakable.

PRISCILLA'S POEMS

When Krista picks me up from my parents' home to bring me an hour northwest to Orlando, I make sure to bring as much of my closet as I can fit. There are jean skirts with raggedy edges that I cut; bright halter tops; studded belts; aquamarine boots; fishnet stockings; size-zero jeans; and a tight black dress. I threw everything I could into department store bags and now we're packing it away in the trunk of the new Camry her parents bought her for high school graduation. My parents sometimes let me borrow their car, but I don't have my own. In the back seat, I place my makeup bag, fuller than most girls', with bright eyeshadows, glittery mascara, black eyeliner, and lots of foundation. I am moving into Krista's bedroom.

"I'm always amazed by the amount of stuff you have," Krista says as she slings my last bag (full of shoes) into the trunk.

"I tried to pack light," I say. When Krista visits me she usually only has one bag.

Krista has the kind of look I wish I had. She's pale like soft tissues with a few light freckles littered over the bridge of her nose like little flakes of cocoa. I have dark Puerto Rican skin. I could never get as pale as her. She tells me, *But I could never get as dark as you. So we're even.* Her eyes are green as jade but sometimes, depending on her outfit, they can look blue like the ocean in Jamaica. I haven't been there but Krista's parents took her on a cruise there and she couldn't stop talking about the clear aqua water. Mine are always the same dark brown, shaped as if God took my mother's Japanese eyes and my father's Hispanic eyes and mushed them together, so they're big and wide and pointed on the sides. Her hair is black and she doesn't have blond highlights like I do. She's taller than me too, but we weigh about the

same amount—ninety-eight pounds. We share size-zeros and feel fat if we go above one hundred pounds. I wish I could look like Krista, but she says the same about me.

The drive goes quickly, partly because Krista is a fast driver—too fast—and partly because we are singing songs about love and sex and dying inside. Those are the things we care about. Krista is studying history at the university, and she says love and sex and dying inside are what history is all about too. That and war. I am studying nothing in particular at the local community college-but I do keep a notebook of poetry. Maybe one day that'll mean something.

#

Before we go to meet our boyfriends, who are roommates and close friends, we spend time going through each other's clothes and makeup. She chooses one of the miniskirts I stole from Hollister with a frayed end. Then she grabs one of her own black, collared, button-down shirts so that she doesn't look too slutty. She's more modest than me. She puts a three-row studded belt around the skirt that rests on her hips and not in the belt loops. Classic Krista; she finishes her outfit with a pair of dirty old Chucks she's had since her feet stopped growing-probably in ninth or tenth grade. I wish I could dress like her. She says the same to me.

I write in my black notebook: *The pale moon sprinkles light over torn rose petals; a small girl dances in the garden with a ghost only she can see while lilies sway in the ocean wind; waves glitter as they collide with the sky, a marriage of diamond-encrusted water and sky of the darkest blue.* Sometimes these images pop into my head. I'm not sure where these words come from.

I slip into a pair of dark jeans, add my own studded belt, and wear a silver and black halter top that I cut so it would be shorter. My shoes are purple cowboy boots with heels that Krista likes to borrow. We go into the bathroom Krista shares with her roommate Jackie to put

makeup on and straighten our hair. We both have wavy, thick hair that we hate but other people love. I keep mine long but Krista so easily pulls off short hair in a style like Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*.

Krista is lining her eyelids with black and I am painting mine with purple. She asks, “Do you know who the man with the prettiest name in American history was?”

When I think of pretty, I can only picture musicians. “Who?” I ask. The yellow light from the bathroom ceiling makes Krista’s skin look unreal, as if she has turned to pure gold.

“Elijah P. Lovejoy. It sounds even prettier when you say it with a Charleston accent.”

“Say it like that,” I say.

“No,” Krista says; then she laughs. I am always amazed at her knowledge of random historical facts. She got the top score on her American History and European History AP exams but she’s re-taking them at university anyway because she finds them so interesting. When people ask her what she plans on doing with a history degree, she says, *Run for president*. She insists all politicians should be required to hold an American history degree.

“He was an abolitionist. It’s a shame he was murdered,” she says.

“Was he hot?” I ask.

“God no,” she says. “Now Alexander Hamilton--*He* was hot.” Krista is always getting crushes on dead men: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Dickinson, to name a few.

When we finish painting our faces and hairspraying our locks, Krista knocks on Jackie’s door. “Hey girlie!” Jackie says.

Jackie is Puerto Rican like me but she used to be a cheerleader so she doesn't wear as much makeup as I do. I wonder which of us Krista thinks is prettier than the other. Jackie tells us to come into her room.

Jackie's room is what I'd imagine the ocean would look like if you separated the blues from the greens. Her bedspread is blue with lightning green stripes on it. There are blue and bright green plastic circles hanging from the ceiling. Her lamp is bright green and her trash can is blue. Her room must be what acid trips look like to people who can only see blue and green. Krista likes acid the best of all the drugs because she likes mental trips. I prefer the physicality of ecstasy.

Krista's room is much calmer than Jackie's. She has a dark red and green plaid comforter, a wooden desk, and incense that is always burning. The best things about Krista's room are the pictures. I wrote a letter to the Skittles company complaining that Skittles don't actually taste like rainbows and she pinned a copy of it up there. She has some pictures of musicians she loves too. Jackie doesn't have anything on her walls.

"You working tonight?" Krista asks as we sit down on Jackie's oceanic bed. Jackie is at her computer messing around on Myspace. Yesterday Krista commented on Jackie's Myspace page about hanging out, and I have to admit it made me jealous. Sometimes I want to be Krista's only good friend. I like Jackie, though. She works as a shot girl somewhere downtown. Basically she just has to look cute and sell shots outside the bar to get people to come inside. Maybe now that I'm moving up here, I can get a job like that.

"Yep," Jackie says. "Then after I get out I have to hit up a few people who wanna buy."

“We’ll buy right now,” Krista says. When Jackie goes to her closet to get her stash, I can feel my veins lighting up like lightning is rushing through them. Just thinking about putting the powder up my nose makes me feel like I’m already on it. My hands shake with anticipation.

“Have some of mine while I weigh this out,” Jackie says, pointing to a plate with a rolled up twenty dollar bill and a small pile of cocaine on her desk. “How much did you want? A gram?”

“Eh, fuck it,” Krista says. “I’ll take an eight ball.”

My boyfriend, Sam texts me: “When are you coming over?”

I text back: “Very soon, love.”

He asks who I’m with and I tell him Krista and Jackie. He asks if any boys are around and I tell him no.

I remember Krista telling me an eight ball is three and a half grams. From dealers who aren’t Jackie, one gram usually costs about forty unless the dealer is an asshole and then it’s fifty. Some try to charge sixty but Krista laugh in their faces. I don’t say anything because they scare me. Jackie’s is the best anyway because she doesn’t cut it with No-Doz or anything else.

Krista goes over to Jackie’s desk and uses a razor blade to make two perfect lines. She snorts the first one in one big motion and then hands me the dollar bill. We know not to share straws with most people-but since we know each other and Jackie, we don’t really mind sharing with each other.

The twenty feels like a scared stiletto that’s soon going to bring me nutrients. I unroll it so I can roll it myself. I look at the man on the front. “Is this Hamilton?” I ask.

Krista laughs. “No, that’s Jackson. Not cute.”

“He looks like Hugh Grant,” I say. I roll up the twenty as quickly as I can, my hands still shaking. Unlike Krista and Jackie, I can’t take a whole line in one snort. I manage half and it’s like an explosion in my body—electric blue and pink confetti flying around, my heart beating like in a cartoon, fireworks in my head—and, oh my God, this is what I’ve been missing! I can feel words wanting to come up—I want to talk about anything—ponies or music or my dead grandmother or tile grout ... I don’t even care about the sour drip falling down the back of my throat.

“How much for the eight ball?” Krista asks.

The stuff never seems to affect her as much as it affects me. She’s always been like one of the boys. She can handle as much as them if not more; well, probably more. She’s a lot like a boy, really, except for how she looks. She told me she used to wish she was a boy because they get treated better.

“For you guys? Ninety,” Jackie says.

“You sure?” Krista asks.

“I just love this lamp,” I say, admiring the bright green oval-shaped lamp. I couldn’t help it—something had to come out. “I love green. It’s Krista’s favorite color and I mean it’s not my favorite color but I still like it a lot.”

Jackie laughs. “Thanks. And yeah, I’m sure. Ninety.”

I know ninety dollars is a deal for an eight ball because if one gram is usually forty on the street, then three and a half grams would be something like one hundred and forty, less a discount for buying so much. When I’m not around, Krista goes on runs with Jackie to pick up bags from the big dealers, so she knows how much Jackie spends and she knows for a fact that Jackie never upcharges us.

“Give me two Xanax bars too,” Krista says, and I know she’s asking for these for the comedown. She doesn’t like to experience the comedown and I can’t blame her. After we pay, we use the bathroom because doing cocaine is like doing coffee but not.

On the way downtown to our boyfriends’ house, I write in my notebook: *Flames unite to tie the souls together; When we’re together it’s like being in a treehouse; It hurts and it’s beautiful like war and birth.*

Ben is Krista’s boyfriend and Sam is mine. Krista stole Ben away from a girl who was deeply in love with him but she swore she didn’t mean to. It was obvious when Krista and Ben met that something was going to happen. They always looked each other in the eyes with intensity and right away Ben took to caring for Krista—he never let her drive home if she’d been drinking, and instead would offer her his bed while he slept on the couch. Krista said Ben made the first move because she doesn’t go after taken guys. The other girl was nice and I liked her. Krista felt like I took the girl’s side over hers. I didn’t; I just didn’t want my best friend to be that kind of girl. Sometimes I am jealous of Ben because I know when I am not there he is with Krista and they are growing closer.

When I first saw Sam I thought he was one of the most beautiful men I’d ever seen. He is half Puerto Rican like me but half English too and somehow he has blond hair, blue eyes, and light skin that tans easily. Ben is also half Puerto Rican and he has dark hair and skin like me, but he has a bigger nose and Krista says we both have the softest skin she’s ever felt. Both of the boys are trophies. Ben seems happier, though. Sam spends long periods of time feeling a depth of self-hate that I cannot soothe. He will lock himself away for hours or days and he will insist that I do not love him. No amount of words can convince him otherwise. But when he’s happy, he is sensitive and loving and speaks with a softer voice.

Ben and Sam rent rooms from an older gentleman who lives here with his car. The older gentleman is away on business. Ben and Sam could never afford a house like this on their own. Ben was abused by his mother and abandoned at seventeen and Sam says his mother kicked him out at sixteen. Krista is attracted to Ben's suffering but all I want is for Sam to feel happy. Sam is bisexual, and once he told me he used to have a crush on Ben, but Ben is straight so Sam got over it.

I can smell pork cooking in the kitchen but I'm not very hungry. Ben likes to cook because he thinks Krista doesn't eat enough. She eats a lot, really, just not in front of him. I used to be bulimic but I'm not anymore. "You two have to eat up," he tells us. "Because we have a surprise for you." The boys fix us plates of pork and green beans and carrots while Krista and I play *Halo* on their television. She is better than me at every video game except this one, but that's because I've practiced more. I like being better than her at something.

When my stomach grumbles I put my hand to it and I am reminded of the abortion I had in high school. Every so often the memory returns to me like an unwelcome drunk visitor. Krista drove me to the clinic and took care of me afterwards. It occurs to me that I could have a three-year-old kid. There was life and then the fetus was gone and there was still life—mine.

Ben and Sam's calls of, "Dinner's ready!" help jolt me out of my memories. I try to force down food because Ben keeps saying Krista and I don't eat well and we need to be more healthy. Ben used to struggle with drugs but when he was with the girl Krista stole him from he stopped doing them altogether. On the night he met Krista, they did hydroponic mushrooms together and ended up painting a stranger's wall with their fingers for hours. He has been taking drugs recreationally now. Sam holds my hand under the table and when I get up to bring my plate to the sink, he kisses me and tells me he missed me. The only other person I've had

feelings for as strongly as I have for Sam was the boyfriend who impregnated me in high school. That's why I hate when Sam accuses me of not loving him or of not giving him enough affection. Krista says she has feelings for Ben but that they're *not married or anything*. I don't know if it's that she can't feel as strongly as I do about a man or that she chooses not to.

"Let's go into my bedroom," Ben says. Ben's bedroom is the best of all of ours. He is an artist and a photographer. He has been painting the walls in his room in designs that remind me of my poetry sometimes. There are loops, shapes like fire, dots encompassed by half-circles, waves, and brilliant colors—green, blue, red, orange, purple, black. He lets friends paint on his wall too so there are remainders of past visitors. Krista won't paint on it.

In the middle of the room is Ben's bed, which has a dark blue comforter and white sheets. I can't help but picture the time I walked in to wake Krista up and saw them sleeping; he was faced towards her in the middle of the bed and she was as close to the edge as she could get, facing away. Their black hair looked like holes in the white pillows.

On the bed I notice a crate filled with water bottles, three sets of glowsticks tied to shoe strings, and a little baggy filled with a powder that is green and brown and yellow and purple. "So what's this?" I ask.

"You guys said you wanted to try trail mix," Sam says. "Here it is."

"What's in it again?" I ask. I feel nervous but also protected being around the three of them. Even though Ben is not my boyfriend, he is protective of me. I think he sees me like a sister. Sometimes I think of him in other ways but I try to ignore that. Maybe it's just because I'm used to sharing everything with Krista, but he is one thing she gets to have that I don't. Sam does not allow me to hang out with Ben alone because he worries.

“Ecstasy, crystal meth, and ketamine,” Ben says. “I got it from the biggest dealer in Orlando.”

I know Ben is good friends with this man, who is an older gay gentleman with a respectable day job, and who used to send him on drug runs to other states. Ben remembers sleeping in a pile of money in a nice hotel one night on their way back to Orlando. He will not divulge his friend’s name because he’s not allowed to.

Sam puts his arm around me and I love the way he feels against me. I wonder if we will get married. I always wanted to be married by twenty-one. Krista thinks I’m crazy. She doesn’t want to be married until she is at least thirty. I think thirty is old. She thinks thirty is ready. I notice that Krista and Ben are not very affectionate when Sam and I are around. It’s like they still think they have to hide their relationship from everyone.

I can feel myself needing another line of cocaine and it’s making me feel bad about myself. I pull Krista into the bathroom and shut the door. “Am I pretty?” I ask. I can feel how pathetic I’m being and I hate myself for it, but I can’t help it.

“You’re not just pretty,” Krista says, staring me straight in the eyes. “You’re the most beautiful person I know. Now stop doubting yourself.”

“You’re the most beautiful person I know too,” I say. And it’s true. We hug and I kiss her on the cheek. “I love you,” I say.

“I love you too,” she says. Krista has not said this to a boy. One said it to her in high school and she only hugged him back. Ben said it to her once and she kissed him but never responded. Krista has seen Ben cry. I get the feeling she has stronger feelings for him than she claims.

In the bedroom, the boys are already wearing comfortable sweat pants and cotton T-shirts. We slip into the same in the bathroom. They have divided up the contents of the trail mix baggy into eight lines. Krista throws her bag of coke on the dresser. We will go to that when the trail mix runs out to keep our high going. The line I'm about to take looks like a drug rainbow. Ben hands me a ten dollar bill. I ask Krista, "Is this Hamilton?"

She says, "Yes," and nods.

He *is* hot," I say. Hamilton and I scoop up as much as we can get at once. The trail mix is rougher going down and the drip is more intense, but I feel instantly in love with ... with everything. After the others take their first two lines, we turn the lights up and break the glowsticks. Ben turns on some techno and drum and bass music. All we want to do is dance. I think, *It's funny that if alcohol were legal to us, we'd simply be hanging out playing pool at a bar right now.* And now I am in love with everyone. I can't let go of Sam except to do my glowstick routine. It's like I'm fused to him. Ben is making sure we're all okay, checking water and getting blankets. Ben and Krista are caretakers.

We set up the blankets on the floor like it's a little bed for the viewers while one person stands on the bed and makes the glowsticks and shoelaces move in all sorts of directions. The trails are art. My style is slower and more circular while Krista's is erratic and quick. Sam's is circular like mine but quicker. Ben's is the best because he's had the most practice. He goes between circular and erratic and it's fast until he wants to slow down and then pick up the pace back up. For some reason it feels like Sam and I aren't together and Krista and Ben aren't together. It feels like we are all just very good friends. When Krista gets a text message from Jackie, she ignores it and I smile.

Soon the boys are wearing only boxers and Krista and I are only wearing bras and panties because we are so hot. There is nothing sexual about it, which part of me thinks is strange. But the lights dance around the room and when I'm not dancing all I can think about is dancing and I want to knock Sam off the bed so it can be *my turn* again, but I don't. We keep taking bumps and lines and it goes on until the clock says it's seven AM, but Ben has black curtains over the window so no light leaks in. The boys go looking through the house to find more glowsticks since the lights in ours are running out. I saw Ben kiss Krista's head before he left. Sam watched him, frowning.

With the music turned down and no one dancing, I look at Krista who is twisting a glowstick through her fingers. The room must smell like sweat but I don't notice it. All I can think about is how much I love this girl. And then it occurs to me what I want to do. I stand up and walk over to her, grab her face, and kiss her. My tongue moves around in her mouth and I'm thinking, *My God, she is a good kisser*. I pull away and she's looking at me like I just told her there's life on Mars. Then she giggles.

"You know," she says, "part of me is surprised we've been best friends for so long and this is the first time we've ever kissed."

"You're a good kisser," I say.

She giggles again. "So are you." But I can tell she doesn't want it to happen again and I don't understand my feelings but I know right here and now that she doesn't feel anything but sisterly love for me. Any other feeling she harbors are for Ben. Her giggles are high-pitched and awkward and they hurt.

When Sam walks in I realize I don't care, that I just want to see him, that I must be confused because I'm high. Maybe he and I will get married and have a baby. I'm twenty and I

want that to happen soon. Yes, I am desperately in love with Sam. He is desperately in love with me. It will work out so well. He asks, “Did you miss me?” and I say, “So much.”

Soon we have run out of drugs and we are tired. Sam and I have constructed a bed of an old comforter and pillows on the floor next to Ben’s bed where he and Krista sleep. I imagine Sam and me in cave people times, where he would have built this bed and built shelter around us. In cave people times, we would have had children by now. But Sam might be off impregnating other women too. Maybe Krista. My family is Christian but I believe in evolution. They don’t. When I had my abortion, I told my parents it was a miscarriage. They loved me despite the miscarriage. My mom said teenage pregnancy was a curse because I didn’t pray enough. Krista is not religious and neither is her family.

My head is fuzzy. Sam, Krista, and Ben smoke pot together to fall asleep but I don’t smoke the stuff. It makes me feel paranoid. They make fun of me for taking so many drugs but not being able to handle pot. My head is nuzzled in Sam’s shoulder, no covers on us while the fan and our sweat cool us down. There’s water by our makeshift bed but I’m too exhausted to move.

#

When I wake up, Sam is sitting on Ben’s bed and Krista is chasing Ben out of the bedroom. “What’s wrong? What happened?” Krista is saying. Sam gazes after them.

I have to wait to know what happened. Sam says, “Ben thinks I was watching them have sex. No point in going out there to ask yourself.” He sounds angry.

“Were you?” I ask. It wouldn’t surprise me, to be honest. It occurs to me that the room smells like body odor and humidity.

“I heard a noise. I got curious. I looked up to see what was happening and he freaked out. Drugs make Ben paranoid.”

I don't believe him. I know Sam loves Ben and Ben loves Krista and Krista loves me and I love her and she loves Ben probably and I love Sam and I love me and she doesn't seem to love herself, or maybe it's the other way around completely. It's all too confusing. The comforter rubs against my leg and I let out a small noise of exhaustion. It sounds like static in the room. Sam leaves and comes back. “They're smoking Menthols on the porch.”

“Are they mad?” I ask.

“Ben is. Krista looks scared. Or confused. Fuck them.”

“Ben probably feels like you invaded their space. Why even look?” I ask.

Sam frowns at me. “So you're accusing me too? You think I'm like that?”

“Sam, sweetie, I'm just trying to explain to you how Ben probably feels,” I say. I put my hand on his shoulder but he shrugs it off.

“Don't touch me if you're going to be a bitch,” he says.

I hate that word. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it. My mom calls me that. “Please don't call me that,” I say.

“Then don't be one,” he says. “Why don't you just go join Krista and Ben if you're going to side with them. It's not like you give a shit about me anyway.”

“Where is this coming from? I love you more than anyone in the world.” I cry, first lightly, then more strongly.

“Faker,” Sam says. He pushes me. This isn't the first time he's pushed me, but it's the first time I've fallen over from his pushes.

I feel bad that I hope Krista and Ben are fighting. I decide to go see what they're doing. When I leave the bedroom, Sam says, "Good, go."

Though I'm hoping Krista and Ben aren't getting along, that's not what I see through the sliding glass door leading to the back porch. Krista sits on Ben's lap. They both have cigarettes in their hands. Ben pulls Krista closer and they kiss. Though their lips part, their faces linger together, their noses rubbing. His hand rests on her back. I interrupt them by opening the door. They pull apart.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

"Fine," Krista says.

"Are you all right?" Ben asks. "You look shaken up."

"I'm fine," I say. I let them see that I've been crying. I need their attention.

But it seems that in the darkness they can't see the small tear stains on my face because Krista just says, "We'll be in later."

I go back inside and shut the sliding glass door. When I turn back to look at them, they are hugging. I can tell that Ben is holding Krista tightly because his muscle is flexing. Her face is against his, her eyes closed, a small smile on her face. I open the door again.

"I forgot to ask if you guys needed anything," I say.

"We're fine, thanks," Krista says. She looks annoyed that I interrupted them again.

I go back inside and make my way to Sam's and my makeshift bed. He is pretending to be asleep. I lie next to him and push my body against his. He pulls me in close.

"Sam?" I say in the darkness.

"Yeah?"

"Do you love me?"

“Yeah.”

I hope Krista isn't mad at me, but I know she isn't. We don't fight much but if we do we still love each other. I push our kiss and her kisses with Ben out of my mind. My body hurts and I wonder what she did with those Xanaxes. It doesn't matter.

I turn away from Ben's wall—the swirling colors hurt my tender eyes. While Sam sits on the bed I can't stop thinking about my notebook and things I want to say. I find it from within my purse and pull out a thick black pen. *Fragile connections like a failing bridge/ softness surpassing cotton roses/ has betrayed me/ but one iron strong resolution/ stands tall in your light eyes/ and I know it was wrong and it wasn't what I wanted/ but you're a book I'll keep near me like the beach keeps seashells with endless secrets cupped inside.*

With Krista and Ben outside, I sleep.

SCATTERED

Devon stood in the kitchen holding a warm ceramic cup of coffee. She felt weighed down from the continuous rain as she tried not to stare at Anna, the girl of eleven she was going to babysit soon. June, Anna's mother, was in her office on a business call that had seemingly come from nowhere, like an afternoon thunderstorm. The immediate importance of the call made Devon feel inadequate and unsuccessful. She was a twenty-two-year-old babysitter, making a dollar more now than she did at sixteen, when she had not been a babysitter but a hostess at a restaurant near the beach. Her phone vibrated—it would be Sean, her boyfriend—but she ignored it.

Devon had found June's ad online. It had read: "Looking for babysitter for well-behaved eleven-year-old girl. Needed five nights a week (Mon.-Fri.). Call for interview."

Devon had just graduated college with a business degree, art history minor, and was finding it difficult to get a job that didn't involve flipping burgers or selling clothes, making fifty cents higher than minimum wage, whereas Sean was already a successful lawyer. He had secured a job before he even took the bar. Devon felt inadequate, wandering their apartment all day with no real direction while he worked. He often told her that he didn't mind paying for everything, which only made her feel worse and more useless. It wasn't a definite, anyway, that he'd always be around. And so, when she saw the babysitting ad, she thought, *This is something I can do. No customers, the freedom to sit down and answer my phone whenever I want, no managers.* She'd never babysat before and was worried that her lack of experience would work against her.

Devon and June met at a café near the hospital where June worked as some sort of executive—Devon couldn't remember the specifics, only that June made a lot of money and wore nice suits. In their interview, June had asked a long line of questions, making Devon feel like she was in a job interview for something much more important than babysitting—though she supposed that to a parent, babysitting was the most important job. June was conducting a background check on Devon and even tossed around the idea of calling Devon's parents to ask them about her character. This made Devon a bit queasy, as she hadn't talked to her parents much since she graduated.

June asked Devon what she would do in all sorts of emergency situations. She even asked her which subjects she excelled in most, to be sure she could help Anna with her homework if needed. Devon did provide her with three references, which June called that day. They met two more times after that to get to know each other before June finally invited Devon over to meet Anna. During their meetings, Devon never felt that she got to know June very well. Rather, June was getting to know her almost too well. Devon had let some things slip—her lack of motivation to find a job relevant to her degree, the partying she'd done early in college, her lack of even middle-school scientific knowledge—but June seemed to like her enough.

The biggest question Devon had, that went unanswered, was where Anna's father was. June had never mentioned him, though she wore a wedding ring. Had he left them? Died? Was June holding him captive in some sort of dungeon? Devon's own father had died in a boating accident when she was fourteen during a surprise November thunderstorm. When she was little, he had taught her how to swim and how to drive a boat.

Anna sat at the table, her hair as black and sleek as June's new Mercedes, some of it tied back in a small ponytail resting on the remaining strands of hair. Her eyes were almost as dark, on a pale white face with light freckles on a head shaped like a squash.

"So Anna," Devon finally said, "how's school going?" She didn't know how to talk to children, had never bothered with them, was the only child in her own family, and thought her own greeting lame.

"Call me Ann, please," Anna said. "I hate Anna, it's a child's name." Her voice was deeper than most girls' her own age, but still soft and childlike underneath its harshness.

"Sure," Devon said. "Sorry, your mom calls you Anna so I just assumed..."

"She refuses to acknowledge my requests. If it were up to her, I'd remain a child forever."

Devon wanted to inform the girl that she *was* a child and really shouldn't try to grow up too fast, but didn't think Anna—Ann—would appreciate her input. Instead, she tried to recuperate from Anna's disapproval and stared at the rain, setting her full cup of coffee down on the granite counter. The wall parallel to the kitchen was essentially several huge window panes that looked out to the lustrous backyard. Imported granite boulders sat on the grass and everything was perfectly landscaped, complete with a flower garden and bushes whose precise shapes could rival Disney foliage. The rain fell over the stones and oak trees, which were connected by Spanish moss like spider webs, making Devon feel she wasn't in Orlando, but in a house in the middle of the woods. She liked it but was afraid at the same time.

Anna got up from the kitchen table and opened the refrigerator door. It was then that for the first time Devon noticed not only how short she was, but how strangely she dressed for a girl her age. When other girls would have been wearing colorful short shorts and T-shirts, Anna

wore what looked like a uniform dress for a private school—yet it was not a school day, and the dress did not have the emblem of her private school on it. Devon wondered again where Anna’s father was. Maybe he worked even more hours than her mother. Her own father had been absent a lot, out working or, perhaps, doing more leisurely activities. When he was around, he was her hero.

Anna grabbed an orange from a drawer within the fridge and set it down on a paper towel to begin de-skinning. “I apologize,” she said. “I forgot to answer your question. School is ... acceptable. I would prefer that my mother acquiesce to my request to have a private tutor. I’ve found several Ivy League graduates who are available for homeschooling lessons, at a high cost, of course, and I think their lessons would help propel me into the field I’m interested in more quickly than a private school.”

“Oh I see,” Devon said, annoyed with Anna’s pretentiousness. She could feel that Anna fancied herself more intelligent than Devon, but she wanted Anna to know that Devon was the smarter of the two, and just because she hadn’t spoken like a stuffy old philosophy writer at eleven (or even at twenty-two) didn’t mean she was any less brilliant. “What field is that?”

“Medical research.” Anna didn’t elaborate.

“Why doesn’t your mother acquiesce to your request?” Devon refrained from rolling her eyes. Her phone vibrated again, but she didn’t answer it. Sean knew she was meeting the girl for the first time today to be sure they got along well enough.

Anna opened her mouth to speak, but June walked in at that moment, carrying a brief case in one hand and a smartphone in the other. “So, *so* sorry about that,” she said. “Rude, I know, but it was an important call.” She looked simultaneously extraordinarily put together and disheveled—a look Devon had come to expect from her. Her eyeglasses were thick, black, and

trendy. Her suit must have been expensive, picked out with extreme care and consideration for her profession, but the white shirt was untucked and the slate grey sleeves were folded back at the wrist, as if they were too long.

“It’s okay,” Devon said. “I understand.” And she *really* wanted to understand, understand what it was like to be some sort of high-powered executive of some famous company hiring a nanny for your child with a husband who might or might not exist. Once again Devon noticed the classic white gold band encircling June’s wedding finger.

“Do you have any other questions?” June asked, tossing away the orange peels Anna had used her little fingers to pull off. Anna gave June a look of annoyance but kept quiet and nibbled on her orange slices slowly, as if savoring each tiny bite.

“I don’t think so,” Devon said. Since she’d never babysat before, she didn’t know what other information could be important, besides don’t let the kid die and feed it. June had told her plenty during their coffee meets. Devon had purposely looked for someone with an older child anyway, deeming it an easier task. Never had she particularly liked speaking in baby talk to tiny people who pooped in their pants and drooled.

“How’s Monday at seven?” June asked, clamoring for her car keys and fixing Anna’s hair at the same time. Devon wondered what the point of the meeting had even been; June had hardly watched them interact, but who? didn’t mind. The less scrutiny the better.

“That’s fine,” Devon said. She walked out with June and Anna and watched them speed off in June’s brand new car. Instead of answering Sean’s texts, she called Peter, the man she was seeing behind Sean’s back.

#

As Devon shoved a fork full of orange slice, spinach, and walnuts in her mouth, Peter stared at her with a faintly amused smile. “Are you not hungry?” she mumbled with food still in her mouth.

“I’m just thinking,” Peter said. He had begun to grow a bit of scruff on his chin and cheeks, which Devon didn’t mind, kind of liked, but it was the springing up of the neck beard that pissed her off. If she could shave her legs, armpits, and bikini line (at the least) nearly every day, couldn’t he shave his neck? She’d already been rethinking her involvement in the affair, but the neck beard was close to throwing her over.

“Okay,” Devon said. She set her fork down and looked at him. “I’ll bite. What’re you thinking about, Peter?” He still had sexy lips though. She compared Peter and Sean in her mind while she waited for a response, something she did often. Peter had better taste in literature, but Sean had better taste in music. Sean kept his neck shaved religiously. Peter bought chocolates instead of roses for her birthday, knowing she wasn’t the kind of girl to give a damn about dying flowers. Sean was playful, Peter serious. They were both on tracks to success, unlike her.

“Well, you’re a beautiful girl. And you’ve got decent people skills. How would you feel about me getting you a job at my advertising firm? You would be something of a saleswoman. Your degree is in business, yes?”

“Yes it is,” she said, already thinking about how to turn his offer down. The last thing she wanted was to work as a saleswoman with Peter. Which only made her question herself (for about the forty millionth time) about why she had chosen to major in business.

“What was your minor?”

“Art history.” She’d told him that about a dozen times.

“Hmm.” He gazed at some vague point behind her, as if he wasn’t looking at anything at all, but couldn’t take his eyes off the giant wad of nothingness.

Devon suddenly wondered how what had been a purely sexual affair had turned into some sort of real relationship. That was the last thing she wanted, a second boyfriend. She decided right then to break up with Peter, and then almost scoffed out loud at the idea that she would actually have to *break up* with someone who wasn’t even her boyfriend. How had their sweaty, passionate, even *obscene* relationship become—this—this disgusting fabrication of something beyond that? She missed the times when they had had sex in an elevator and then in a public pool.

“Well, I suppose art history could help in advertising quite a bit.”

Devon also knew that the salespeople at the advertising firm Peter worked for were nothing more than door-to-door salespeople, solicitors. People who pretended not to see “No Solicitors” signs outside of businesses.

“I actually got a job,” Devon said, returning to her salad. She stabbed a large chunk of feta cheese and scooped up some spinach.

Peter let out a noise that reminded Devon of a laugh. “Babysitting? Dev, I respect you for doing what you need to do to make money, but I’d hardly consider babysitting a *job*. I mean unless you’re, like, a real nanny or something. Watching some rich woman’s kid hardly qualifies you as employed.”

Devon finished her salad before saying, “Peter, I think we should stop seeing each other.” He objected at first, then accepted their fate, as if he already had the second she considered babysitting a job.

*

“*Baaaabycakespoonpeanut*, lie down, let me put the heating pad on your tummy, and just *rest*. Menstrual cramps are no joke.” Sean ran his fingers through his curly auburn hair and fidgeted with the TV remote in the other hand. He could never just sit down and be quiet.

“I’m okay, really,” Devon said, lying down on the couch despite her claim. She wasn’t okay though. She had already decided (had never really contemplated any other decision) that she would not tell Sean about her affair. Yet, Peter kept calling and texting her and Sean had begun to ask who Peter was. Devon told him he was an old friend from school who had contacted her about an advertising position that she didn’t want to take.

“You have to *rest*, my darling,” Sean said. He patted the pillow under her head, then plugged in a heating pad and laid it on her stomach. Devon was reminded of one of the few personal statements June had made during their second lunch: “I want my daughter to grow up to be whatever she wants to be, of course financially secure on her own, and with a husband—or wife if that’s the way it is—who has the good sense to take care of her even when she’s having the worst period ever.”

Sean said, “That *dreadful* little girl is going to take a lot out of you. Can I get you some tea? Hot soup? Chocolate pie?”

“Thanks, Sean,” Devon said. Sean had always been a doting father, which she enjoyed—she found it balanced out the complete lack of attention she paid most of the world—but lately he seemed even more concerned with her well-being. She wondered if the five pounds she’d put on were noticeable enough for him to think she was depressed or something. Though, really, he’d been this way ever since she’d given up on interviewing for jobs she never had the experience or personality or grades for. “But, I mean, I never said she was ‘*dreadful*.’ Just pretentious as hell.”

“Well that sounds dreadful to me,” he said. Sean’s parents were both doctors, as were his older and younger sisters, making him, as he so gushingly referred to himself, the “black sheep.” Devon was always glad she had no one to compare herself with except friends who she could always cut out of her life. Truth be told, Sean was the only person who had lasted longer than a year or so in her life. They’d been together three years and throughout those years, Devon had let Sean in more than anyone else. His sensitive nature and ability to accept people for who they were kept Devon feeling comfortable with him.

Her phone vibrated again, and this time Sean picked it up. He read aloud, “Plz stop ignrng me, i need 2 tlk 2 u Dvon.” She could feel her heart beating in her stomach. The look of comprehension forming on Sean’s happy-go-lucky face made her sick. She’d never thought about what she was doing wrong while it was happening, just now that she saw the man who had never been unkind to her staring her infidelity in the face—or at least the text message.

“Devon, is there something you’re withholding from me?” he asked.

“I, uh—”

“Is this man stalking you? It’s not natural to call and text someone so often unless they’re *stalking* you. I know you like to do everything on your own, but don’t you remember all those talks we’ve had about letting me help you out? Would you like me to take care of this? I’ll kick his ass.”

“No, no, no,” Devon said, able to breathe again. “He’s not a stalker, he just really thinks I’d be great for the job and doesn’t want to hire someone he doesn’t know. I guess I shouldn’t be ignoring him.”

“Darling,” Sean said, “why, again, did you *not* take the job?”

“It doesn’t fit my personality,” Devon said. For the first time in months, Devon felt as instinctually attracted to Sean as she had when they first started dating. She wished her cramps would go away so she could jump on him, pin him down, and screw him better than she’d ever screwed Peter.

“Well it doesn’t matter to me,” Sean said, grinning and setting the phone back beside her. She imagined ripping his pants off (if only she had that kind of strength) and pushing him down on the couch. “I love you *no matter what*.”

She felt her entire body lighting up and prepared to pounce on him.

“If you’d like me to take care of you for the *rest of our lives*, I’d be thrilled to,” he said.

Devon smiled on the outside. He didn’t get it, either. Her body powered down. His not getting it was much more likeable than Peter’s, but equally detrimental. She would never be able to make Sean understand that she didn’t want to be the type of person who has to be cared for by someone else.

“In fact,” he said, frowning, “I’ve been wanting to ask you something, and I know this isn’t the *right* time, and I’ll redo it the *proper* way later, but what would you say to getting married?”

They’d lived together two years. It seemed logical. And all she knew right then was that she didn’t want to lose this person, even though she wasn’t sure she wanted to keep him forever, either. And so she said, “Yes, I think that might work out.”

*

When Devon arrived at Anna’s house, June had already left five minutes before. Anna let her inside and showed her to the kitchen where June had left a note.

“*Devon-*

Sorry, had to run, dinner in the fridge, anna is already showered, allow her 1 hr of reading before bed, then bedtime is 9:30. call me if anything happens.

-June”

“Well,” Devon said, glancing at Anna, who sat on the stool at the kitchen Bar. “Are you hungry?” It was nearly seven, and Devon was starving. Her nerves hadn’t let her eat lunch. What would she talk about with a child for three hours?

“No,” Anna said. “Not yet.”

“Do you want to play a game or something?” Devon asked.

“If you wish,” Anna said.

Devon wondered if the girl ever smiled. She thought it might be a fun goal to make the girl smile at some point over the course of the night. When her right butt cheek vibrated, she pulled her cell phone from the back pocket of her jeans and saw a text message from Sean. “Good luck tonight, baby, don’t let her give you the run around. Love you.”

It vibrated again almost instantly, only this time the message was from Peter. “Nd 2 tlk 2 u...made BIG mistke by endng things plz call.”

She even despised the way he texted. As if he was a twelve-year-old idiot. Devon giggled as she thought about how much better Anna’s typing skills must be than Peter’s. Even now she couldn’t picture him how she first had. At first, she had seen him in short bursts—only his caramel eyes, only his perfect abs, only his calloused hands (calloused from what she didn’t know; as far as she knew he had always been a spoiled child and was now in anything but a physical career)—and it was only when she began to see him as a whole that she didn’t like what she saw. And his texting etiquette itself made her intensely unattracted to him. Why had she strayed to begin with? She wracked her brain for an answer. She needed to know what had

made it happen. She wasn't unsatisfied with Sean. But no practical reason came to her mind. When her mother had found out about her father's affair, her father's excuse had been, "I'm sorry, I'm a sexual being." At the time, when a thirteen-year-old Devon overheard him saying his to her mother, she'd scoffed and, aside from being grossed out, had thought her father a liar. Now she wondered if she wasn't so different from him herself.

"Excuse me." Anna's voice brought Devon back to reality. "I don't wish to interrupt a daydream or whatever it is that's going on in your mind right now, but was there a specific game you wanted to play?"

"Oh, um, do you want to play Scattergories?" Devon asked.

Anna raised her eyebrows and sighed, then got up from her stool and left the kitchen. Devon texted Sean back, "Thanks, love you too."

Anna returned a minute or so later carrying a red game box.

"I must warn you that not only am I exceptionally good at this game, I don't accept nonsensical answers. If the category is 'business' and the letter is 'r,' I won't accept an answer of 'risky.'"

"But that's a creative answer, not a nonsensical one," Devon said, and then wondered why she was arguing with an eleven-year-old.

"Creativity has its place," Anna said. "And that place is somewhere I am not."

Devon thought back to her art history classes. Her professors had never scorned less creative areas of thought. But in her business and math classes, occasionally professors made comments like, "If you're not prepared to study and understand numbers, real ideas, and facts, then you might want to drop this course and go hang out with the artists. Paint pictures or write about fairies with the rest of the daydreamers." She wondered why they implied that a person

couldn't be both artistic and logical. She remembered a painting she'd done in rebellion of such thought called "The Logical Daydreamer." The painting featured her head with a thoughtful look, a pencil against her jaw, and a flowery, nature-like background. But the detail was done with numbers and equations that one might only notice when looking up close. She'd won an award for the painting and had it published in a literary journal. She had considered sending it to *Money Magazine* but didn't think they'd appreciate it as much as the literary journal.

"You seem really out of it," Anna said. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no," Devon said. "I apologize. I'm here. So, no creative answers, even though the rules on the box say creative answers are allowed."

"Some are permissible," Anna said. "Others are not. Just don't get too ridiculous."

Devon thought about saying, "Yes ma'am!" and saluting the girl, but nodded at her instead. They went into the living room and sat down at the marble table in the middle. Devon tried to remember how to play as she grabbed a pencil and pad of paper. She would have until the timer ran out to write something for each category listed beginning with the letter predetermined by a roll of a die. Anna removed the die (which had letters instead of numbers on it) and a small hourglass.

"You want to roll the die?" Devon asked.

"You may roll if you like. I've found that most people find some joy in rolling it, and I really couldn't care less about it."

Devon found herself holding back from letting out a deep sigh. *Fine*, she thought, *I will roll, because it's fun to be the die roller*. She rolled a "G." "Are you ready?" she asked.

"Yes," Anna said.

“No peeking at my answers,” Devon joked. Anna scoffed. “Okay go!” She turned over the hourglass and began furiously scribbling words on her list. By the end of the timer, her list looked like:

1. BOY’S NAME: Gary
2. SANDWICH: Greek
3. CELEBRITY: Glenn Close
4. EXCUSES FOR GETTING OUT OF WORK: Got lost
5. ACRONYMS: GAAP (generally accepted accounting principles)
6. WORDS ENDING IN –N: Grin
7. THINGS THAT HAVE STRIPES: ~~Giraffes~~
8. MATH TERMS: Geometry
9. THINGS IN THIS ROOM: Girl
10. COMPUTER SOFTWARE: Gamma correction
11. COUNTRIES: Germany
12. SPICY FOODS: ~~gnocchi greek olives graham~~ ???

“How did you do?” Devon asked.

“I got all of them,” Anna said.

“I’ll call mine out first, then you,” Devon said. She wasn’t surprised when Anna had a problem with her second answer.

“‘Greek’ is an ethnicity, not a type of sandwich,” Anna argued.

“A Greek sandwich has olives, feta, beef, olive oil, peppers, and other stuff on it. It’s a very specific sandwich, and my personal favorite.”

Anna just shook her head. “It doesn’t count. Now, see, I put gyro which is a type of Greek sandwich.”

“Well, if you want to get technical, a gyro is a wrap. And are you saying that I couldn’t have put a Cuban sandwich by that same logic?” She felt her face getting hot. A vibrating in her back pocket reminded her, though, that this was only a game with a child.

Peter texted, “Plz txt bak!!! nd 2 tlk 2 u now!!!!!!!!” She sighed.

“Listen, I need to go make a phone call. Why don’t you mark every answer of mine that you have a problem with?”

“Sure,” Anna said.

Devon took her phone out to the foyer and called Peter. “Why won’t you stop texting me?” she said as soon as he answered. She tried to keep her voice down so Anna wouldn’t hear. Her voice echoed in the large foyer.

“I don’t want things to end with us. I think we could be really great together,” he said. His voice sounded shaky, like he had been crying.

“I don’t want to be with you, though. I want to stay with my boyfriend.”

“Well then I’m willing to tell him about us.”

“You bite your tongue!” Devon almost shouted. “If you say one word to him, I’ll never speak to you again. Ever. No matter what you do to try and make me.”

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

“As long as it’s before six. I have to babysit at seven.” She figured it was the only way to be sure he wouldn’t tell Sean about their affair. She’d meet him, and in their meeting she’d use her charm to convince him to keep his mouth shut.

After Peter agreed, Devon walked back to the living room. Anna sat with her legs crossed on the floor. Upon the mantle above the fireplace Devon noticed it-a picture of Anna, looking much younger, June, looking sincerely happy with a wide smile and pink cheeks, and a man. June and the man sat huddled together in Christmas garb while Anna sat half on June's leg and half on the man's leg. Where was the man?

Devon's Scattergories paper had only six answers without a big "X" over them. "Are you kidding me?" she said.

Anna crossed her arms, looking bored. "I'd be happy to explain why I couldn't accept most of your answers."

"Give me your paper," Devon said. She grabbed Anna's answers and looked through them.

1. BOY'S NAME: Gil
2. SANDWHICH: Gyro
3. CELEBRITY: Gary Oldman
4. EXCUSES FOR GETTING OUT OF WORK: Gall bladder surgery
5. ACRONYMS: GRE (graduate record examination)
6. WORDS ENDING IN -N: German
7. THINGS THAT HAVE STRIPES: Graph
8. MATH TERMS: Greatest common factor
9. THINGS IN THIS ROOM: Globe
10. COMPUTER SOFTWARE: Gamma correction
11. COUNTRIES: Ghana
12. SPICY FOODS: Green chili peppers

“The boy’s name you picked is Gil?” Devon said. She frowned and bit her tongue, trying not to laugh. “Who’s named Gil?”

Anna’s shoulders slumped a bit and her eyes cast downward, her flat-line mouth curling towards her chin. She picked herself back up and smiled, showing little white teeth. “My dad. I’m hungry now, Devon. Will you make me dinner?”

Devon wanted to pry, but didn’t. After she and Anna ate dinner—a lasagna with a note on the cover that said, “To: June, Please enjoy, Love, Heddy”—Anna read in her bedroom for a bit, then fell asleep. Devon looked through magazines in the living room and checked on Anna twice. She couldn’t concentrate much, though, on the pages she was looking through. Her father was on her mind more than he had been since the year he died. Most of her memories of him involved going out on his boat. He called her his “first mate” and taught her how to steer. They hadn’t done much else together. Instead, Devon’s mother had done most of the raising. Other than boating, her father liked to read to her before bed, when he was home. She had longed for those nights and looked forward to them like she looked forward to boating with him.

When June got home, she made some espresso for herself and Devon. They sat at the kitchen counter sipping from tiny aqua ceramic mugs. “This is how I rest at the end of the day,” June said. “Strange to use caffeine to rest, I know.”

“I’ve always been a heavy coffee drinker,” Devon said. She smiled at her cup. “There is something calming about coffee. It’s a part of a daily routine that’s meant to be productive. That’s why we drink it, you know? And then it becomes part of life. Natural.”

“Sometimes, after such a long day, I’d prefer to have glass of wine or scotch. But I can’t. I’ve been through that.”

Devon wasn't sure if she should speak. She sipped her espresso, the grainy thickness of it rolling over her tongue like mud. She closed her eyes, enjoying the bitterness, allowing the caffeine to awaken her veins. It smelled like morning and midnight, brightness and darkness, love and hate. Mildewy and earthy, like Devon buried in the soil up to her neck.

"How was Anna?" June asked.

Devon opened her eyes, breathed deeply, and said, "Well-behaved. Not sure I'll ever play Scattergories with her again. But she's a good kid."

June finished her espresso and re-filled her cup. She nodded. "A good kid."

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Devon asked. When June nodded, she said, "I'm just curious about your husband. Anna's dad. Or whatever he is. Gil?"

June looked older as the shadows hit her face in all the wrong ways; wrinkles crept along the sides of her chin and her eyes cast downwards. "My husband," she said. She glanced to the left of Devon. Behind her. June's wedding ring glimmered under the dim light that hung above the kitchen table. She got up, took a glass from the cabinet, and poured it full of red wine. The wine bottle stood next to the fridge. "I allow myself one a week. This makes two."

"I'm sorry," Devon said. "I didn't mean to pry. You don't have to..."

"Gil was my husband. He had a pulmonary embolism. No one saw it coming. That was a year and two months ago. Anna and I have been coping in our own ways. She with her studies and me with work."

"I'm sorry," Devon said. She felt ashamed of her own whining about life recently. "My dad died when I was fourteen. I understand what Anna's going through. My mom was really upset about it, but they were going to get a divorce anyway."

June nodded again. “Gil and I were happy. He was an artist. He stayed home with Anna and took care of the house. When she started school, he spent his days keeping up the house and painting. One day maybe I’ll show you the room I keep of his paintings. It’s difficult for me to go in that room. I feel him when I’m there.” She gulped down her wine.

Devon thought she might cry. She looked away from June and tried not to think about her father. “I should get going. I’ll be here tomorrow.”

*

Devon met with Peter in a seedy bar along SR 520 just outside of Orlando. The dim lighting allowed her to feel like she could never be caught here. She had friends who still attended the nearby University of Central Florida, but they never traveled this far out into the middle of nowhere. Devon and Peter sat at the Bar, Devon’s head resting on the thick wooden beam behind her. She ordered a double tequila shot and pounded it, ignoring Peter’s attempt at a cheers with his own SoCo and lime. In her hands, she clutched *Rabbit, Run*, the book she’d brought to hide her face if Peter was late. She had never been a big reader, but she’d read *Rabbit, Run* about fifteen times over. By now her beat-up book felt like a close friend.

“I’m sorry I had to bother you so much to get you to meet with me,” Peter said. “I just can’t stand the feeling of not having you.”

Feeling oddly sobered and expectedly numb from the tequila (which she ordered another shot of quickly), she spoke to Peter with subdued and enunciated words, as if he were a child and she the discipliner. “Listen, Peter. You knew from the start that I had a boyfriend. A long-term boyfriend. You knew this could never be more than what it was. Things have to end now. I do not want to date you. I do not want to leave my boyfriend. You need to understand and let it go.”

Peter took her hand, his jaw jutting out as if to stop himself from crying. “Just give us a chance. Please.”

Devon was reminded of high school relationships where begging for just another week was not uncommon. She felt even more repulsed by him, but also she felt pity. She did not steal her hand away. With her other hand, she brushed a bit of hair off his forehead. “I always said that if I ever got married I’d never cheat on my husband. Sean and I are getting married.”

“You can’t marry him!” Peter said. He nodded at the bartender when she asked if he’d like another SoCo and lime. Peter and Devon took their shots together. “Devon, come on, he’s so...so...hokey! He’s not for you. He’s not like you and me.”

“Maybe that’s what I like,” Devon said. “And he’s not hokey. He’s caring. You only met him once.” Peter and Sean had indeed met at a Christmas party. Peter had done an excellent job of pretending not to have seen Devon in months. She was so thrilled with him after that party that she told Sean she wanted to go for a drive to clear her head, but ended up in Peter’s bed.

“Once was enough,” Peter said. “Come on. Don’t you remember Miami?”

There was a career expo in Miami that Devon didn’t really want to go to but provided a perfect reason for her to go south without Sean. She and Peter had taken the trip together, gotten an expensive hotel room in South Beach, and traveled the city. They had laughed at the clichéd *Miami Vice*-looking men on street corners who tried to sell them cocaine at three AM. Devon claimed that she really learned how to drive that weekend, among all the drivers who didn’t use signals and all of the vans blasting music from emerging hip-hop artists. They’d eaten authentic Cuban food and felt inadequate around all the perfectly toned Miami beach bodies together on the beach. It had been a true vacation, and the only time in their relationship Devon had ever

considered really being with Peter. Once they'd gotten back to Orlando, though, things went back to normal and she lost any romantic feelings for him she'd had, with only sexual and obligatory ones remaining.

A rickety old man dropped a quarter in the old juke box at the other end of the musty bar and soon a Johnny Cash song played. The volume was messed up—it would get very loud, and then almost too low to hear. It reminded Devon of being in a boat on rough waters, as she and her father were tossed up and down, inevitably making her sick.

“I remember Miami,” Devon said. “And I remember how I felt afterwards. Like it was a nice vacation that had to end. Like *you* are a nice vacation that has to end. That has ended.”

Peter sneered and frowned at her, grabbed *Rabbit, Run* out of her hands, and marched out of the bar, leaving her with his bar tab and a sense of deep loss that only the stolen book could have caused.

*

The weeks dragged on as guilt persisted in Devon's mind. She saw her crimes against romance everywhere she went—in the cracks of their apartment doors, on the bedroom door June kept locked, on the sidewalk in young and old lovers holding hands. When she saw elderly couples, she wondered how many affairs they'd each had. It seemed unfathomable to her that people could remain loyal and good for so long. She began to wonder if she'd have to tell Sean about her indiscretions.

It was at the end of her fourth week watching Anna that they played Scattergories again. She had hardly grown closer to the cold child, but they had a mutual respect for one another. Devon had wanted to talk to Anna about her father, but found it nearly impossible until that night. Devon rolled a “J.” They compared cards.

Devon's

1. FICTIONAL CHARACTERS: Joker
2. MENU ITEMS: juice
3. MAGAZINES: *j-14*
4. CAPITALS: jerusalem
5. MOVIE TITLES: *jack and jill*
6. ITEMS YOU SAVE UP FOR: jukebox
7. FOOTWEAR: jordans
8. SOMETHING KEPT HIDDEN: jewels
9. ITEMS IN A SUITCASE: jeans
10. THINGS WITH TAILS: joey
11. SPORTS EQUIPMENT: jogging shoes
12. CRIMES: jury tampering

Anna's

1. FICTIONAL CHARACTERS: jesus
2. MENU ITEMS: java
3. MAGAZINES: *juvenile magazine*
4. CAPITALS: juneau
5. MOVIE TITLES: *journey to the center of the earth*
6. ITEMS YOU SAVE UP FOR: jet ski
7. FOOTWEAR: jimmy choos
8. SOMETHING KEPT HIDDEN: jeopardy answers
9. ITEMS IN A SUITCASE: jeans
10. THINGS WITH TAILS: jackal
11. SPORTS EQUIPMENT: javelin
12. CRIMES: j-walking

Devon laughed when she saw Anna's first answer. "You know, Jesus wasn't necessarily fictional. Even if you don't believe in religion, which I'm there with you on, there's a good chance he still existed. I don't think I want to count it."

"You sound just like the theologians," Anna said, sneering. "Just because there's no proof that someone doesn't exist doesn't mean that they did exist."

“But there is evidence that suggests he did exist. Not as a god, but as a man. Just accept that you don’t get the point.”

“Who is the joker? Doesn’t count. Never heard of *J-14*. Doesn’t count. *Jack and Jill* is a story. No one buys jukeboxes. ‘Jordans’ is a name, not a shoe. You don’t keep jewels hidden, you show them. I’ve never met a boy named Joey who had a tail. Jogging shoes are not equipment. So, you’re left with about four points, yes?”

“The Joker is from *Batman*. *J-14* is a popular magazine for preteens and teenagers. *Jack and Jill* is also a terrible movie with Adam Sandler. People *do* buy jukeboxes, but they’re very expensive, so you have to save up for them. We can look on Ebay if you want proof. Jordans are the shoes by Michael Jordan, the most famous basketball player ever, also actor in the great children’s movie, *Space Jam*. When you’re not wearing your jewels, you keep them hidden. A joey is a baby kangaroo. I’ll give you the last one. You’re really not part of Gen-Y, huh?”

“Clearly not,” Anna said. “I’ll have to confirm all of these claims on the internet, of course.”

“You know,” Devon said, feeling anger rise up in her like heat, “you are not a fun girl. Games are meant to be fun ,and you suck the fun right out of them. You’re a fun-ruiner. No wonder you don’t have friends.” As she said the words, she wished she could stuff them right back into her mouth and swallow them whole. June would fire her if Anna told, and she would.

“I’m sorry I care about facts. I don’t like nonsensical answers. I don’t like answers that can’t be confirmed. And I don’t like creative answers.”

“Your father was an artist and you hate creativity? What’s wrong with you?” It was like someone else was controlling her now and Devon was a mere puppet held up by strings.

“How did you know?” Anna asked. She recoiled and her eyes cast downward much like her mother’s had at mention of Gil.

“I didn’t mean to say it like that,” Devon said. “Your mom told me. Will you tell me about him?”

Anna shrugged. “He was nice. He took me to the beach a lot in Cocoa and helped me build really big sand castles. We built one once that was almost as tall as me. He was a doctor before I was born, that’s how I got interested in medical research. That’s how he and my mom met.

Devon couldn’t help but note Anna’s diction change. She actually sounded eleven. “My dad took me boating a lot. The ocean was kind of our place,” said Devon.

“Yeah, Mom’s not from here so she doesn’t really care about the ocean that much, but Dad grew up at the beach and it was really important to him that I get to experience it too,” Anna said.

Anna grew more animated as they continued their conversation, fixing her hair behind her ears, opening her eyes wide, and re-positioning herself. To Devon, Anna’s father’s death was not so different from her own father’s storm. Both had been unexpected, out of nowhere. Both deaths could have been stopped if anyone knew to look.

“How did your dad die?” Anna asked.

“Thunderstorm while he was out on the ocean. Mom wouldn’t let me go that day. Made me stay home to do homework.”

“Do you hate the ocean now? I do. I know my dad didn’t die there, but I hate that I couldn’t protect him. I’m sorry, I’m being silly. Illogical. I guess sometimes I try to be like him because maybe if I can be just like him, he’ll be here with me again, in some strange way.”

Devon had not been to the beach since her father died. “You’re not being silly or illogical. How’s your mother been?” She wondered if she was over-stepping her boundaries. She didn’t really know the girl that well and understood how personal her questions were. Somehow she wished someone had asked her the same questions, though, after her own father died. Her mother, still bitter about the affair, had hardly spoken of him.

“She works a lot, you know that. Even more than usual, though. Neither of us are the type to talk about our *feelings*. I expected her to date eventually, but she hasn’t. Daddy’s clothes are still in the closet. I stole one of his T-shirts—it had his medical school’s logo on it—and keep it hidden in my room. Sometimes I sleep with it.” She turned away from Devon quickly, as if she had said something she shouldn’t have.

Anna finally seemed like a child to Devon. Despite her diction, this was a child sitting before Devon, a child who slept with her deceased father’s shirt. Devon didn’t like to use the word “dead.”

“I have a query for you,” Anna said.

“Query away.”

“Who was that person you were speaking with on the phone the first time you watched me? I don’t mean to pry, but it sounded heated and I’m curious.”

Devon debated telling Anna all of her problems. Maybe she should get advice from the smart young girl. She felt, strangely, that Anna could understand and offer a logical analysis of, and solution to, her problem. But the image of Anna crawling into her bed, holding her father’s T-shirt, made Devon stop before speaking.

“It was no one important.”

Anna nodded.. “I’m going to bed. Do you like being my babysitter?”

“Well, I’ve got nothing else on the horizon and you’re not so bad,” Devon said. She grinned.

Anna gave a hint of a smile, nodded, and went to her bedroom.

*

Though she’d rehearsed everything she planned on saying the whole day, Devon was still shaking her leg and rubbing her knuckles when she asked Sean to sit down on the couch with her.

He sat down, making a square out of his right leg crossing his left thigh. “What’s up, Snickerdoodle?”

“I have to tell you something and I don’t want you to say anything until I finish.” She held his hand, and then let it go. She had already accepted that her main source of income, Sean, would probably be gone soon and she’d have to find much more than one babysitting job.

“Go for it, Cream Puff.” His wide eyes looked inquisitive, not at all worried, making Devon feel a bit nauseous.

“I don’t know why, so don’t ask me to explain why, because you’re not doing anything wrong in the bedroom, but I kind of, well no, I did, I had an affair. With a man. And that’s, that’s who Peter is, really. You remember him? And I mean, I didn’t completely lie, he did have a job offer for me, but I didn’t want to take it. And I still love you and I want to be with you, but I understand if you don’t want to be with me. I’ve just been in a sort of quarter-life crisis or whatever it’s called, and I don’t know what I’m doing in life. It feels like I’m walking through a hall of mirrors and everything is blurry. I’m sorry.”

Sean took a deep breath and frowned before saying anything. When he spoke, he spoke carefully, enunciating his words and not showing emotion. “I’m afraid to ask this question

because I'm sure I already know the answer, but by 'affair' you mean you slept with him, am I right? It wasn't, by chance, some sort of emotional affair?"

Devon, unable to speak from tears once again waiting for the starting horn, nodded. "I don't know why," she said, choking out the words and realizing in that moment that Sean might not be the type of man she would keep her wedding ring on for years after he died, but he was someone she didn't want to be apart from right then.

"I'm going out for a drive," he said.

"Are you breaking up with me?"

"I'm just going for a drive. And a smoke," he said. He only smoked when stressed.

Devon watched him walk outside, possibly out of her life, possibly just for an hour or so. She wondered if in the morning he would act as if she hadn't told him anything, or if he would evict her, wishing to never speak to her again. Either way, she didn't know if she could forgive herself for her shortcomings.

Unsure of what to do with her hands while she waited for him to come back, she thought about calling June. Maybe June could get her a clerical job at the hospital to pay for a new apartment, or maybe they'd just talk about Anna, or maybe they'd share stories of loss. Never one to get too close to friends, Devon craved a closeness she felt she could get from the older woman. She picked up the phone and dialed June's number.

"Hello? Devon? Is everything all right?" June's said.

"Yeah," Devon said. Tears came again and she couldn't speak.

"You're crying, I can hear it. What's wrong?"

"June, would you like to get lunch with me sometime this week?" she said.

"Hmm? What? Lunch, sure. I'll pencil you in for Wednesday at noon. Is that good?"

“Yes,” Devon said. “I’ll see you then.” She hung up the phone and lay down on the couch, practicing breathing exercises she’d learned from television.

Her phone buzzed with a text message from Peter.

She turned it off and rolled over on the couch.

Something deep within Conner had sent him down the rainy downtown street that day. He was expected at a friend's barbecue, but his friends would have to wait. A boiling up of anxiety and desire drove him past the old buildings and palm trees. His windshield wipers swooshed rhythmically back and forth, back and forth, to the beat of his breath. He had no reason to believe Maddily would open her doors to him; his lie had been outed a month before, when someone had told her that he was only sixteen, not twenty like he had claimed. Months of lies about college courses he was taking had been wiped clean. She had looked at him with expanded blue eyes, her head cocked slightly to the side, and said, "Why would you lie to me?" From then on, she had remained friendly with him, chatting with him when he came in to study at the café she worked at, but not invited him over.

He parked in the lot behind her apartment, which sat on top of a sixties diner. He could feel his heart thumping and the unwanted warmth of blood speeding through the veins in his hands. He felt small tremors. Conner pulled his hoodie up to protect his head from the rain and hurried up the stairs to Maddily's apartment. After one knock, she greeted him, wearing sweat pants and a tank top with no bra. He liked her best like this, with no makeup covering her pale face, her strawberry blond hair messy and wavy. "Conner," she said.

"Hi," he said. "I'll go, if you want. I just thought you might want to hang out."

"Come in," she said. She opened the door wider and then closed it behind him. Her arms were thin but toned. Her roommate was at work, which Conner had anticipated. Her roommate's drum set stood to the left of their nook table. Maddily was talented on the drums but

preferred her acoustic guitar. Her apartment was open. A long window looked out on the rest of downtown. Across from her building stood the two tallest buildings in their small Floridian town: “The Towers,” which were for retired people. He sat down on the old yellow couch, which was partly covered in an even older sheet with faded flowers.

Maddily put on her new favorite album, *You Are Free*, by her favorite musician, Cat Power. Though Maddily owned an expensive CD player and speakers, she nearly always preferred the sound of records. She did not own a television, a computer, or a phone of any sort—simply books, instruments, and tools to play music. Cat Power’s warm, alcohol-fueled voice matched the intensity of the pouring rain. Thunder cracked and lightning followed. Conner had always loved thunderstorms.

Maddily sat next to Conner on the couch. She had made it clear nothing could happen now that she knew he was so young. He wondered why she sat so close, then. They had not slept together ever, not even close, but Conner could feel that it was going to happen. His hands shook. Though he wasn’t a virgin, he’d slept with only one other girl and only a couple of times. He had no idea if he was doing it right. Once he had asked his former girlfriend if she’d orgasmed and she’d said, “I don’t know. I think so.”

“You know,” Maddily said, “we were born in different decades. I’ve been thinking about that.”

Conner concentrated on her pink lips moving as she spoke. “You were born at the end of 1979,” he said. Now he looked into her eyes. She looked away from him, to the outside rain. Since they had met, Conner had felt something around her that he’d never felt with anyone before. It was physical, but mental too, and caused him to shake slightly when near her. On a

television show or movie, they might have called it electricity. It was uncomfortable and made him feel needy and addicted to her presence.

“And you were born in the eighties. It’s not right.”

“That’s kind of a ridiculous argument,” he said. He grinned at her.

“When are you seventeen?” she asked. “I think seventeen is legal.”

“Eight months from now.”

Maddily sighed. Between their silences, Cat Power cried out. Maddily was right; records sounded better than CDs.

Maddily leaned away from him. She said, “Well, how’s your mom been treating you?”

“She flipped out at me for getting a ‘C’ on a bio test. I’m getting really sick of her constant yelling.” He crossed his arms. Complaining about his mother made him feel like a child.

“It’s just because she cares about you,” Maddily said. She smiled. “She wants you to do well. I wish my mom or dad had kicked my ass a little more.”

“You went to college.”

“I dropped out after three years because I was an idiot and doing drugs. Your mom just wants to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Conner shrugged. “She could give me a little credit.”

“I’m sure she’s proud of you,” Maddily said. She moved closer to him and put her arm around him. “Don’t look so sad.”

Conner was aware of his breathing and worried that Maddily could hear it too. He had chewed gum before coming over but worried that his breath was bad. He felt frozen.

“I don’t think you should call yourself an idiot,” he said.

“Why’s that?”

“Just because you’re not making a million dollars right now doesn’t mean you’re a fuck-up. You always say you are, just like you always say you’re old. You’re not old and you’re not an idiot. You’re twenty-three, you have three years of college under your belt, and you’re the most interesting person I know.”

Maddily laughed. “Well thank you, Conner. I don’t know how interesting I am, but I appreciate it all the same. I’ve thought about going back. To college, I mean. If so, it would be out of state. I’m thinking Seattle. I have a cousin there.”

Conner wanted to encourage her but he didn’t want her to leave. He just said, “Wow.”

“Or maybe I’ll go back to Tucson,” she said.

Conner said nothing. Maddily kissed him. He knew she felt the same electricity as him. He knew that if they were alone, this would happen. That’s why she hadn’t invited him over—she knew it too. She stood up and took his hand in hers and led him into her bedroom. When she asked if he was a virgin, he said he was not. He still felt embarrassed by his body, his lack of technique, and the way he couldn’t stop feeling so frozen around her.

#

Seven Years Later

After squirting three pumps of chocolate into the blue ceramic mug, Conner poured two shots of espresso in next. In a separate container, he poured skim milk. As the milk’s temperature heated up to 170 degrees, the scream of the steamer died down. He poured the milk in the mug, making sure to leave about a centimeter of foam at the top.

“One hot mocha,” Conner said to the fat regular sitting at the café bar. He sat the mug down in front of him. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks, buddy,” he said. “Hey, Laura!” he called to Conner’s co-worker.

“What’s up?” Laura skipped over to the bar and put her arm around Conner. “Did my new employee mess something up?”

“Just the opposite,” the regular said. “This one’s a keeper. Ordered three different drinks from him now and they’ve all been just right.” He took a sip of the mocha, then sighed in pleasure.

“Well, he did have the best teacher,” Laura said.

Conner rolled his eyes. “This isn’t my first café gig.”

“But I perfected you,” Laura said.

“Well, thanks either way, kid,” the regular said.

Conner smiled at the man, then went to wash out the milk decanter. When a piece of his hair fell into his eye, he used his elbow to wipe it back. He scrubbed the container, probably more than was necessary, and set it upside down to dry on a towel.

“How’re you doing, Conner?” Laura said. She had walked up behind him.

“Mind if I take a ten?”

“It’s dead; go for it,” she said. “And try to smile.”

Laura was perpetually happy. A leftover candy-kid with a purple streak in her hair, who was twenty-seven, ate more ecstasy than Conner could imagine necessary, and loved bright colors and music to dance to. She was always complaining about his music choice. Tonight was no different.

“And what *is* this crap? The guy sounds like he’s going to kill himself any minute,” she said.

“It’s Elliott Smith. And he did kill himself.”

“Well there you go. You’ve got thirty more minutes of this crap, then I’m stealing the stereo back.”

“Customers like my music more. No one wants to hear techno when they go to a coffee house, Laura.”

“No one wants to hear from some depressed guy either.”

“You’d be surprised,” Conner said. “I’ll be back.”

He put on a jacket and headed out the back door. The dry air felt cool on his face. Leaning against the café wall, he pulled a packet of cigarettes out from his jacket and lit one. It wasn’t enough to dull the anxiety lurching up from his stomach to his throat. He sat down on the dirt and closed his eyes. Only a few feet away were Barrell Cactus Flowers. In summer they would look like little suns, but now they stayed closed, keeping the warmth in. He loved the plant-life in Tucson. The city’s dryness did not make him feel dehydrated as he had been warned it would. In Florida the humidity had made him feel like he was drowning. Now he felt crisp. He pulled his flask of whiskey out of another pocket in his jacket and took a swig. The mixture of nicotine and alcohol calmed his nerves.

The back door opened and Laura sauntered out. “Are you okay, kiddo?”

“I’m fine.”

“Is that a flask?”

“I’m sorry,” Conner said. “I’ll put it away.”

“You’ll give it here and share,” Laura said. She swiped the flask from him and took several long gulps. “I prefer vodka,” she said while scrunching up her nose. “But thanks.” She handed him back the flask.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Conner said.

“Anyway, I just came to check on you,” Laura said. “I worry about you with your sad eyes and your depressing music and your obvious alcohol addiction.”

“You don’t need to worry about me,” Conner said.

“You should come to a party with me this weekend.”

“We’ll see,” Conner said. From the stories she told him during mid-afternoon lulls, her parties took place in darkened houses where everyone dropped acid and ate ecstasy. They’d play with glowsticks and listen to drum and bass and techno music. Some might end up having an orgy while others just danced with glowsticks in their hands and pacifiers in their mouths to calm the teeth grinding. It didn’t appeal to Conner, who preferred not being around strangers, especially when on drugs.

“All right, well I’m gonna head back in. If you need me, just knock on the door.”

“Thanks, Laura.”

Conner drank more whiskey and finished his cigarette. His twenty-third birthday was this weekend. He supposed that had been weighing on his mind, especially since he was here in Tucson. Even though Maddily was long gone from his daily thoughts, he imagined that she still affected him. How else had he landed in Tucson after finishing his worthless philosophy degree? It was, after all, where she was from. She had loved the town. Why else was he smoking Camel Filters, just like she had? And why else was his twenty-third birthday giving him so much anxiety? Maybe it was as simple as the fact that he’d been a straight “A” student in high school and college, and now he was entering his mid-twenties and working as a café barista. Conner had planned on attending graduate school, getting a PhD so he could at least teach. But he hadn’t made any moves to do so yet. He took another swig of whiskey and put the flask back in

his jacket. His ten minutes were up. Before going back inside, he closed his eyes and pictured Maddily. She nearly always wore a tank top, jeans, and either combat boots or dirty black Chucks. Once she told him she liked his green shoes and the next week she had green shoes, too.

#

Conner sipped a glass of whiskey while he searched through graduate programs on the Internet. The University of Arizona offered both an MA and a PhD in philosophy. He could stay in Tucson. He'd been haphazardly compiling a portfolio, anyway. His writing sample would be a paper he wrote in his senior year about ethics and artificial intelligence. His professor had been a *Star Trek*-obsessed Aussie who never wore shoes and often cited the android Data in his lectures. In the paper, Conner asserted that if an android could feel emotions, however artificial they might be, that android deserved protection under the law. The professor had given him an "A" and called him "compassionate."

His letters of recommendation would be easy to come by. The philosophy department at his undergraduate institution was small, and he had many of the same professors multiple times. With an overall GPA of 3.8, he knew it would be easy to get decent letters from any of them. And he'd already done well on the entrance exam, which he'd taken right after graduating. He began writing a statement of purpose. Rather than write about the importance of philosophy in general, he chose to write about how he saw education as the most important job, and as a way for him to feel like he was contributing to the world. He mentioned Foucault and threw some ideas on gender and sexuality in there too. They were a bunch of liberals; they'd love to hear about that. He was a liberal too, but he didn't mind manipulating others with similar beliefs. It wasn't that he didn't believe what he was saying; rather his fakeness came more from the passion he displayed in his sentences. Ironically, what he wanted was to feel real passion. He knew that.

He'd been searching for it since Maddily had made him so nervous that he shook constantly when around her. He wanted to be challenged again.

One paragraph later, and Conner was tired. He decided to put a record on. Without really thinking about it, he found himself putting on *You Are Free*, which he hadn't listened to in a while. The album had come out the year he'd met Maddily. When she had moved away to Seattle and left him there, a lonely teenager, he had listened to the album over and over. Her boss had ranted to him that she'd probably end up dead in a gutter somewhere with heroin tracks all over her arm. Conner had only ever seen her smoke pot, but after she left she admitted to him during of their phone calls that she'd been doing a lot of drugs. She'd urged him not to. He had wondered if she'd been unafraid to tell him since they were talking over the phone, which they did for a while.

A picture she drew hung on the wall to the left above Conner's computer. She'd been bored at work one day and drew on the back of a receipt. It was a hangman, but the noose was made out of words. The words had become smudged and he couldn't make them out anymore. He remembered complimenting her on the song she'd written. Her shoulders folded in and she said, "It's not that good." Conner had tried to write songs himself, but had given up after realizing that he was no good at it. Everything he wrote was trite and cheap and lame. All of his songs involved trees with weak branches that reached too far, descriptions of alcohol, and revelations about the stars. (One lyric read, "The brightest ones burn the most.")

After refilling his whiskey glass, Conner picked up his copy of *Ask the Dust* and lay on his mustard yellow couch, ready to embark on Bandini's insane romance for about the seventh time. He sent Laura a text message letting her know he'd come to her party.

He couldn't pay attention to his favorite book because Maddily was still on his mind. He hadn't obsessed like this since he was a teenager. She had once admitted to having twenty-six sexual partners in her twenty-three years. Conner had become twenty-seven; he never forgot the number. He laid the book on his chest and pulled more whiskey into his mouth, letting it sit and swim around his gums and teeth.

He counted the women he'd been with. His virginity was lost to Megan, who was nineteen when he was sixteen, the daughter of a preacher; Maddily came next, and he still felt embarrassed at how inexperienced he had been with her; then there was Jewel who had bright blue eyes and who visited his bed for years to come; the girl visiting Florida from Tennessee whom he had met and slept with on the beach; Nova, who slept with men and women, and who could attract anyone to her bed, even Catholic straight girls and married men; Jewel's best friend; there had been a threesome with two blonds, two of the only blonds, and he thought maybe one of their names had been Michelle; Kat, with long black hair and a better grasp of Nietzsche than Conner ever had, who he thought he might marry; Haley, who he'd met at his high school graduation because their last names came together, and she had wanted him to stay the night afterwards, but he craved spaghetti and left her for his midnight snack; Dani, who he had been sure he would marry, but who had left him when his drinking temporarily got too bad; the girl who had been Maddily's age when Conner was eighteen—that was twelve. He remembered the girl who glued fake gems to her face; the plain girl whose brilliance in his Gothic Literature class had tantalized him; his TA, Brit; Ivory, who was actually a ginger, and Ivory's half-sister, Ebony, who was only half black—that made seventeen. He knew there were a few more, but couldn't place them. Some had meant nothing at all to him, hadn't even pleased him, whereas others were certainly more frequent visitors in his mind than he was in theirs. He fell asleep to

the thought of the women who had mattered more than he'd wanted them to, like a melancholy lullaby growing more despondent as his consciousness faded.

#

Morning shifts were always difficult for Conner. Even when he went to bed early, he often felt nauseated and overly tired in the morning. He finished pouring two cups of black coffee for a tall, middle-aged regular. He wrapped up a blueberry muffin for her and thanked her for the dollar tip she always left. Needing to re-stock the napkins, he slowly made his way to the back room, grunting as he passed by Laura. Thankfully, she had let him play The Velvet Underground, which he found much more listenable than techno music at eight in the morning.

As he searched for a new package of napkins, he was startled by arms wrapping around his mid-section. He jumped, then turned around to find himself in Laura's arms.

"It's so dead out there," she said. "Why don't we have some fun?" Her pupils were dilated, making Conner wonder if she was on something.

He found Laura attractive, but thought of her too much as a friend. "We should probably go make sure no one's out there waiting," he said.

"There's no one out there," she said. She kissed him and ran her hand against his crotch.

"I just heard the door open," Conner said, pulling himself away from her.

Laura rolled her eyes and said, "You're such a pussy."

Conner briskly walked outside and cleaned the tables. Only one person had even sat at an outside table this morning, but he cleaned them all anyway. He decided to pretend like nothing had happened, and hopefully he and Laura would remain friends. He didn't want to look for another job. When he went back inside, Laura was counting money at the register. She

asked him if he'd cleaned both espresso machines, but didn't act as if anything else had happened.

Laura continued acting normal all day, which Conner appreciated. When he went out for his last ten-minute break, she snuck out for a second to take a drag of his cigarette and a sip from his flask. "Thanks, man," she said before going back inside.

It probably would have been colder out, had the back of the building not faced the west side. The sun made it warm enough for Conner to take his jacket off. He looked at the Barrell Cactus Flowers and wondered why they didn't just go ahead and bloom. Maybe he would incorporate them into his statement of purpose. Though he found philosophical writing to be much different from the writing he did in literature classes, he still felt as though his English minor had at least made him a more aesthetically pleasing philosophical writer.

Conner put his cigarette out and went back inside. Through the window, he saw a girl with strawberry blond hair and combat boots walking away. He was sure it was Maddily. She carried a to-go cup from the café. "Did that girl just come in here?" he asked Laura.

"Yeah, why?"

"Did you get her name?"

"No, why would I?"

Conner felt a blast of anxiety in his chest. "Did she pay with a credit card? Can you find out her name?"

"She paid with cash, spaz. What's wrong?"

Conner ignored her and ran out the café door. He thought he saw a swish of strawberry blond hair fifty or one hundred yards ahead. The sidewalk was surprisingly busy, but he ran through the crowd of parents and children, university students, and dog-walkers. He hadn't seen

her since he was seventeen and she had come back to Florida to visit her family and, he had suspected, him. Her hair had been shorter then, and she wore a plaid flannel shirt, though it was cool that winter, even in Florida. He hadn't spoken to her in any form since he was eighteen. They had talked on the phone and written letters back and forth, but her new fiancé, who Conner hated without knowing, had forbidden her from talking to him. Though he hadn't sought her out, angry that she would cut him off like that, he had fantasized about running into her.

After a few more minutes and two forks-in-the-road, Conner gave up hunting Maddily. He walked back to the café at a slow pace. He made his way behind the counter. When Laura finished a drink for a customer and the customer walked away, she said, "What the fuck just happened, sad boy?"

"I just thought I saw someone."

"Who? An ex-girlfriend? A ghost? An axe-murderer?"

"Yeah," Conner said. Then he laughed at himself. "Just this girl I used to know a long time ago. I never thought I'd see her again. But I only saw the side of her face; it probably wasn't even her."

"The hot girl wearing a tank top and no bra who just ordered a black coffee?"

Black coffee had always been Maddily's drink of choice, but it was also countless others' drink as well. He couldn't get worked up over a detail like that. "Did she say anything else?" Conner asked.

"She complimented your shitty music. I told her it was my associate's choice, not mine. She said thanks and left a tip. That's about all."

"Did she have blue eyes?"

“How the fuck do I know? It’s not like I was gazing into them. She looked a little older than you, though. Probably closer to thirty.”

“The girl I’m thinking of would be thirty. Did she have a nose stud?”

“No, I don’t think so. I usually remember facial piercings,” Laura said. “Seriously though, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Conner said. He fixed himself an iced mocha and sat down. “She’ll probably come back,” he said after a long silence. “If she lives here now.”

“I guess,” Laura said. She frowned at him, though it was not an angry frown. He could sense her concern. “Did this girl really fuck you up or something?”

“No,” Conner said. “I just kind of looked up to her. I was sixteen and she was in her twenties.”

“Ew. That’s statutory rape, Con.” She crinkled her nose and sneered.

“You’re the first person who’s ever said that,” he said. He looked into Laura’s large, dark eyes.

“Bullshit.”

Conner shrugged. “People were obsessed with her. Both my guy and my girl friends praised me. I think even the straight girls were attracted to her.”

“But she was old and you were a kid. Maybe that’s why you’re so fucked up.”

Conner shrugged again. “It’s not like she took advantage of me. Everything I did, I did because I wanted to.”

“Maybe she manipulated you into thinking that. It’s not right, Conner. A twenty-something seducing a teenager. Think about it. You’re what? About to turn twenty-three? Would you ever consider sleeping with a teenage girl?”

Conner thought about the high school girls who came into the café. They all looked so young. He had always preferred girls his own age and older. Teenage girls' bodies were too straight, and their faces too untouched. He liked women with hips, with shallow lines around their mouth and eyes. "No," he said. "They look too young."

"Well that's what that girl did," Laura said. "It's creepy. I wonder how many other boys she statutory raped."

"I knew two of her exes. They were her age." He wasn't sure why he was defending Maddily.

"It's just not right," Laura said. She put her arm around him and pulled him into a half-hug. "Get that girl out of your mind. It's been seven years and you're still chasing her down the street. Any girl your own age you do that for?"

#

Conner now found himself looking for Maddily everywhere. Surprisingly, he felt anger towards her. She had made him develop feelings for her and then just cut him off like he meant nothing. He told himself he wanted to see her so he could blow her off.

But tonight was Laura's party. He doubted he would see Maddily there, and then he reminded himself that it probably hadn't been Maddily at the café anyway. It was dark when he walked up to Laura's friend's house. It looked like a normal three-bedroom suburban house. Laura had told him that her friend, the owner, had a job in marketing, or something like that. It was weird to think of people his age with real jobs and houses. He'd have to finish that damn statement of purpose and apply to the University of Arizona.

Laura let him inside the house. The lights were off except for a black-light and a string of blue Chanukah lights around a lamp. Fast techno music played loudly. There was a bowl of

ecstasy pills sitting on the kitchen table. Free to grab, it seemed. Conner could see about six other people, some already stripped down to their underwear. Some of them played with green, pink, and orange glowsticks while others danced around. Another kitchen counter was covered in water bottles. At least the druggies were cautious.

Laura grabbed two E pills and Conner grabbed one for himself. He hadn't touched the stuff in years, but couldn't think of a reason why not to. They made their way to the living room where the owner of the house and a couple others sat, smoking from a bong.

"This is my friend Conner," Laura said to the small crowd. "I finally got him to come out."

"It's great to have you," the guy Laura had identified as the owner said. "I'm Mike. And you're welcome here." He spoke slowly, like the surfers from Conner's hometown.

"Thanks for having me," Conner said. He swallowed his E pill with a bottle of water.

"So tell me about yourself," Mike said. The other two girls in the room stared but stayed silent. One wore a beret and the other had a lip ring, eyebrow ring, and nose ring.

Conner shrugged. "I'm from Florida. I have a philosophy degree. I think long walks on the beach are overrated, but night swimming is fantastic."

Mike laughed loudly. "He's funny, Laura."

Laura rolled her eyes but smiled.

"You got a girlfriend? You and Laura getting together?" Mike asked.

"He's single," Laura said. "He's all obsessed with this older woman."

"Laura—" Conner warned.

"Tell us about her," the girl with the beret said. She took a bong hit before passing it to the multi-ringed girl.

“I’m not all into her,” Conner said.

“He was all into her when he was a teenager. Girl took advantage of him. She had a weird name too, what did you say it was?”

“Maddily,” Conner said.

“Not Maddily George,” Mike said.

Conner’s heart skipped. “Yes, why? Do you know her?”

“Yeah, I know Maddily. She’s from here.”

“Is she in town now?” Conner wondered if all people who did drugs knew each other.

“Don’t know, bro. Haven’t talked to her in a long while.”

Conner wanted to ask for her number but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“Are you, like, in love with her?” the facial-ring girl said.

“No,” Conner said.

Mike laughed. “Hey man, I’ll find out if she’s in town for you. No problem. I’ll give her a call tomorrow.”

Even though Conner knew it was a drug-promise that would be forgotten in minutes, the thought of being so close to finding her made his heart speed. He took a rip off the bong.

“Man, Laura,” Mike said, “remember when you were in love with me?”

Laura didn’t smile, but let out a small noise that sounded like a fake laugh.

“Good thing you got over that. It got a little weird for a while.”

Conner looked at Laura, but she only looked away from him.

Mike and the two girls started talking about astrology and astronomy and how they were inter-connected. Conner sank back on the couch and waited for the ecstasy to kick in.

After a few minutes of listening to meaningless talk, Conner could feel his skin dance and melt. The techno he usually loathed was like his blood, running through him and keeping him alive. He found himself rubbing his hand against the soft couch. The facial-piercing girl braided the beret-girl's hair. He had never really liked being around strangers while on ecstasy.

"You wanna get away?" Laura asked. Her eyelids drooped a little and Conner could not tell the difference between her pupils and her irises.

Conner nodded. He followed her into an empty bedroom. She put a CD in the stereo. Conner laughed. "I hate this music so much, but I love it more than anything right now."

Laura laughed at him. "Your inhibitions are being let out! This proves you secretly like it!"

"No, it's all the drug," Conner said.

"Do you want to dance?"

"Not really," he said. "This pill is really chill. I feel more sedated than energized."

"Me too," she said. "It must have more heroin than uppers."

"Is it true there's heroin in ecstasy?"

Laura shrugged. "Makes sense, but hell if I know." She pulled two glowsticks out of her pocket and said, "Here, I grabbed these."

They each cracked their sticks; Conner's lit up green and Laura's lit up purple. Conner watched Laura play with the purple one. He watched the trail following the stick and thought it was beautiful. Why didn't he do this drug all the time?

"I really like you, Conner," Laura said. "Not in a romantic way. I just mean, I give you a lot of shit, but you're a cool guy. I really like you."

"I like you too, Laura. You're a weirdo but you're a good person."

“I think you need to get over that girl,” Laura said.

“I love her,” Conner said.

“You do?”

“No, but this drug does. This drug is making me say that I do. I don’t think I do because I didn’t until you just asked me that. But I also want to tell you that I love my mom and my dog who died and I love you, Laura.”

Laura smiled. “I love you too.”

Conner breathed slowly. He was hot and sweating, but it didn’t bother him too much. He drank from one of the water bottles in the bedroom. The bed was so soft. Laura’s black and purple hair looked like velvet and he wanted to touch it, so he did.

“Have you ever been passed out?” she asked.

“No.”

“Let me show you.”

Laura took Conner to the bedroom wall and told him to stand straight up. She placed several pillows around him. “You’re going to hyperventilate yourself,” she said.

“Is that safe?”

“Yeah. I’m going to count to ten, and with each number I say, I want you to take a deep breath in, hold it for a second, then let it out.”

“Okay.” Conner just wanted to lie down on the bed, or at least sit. He felt too good to stand.

“Now, when I say ‘ten,’ you’re going to hold your breath. I’m going to have my hands around your neck. You’ll fall onto the pillows when I put pressure on your neck. Then I’ll wake you up, and your high will be stronger.”

“Are you sure about this?” Conner asked.

“I’ve done it a million times. You’ll love it.”

As the techno music played, it was drowned out by Laura’s strong voice. “One.” He breathed in and out. “Two. Three. Four.”

When she got to ten, he held his breath. He felt faint pressure around his neck, then he could feel himself leaving the world.

He woke up to Laura tapping his face and saying something he couldn’t make out over and over. His fingers and toes tingled. His brain was a little fuzzy, but he felt more high than he had before.

“You good, sad boy?”

“I’m good,” he said. “And whoa.” Everything felt more intense. Growing too hot, he took his shirt off. All that existed was that which was in this room. A stereo, a bed, a popcorn ceiling, Laura. That was all his brain could process. He felt wonderful.

Laura got up off the floor and laid her second pill out on an oak dresser. She mashed it up and made several lines. “Want some more?”

“Not right now,” Conner said.

Laura snorted two of the lines. She sat down on the bed. Conner got up and sat next to her. He couldn’t hold his head up, so he rested it on her shoulder. He said, “You’re a really good friend. You’re the first person who’s cared in a long time.”

“You’re the first person who’s called me a friend and not just a drug buddy in a very long time,” she said.

She nudged his head off her shoulder and kissed him. This time he kissed her back. The softness of her lips made his face tingle. As they undressed and their bodies felt like velvet on

silk, Conner imagined adding another girl to his list: the good friend with purple in her hair and music in her blood. They made their own rhythm and he wondered again why he didn't do this drug every day.

#

The day after his twenty-third birthday, Conner officially sent off his application to the University of Arizona. He would get a PhD. They would accept him, he was sure of it. He had impressive stats and he knew his essay would be better than most. Academics had been one area he'd always felt confident in.

When a high school girl came into the café after school, Conner thought she was flirting with him. Laura told him that all the high school girls giggled and batted their eyelashes at him. "You know you're beautiful," she told him. "You have that look. That look like you don't care, but you're also sensitive."

"I'm a white guy with brown hair," Conner said. "I look like everyone else."

"No, you look tortured. That's what young girls like," Laura said.

The high school girl ordered a chocolate chai. She was pretty. He felt nothing sexual toward her. She asked him his name and he told her. He smiled when she thanked him. When he noticed her pushing her breasts together with her arms, he made sure to look into her eyes. He imagined that at her school, she was much sought after by boys her age. He imagined that a lot of men his age would want her. But he didn't, and he couldn't really understand why anyone his age would.

"They all talk about you," Laura said after the girl went back to her table.

"Who?"

"The high school girls."

“Great.”

“That girl came in again. Yesterday. I wasn’t going to tell you.”

“Maddily?”

“I didn’t ask her name. I was going to but then I didn’t want to know. I don’t think you should pursue her.”

“Laura, you should have asked her name. I’m not going to pursue her. I just want to see her once, as a man and not a teenager. I just need to say something to her.”

“What do you need to say to the girl who statutory raped you?”

“Stop saying that because it wasn’t rape. I played my part.” He thought of the girl who had just pushed her boobs towards him and asked his name. He wondered what people would think if he slept with her. Rapist, pedophile, disgusting: that’s what they would think. Was it really different when the older person was a woman? Why did people consider all sixteen-year-olds to be innocent? He knew he hadn’t been. But he also knew he could never touch a teenage girl.

“So then what do you need to say?”

“I need her to know that I’m fine.”

“Why?”

“I just do.”

“But you’re not fine, you nicotine-addled alcoholic. You’re the saddest person I know.”

“You’re the saddest person I know,” Conner said. “Why don’t you give Mike a call? I know you want to.” He felt bad immediately. He hadn’t meant to jibe her like that. He thought she deserved a lot better than Mike and she definitely didn’t deserve to be made fun of by him.

“You’re a dick. Go home,” Laura said. “I’m serious. Go home for the day.”

“Laura, I’m sorry.”

“Go. Home.”

Conner didn’t say anything else, but left her there, sneering. He had Mike’s number and thought about asking him for Maddily’s number. But Laura was right, he shouldn’t chase her. If he ran into her by chance, he’d say what he needed to say.

When he got home, he text-messed Laura, “I’m sorry.”

She replied a few moments later, “I know. Dick. <3.”

Conner took a nap. When he woke up, he had a text message from Mike. Apparently his promise hadn’t been forgotten in the drug haze. He asked if Conner still wanted Maddily’s number. Instead of answering, Conner picked up his book. He put on his Cat Power album. He invited Laura over for drinks. She came over with a deck of cards and they played fourteen games of Rummy. Conner passed out drunk on the couch, but Laura stayed up. When he woke up after only an hour or so, he saw her holding his phone and texting someone. He didn’t have the energy to ask who and he was still pretty drunk, so he let his eyes fall back down and he slept. When he woke up, Laura was gone and there was a message from Mike. It contained Maddily’s number and the words, “Good luck, man.”

#

She planned her escape before Conner’s seventeenth birthday. He and his best friend were the only two underage kids invited to her going-away party. They drank from the keg and talked to Maddily’s twenty-something friends. Someone told Conner, “Maddily is so messed up right now.” For an hour she sat at her drum set and played while her roommate played guitar. For being on whatever they were on, Conner thought they sounded pretty damn good.

He didn't get to spend any time with her that night. She was leaving for Seattle the next day and she hadn't even tried to talk to him. He wanted to cry and he felt angry and, more than anything, he felt like he was missing out on something important. He would never find someone like Maddily again and he didn't have any interest in meeting girls his own age now. What really sickened him is how much he wanted to be like Maddily. Not just with her, but *like* her. It was as if she were his idol.

He marched down the stairs with his friend, each step causing him more pain. It wasn't until he was near the end that he heard her calling his name. He turned around and saw Maddily running down the stairs, like in a movie, to get to him. "Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?" she asked. Her pupils filled up most of her blue eyes. Sweat shone on her face. She seemed a little wobbly.

"You seemed busy," he said.

"You were supposed to leave me your address so I could write you. And your number so I can call when I get there."

Conner had nothing to write on, so Maddily asked someone for a napkin. Conner wrote his information down and watched her fold it up and put it in her pocket. "I promise to call when I get there," she said.

"You don't have a phone," Conner said.

"I'll find one." She pulled him into a hug. It almost felt as if he were holding her up, but she squeezed him tightly for a long time. "Bye Conner," she said.

"Good-bye," he said. He watched her wobble back up the stairs. Waiting for her at the top was a very good-looking guy her own age who kissed her and took her hand, leading her inside, the way she had once led Conner.

ALEX AND THE SHARK

As Alex was closing up the sex shop, a young man walked past the door once, then again. He stood outside as if deciding whether or not to go inside. It was ten minutes until closing and Alex thought he'd better make a decision quickly.

She straightened the lingerie racks, making sure the sizes were in correct order. The packages that fishnet outfits came in were often left open by browsing customers, so she folded them up and closed the bags. She ran her hand over a faux-silk purple bustier, trying to imagine herself in it. Having never worn exotic lingerie before, the thought of it both excited her and made her feel embarrassed.

The store wasn't large—a few rooms rented in a plaza across from the beach—but it still took a while to close because of all the different types of merchandise. Alex had already made sure all of the pornographic DVDs were in their respective places, from plain old man-on-woman sex to hardcore BDSM and poop fetishes. She always saved the sex toys for last because, even after a year of working at the store, they could often still make her laugh. There were “The Hand” and “The Fist,” which were larger-than-life-sized models of a male hand and a male fist meant for inserting in whichever orifice the buyer desired. Dildos and vibrators ranged from nine dollars to two hundred and were probably the most popular merchandise in the store, at least with women. Alex found some of their strange shapes and colors humorous, though she had bought a tiny grey vibrator for herself. Perhaps what seemed the most strange to her were the fake body parts, marketed to straight male clients. There were breasts, vaginas, and female buttocks, casted from actual porn stars, with holes inside them like a reverse dildo. For the women, there were what looked like saddles for horses with dildos sticking out of them, ready to

ride. Alex imagined her reaction if she were dating a guy and found a fake body part in his closet—she couldn't imagine it would end well. She often felt as if she were in another land while at work, a land where there was no shame in sex, nothing but good humor. Titles of pornographic films were puns like *The Lord of the Cock-Rings* and *Breakfast in Tiffany*; there were vibrating cock rings named "The Dave" and dildos called "The Rabbit;" there were necklaces with dozens of tiny penises hanging off like beads; and as weird as she found it, there were casts of real women's vagina's, which did sell. It was like sexual Narnia.

To finish up, she straightened the small items—shot glasses, bachelorette party gear, lube, and gifts. She heard the small bell on the front door ring and glanced over to see the young man who had been pacing outside finally come in.

The guy who usually stood at the door IDing people had gone home twenty minutes before. The young man, who had a pale, round face, curly black hair, and glasses, meandered over toward the porn section.

"Excuse me," Alex said. "I need to see your ID." She figured he was probably eighteen, but didn't want to get in trouble if he wasn't.

He walked over to her and pulled out his wallet. Feeling a bit anxious to be alone in the shop at night, she looked at the camera above the register, then down to his driver's license. "Morgan Wilder," it said. Born eighteen years and two months ago. She felt a pang of sympathy for him that his name was Morgan, as having a relatively androgynous name had caused her some annoyance in life and she figured it was probably even worse for a guy. "We close in five minutes," she said.

"Can you help me pick something out?" Morgan asked. He scratched his nose, which shone with grease under the lights.

“What are you looking for?” Alex asked. Working in a sex store, she was used to men trying to hit on her. She guessed they assumed she was slutty just because she sold dildos and pornography, but she was actually a virgin. After getting out of work every day, she felt oversexed, as if there was no romance in the act at all. Morgan Wilder didn’t seem too threatening, though. She hoped he wouldn’t take too long so she could hang out on the beach for a little while, then go home and sleep.

“I want to buy an outfit for my friend. Like a sex outfit or something. I don’t know. This is awkward. I figured there’d be a guy at the counter, no offense. You don’t have to help.”

“It’s okay,” Alex said. “What kind of thing are you looking for? A fantasy outfit, like a maid or nurse, or a fishnet outfit, or some colorful lingerie?”

“I have no clue,” Morgan said. He grimaced. He followed her over to the apparel section.

“What do you think your friend would be into?” Alex asked. “Does she already own any lingerie?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, I don’t know. She might. She’s been with a lot more people than me. Oh God, that sounded weird. I don’t mean she’s like a whore or anything. I’m not a fan of calling women whores as it is. I just mean she’s more experienced than me.”

“Okay,” Alex said slowly. “Well, do you have a general idea of what you want to get her?” She pulled the purple and black bustier with matching thong off the rack. “I mean, this is kind of our basic lingerie. If you want something more sexual, we can look at some of these lace and fishnet things.” She pulled a package off the rack with a picture of a woman in an outfit that had straps resembling a grid.

Morgan looked from the purple bustier to the fishnets and sighed. “Jeez, I don’t know,” he said. “What would you want to wear if you had to choose? That’s probably inappropriate to ask, huh? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it in a creepy way.” He squinted his eyes closed for a few seconds and then opened them back up. She thought he might cry. “I’m in love with this girl and she finally slept with me but she’s never going to date me and here I am, trying to buy her sexy clothes, and that’s simply not me. I’m not that guy. Which is probably why she doesn’t really like me.”

Alex glanced at the clock on the wall behind him. Two minutes past closing. She tried not to sigh and said, “I’m sorry. Are you sure you want to get her anything?”

“Not anymore,” he said. “I don’t know. Have you ever been in love with someone who didn’t love you back?”

“No,” Alex said. “I’ve never been in love.”

“How old are you?” Morgan asked.

Alex put both pieces of clothing back on the racks and said, “I’m twenty.”

“I thought everyone fell in love with at least one person by eighteen,” Morgan said. “I’m at three but I fall easily. This one’s special, though, I think.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to be in love with someone until you’ve been with them at least a year and you’re at least twenty-five,” Alex said. “That’s when the hormones even out.” She walked with him towards the front of the store.

“No way,” he said. “Love *is* hormones.”

Alex was about to respond when Morgan stopped, gasped and pointed. She looked to where his finger aimed and saw the casts of female body parts. Morgan said, “These ... exist? People buy these?”

Alex grinned. “You interested?”

Morgan stared at the breasts. “I’m shocked. I mean, I’m no prude but ... wow. And look! There are different ones! Small nipples, large areolas, different cup sizes.”

“They each go with a different porn star,” Alex explained.

“And people really buy these?”

“Some people, yeah,” Alex said.

“Kind of gross,” Morgan said. He sneered, but kept staring, mesmerized. “Oh God, that’s a vagina!” He pointed at “Penny Canyon’s” vagina.

Alex laughed. She normally took the merchandise seriously around customers to not make them feel embarrassed, but she felt like it was okay to laugh around Morgan. “Why don’t you get your friend one of these?”

“What would she think?”

“Probably that you were hinting that hers doesn’t add up. It’d be similar to playing hard-to-get.”

“I don’t know why I was hoping for a male employee. You’re so helpful,” Morgan said.

Alex was amazed at how a plastic vagina had brought Morgan out of his shell. Now that she looked at him, staring at the anus cast collection, he wasn’t so bad-looking. Though his hair was too long and his nose too greasy, he had sculpted arms and full, pink lips. “Well, it’s after closing and I’ve got to lock up,” Alex said. She opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again and said, “I’m heading across the street to the beach once I lock up, if you wanna come hang out.”

Morgan looked surprised and said, “Sure, yeah. Really? You wanna hang out with me? You go to the beach at night?”

“I prefer it at night. It’s much more mystical,” she said. “And why the hell not?”

Morgan waited outside as Alex straightened a collection of “I Heart Peckers” shot glasses, turned off the lights, and locked the door. She said goodbye to sexual Narnia, as she always did, as if the dildos and vibrating cock rings could hear her.

#

While Alex sat on the towel she’d laid out for them, looking at constellations, Morgan leaned in to kiss her. She put her hand up against his chest and moved her head away. It wasn’t that she hadn’t thought about kissing him; more that she wasn’t sure yet and didn’t appreciate his forthcoming.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was stupid. I thought you liked me and that’s why you wanted me to come.”

“Even if I do like you,” Alex said, “does that mean we need to make out twenty minutes after meeting each other? Besides, you’re in love with your friend, right?”

Morgan sighed. “I don’t know. I mean, I think I am, but who knows? It’s only, well, it’s difficult. And I don’t know. I’m stupid.”

“Stop knocking yourself,” Alex said. “Try to calm down. Watch the water.” She closed her own eyes and lay back on the towel, careful not to touch Morgan with any part of her body. She took in deep breaths of salty ocean air through her nose and breathed out with her mouth. The breeze coming from the ocean cooled her skin and blew her hair just a bit. The sand, lumpy beneath her, felt like cushions.

“Do you come here a lot?” Morgan asked.

“Nearly every night,” Alex said. “It’s kind of like my way of meditating. I think the beach at night is the most beautiful place on Earth.”

Morgan put his hand on Alex's in an attempt to hold it, but she pulled away and sat up. "I mean look at it," she said. "It's like the sky bleeds into the water. Look." She pointed to the sky. "The sky is black and it's littered with stars, like it has freckles. And then there's the moon, glowing brightly, nearly full tonight, and that's like the seal between sky and ocean. And then you have the ocean, equally black, and in the moonlight it looks as if the ocean has stars too."

Morgan stared at her. "Wow. Are you like a poet or something?"

Alex looked at him and laughed. "No, I'm not anything."

"Do you go to school?"

"I'm thinking of going to FIT for astrophysics. But I don't know. I just want to stare at the sky all night. I have this telescope my uncle bought me a few years. Sometimes I bring it out here. Hey, do you want to go swimming?"

"In there?" Morgan asked, pointing to the water.

"No, in the sand," Alex said, rolling her eyes. "Come on. Strip down to your boxers and let's go." She took off her own shirt and pants, thankful that she'd worn full-bottomed panties that day.

Morgan stripped in front of her but covered his stomach with his hands. He was really quite thin, despite his baby face. He frowned and pushed his glasses up farther on his nose.

"Come on," Alex said. "I swim here a lot. But watch out for sharks."

Morgan followed her, timid all the while, until they reached the water. "It's best to jump right in," Alex said. "That way it's cold at once, but then you start getting warm. I, however, have never been able to do that. So I'll be slowly subjecting my body to the cold."

"What was that about sharks?" Morgan asked.

“Well, they do come out more at night. But shark attacks are rare. You don’t have any open wounds, do you?” She shivered as the cold water hit her shins.

Morgan got in up to his shorts, and then shrieked when the water hit his loins.

Alex held her breath as she waded in to her hips.

“What now?” Morgan asked.

“Swim around.”

“What the hell are those?” he asked, pointing to little balls of light in the water.

“Dinoflagellates or something like that,” Alex said. “They won’t hurt you. They’re just pretty. They’re like fireflies for the ocean.”

“I’m from Maryland,” Morgan said. “We have real fireflies there. That’s one thing I miss about living up north.”

Alex dove into the water, saturating her hair. When she pulled herself back up, she let her hair cover her face. “I’ve come to eat you,” she said, holding her hands out like claws and walking slowly towards Morgan.

“Ha ha,” Morgan said, looking around at the water.

When he didn’t move, she grabbed his shoulders and shook them. “Brains!” she yelled. She lightly bit his head. His curly hair tasted like fruity shampoo and she was glad it wasn’t greasy. In the water and the darkness with Morgan, Alex felt like they were seals, playing and splashing around. She’d done this only once before with a guy she’d met at the end of high school. That time, they’d gone skinny dipping and talked for hours about their personal lives. She thought she might have gained a good friend, but the next day people texted her asking “how it had been” hooking up with him. Apparently he’d lied to quite a lot of people.

Morgan's face turned from playful and laughing to painful as he screamed and sank under the water. Alex panicked and thought she might vomit. A shark? She dove under the water and tried to grab him but he was gone. "Morgan?" she called into the nothingness surrounding them. She tried swimming around to find him. She had no idea what to do. Keep looking? Try to call the police? But what could the police do if a shark had him? And if the shark had grabbed Morgan, would it grab Alex too?

Alex heard a splash right behind her, and then arms squeezed her tightly and someone bit her neck lightly. "You scared the fuck out of me," she said, turning around to face Morgan.

"I feel like a child tonight," Morgan said.

"You are a child," Alex said. She turned around and grasped his waist. They moved together in the water like synchronized swimmers on muscle relaxers, moving with the choppy ocean while waves washed over them and onto the sand.

She swam away from him, as far as she could go. He didn't follow her at first, and then she heard him call out.

"Alex! Alex! Where are you going!" he called behind her. But his voice grew more and more faint as she swam. Maybe she'd go until she couldn't feel her arms anymore, and then she'd sink to the bottom and fall asleep before drowning. When she looked back and didn't see Morgan anymore, she swam back, onto the shore. Her arms hurt, but she felt renewed, like the salty water had baptized her. She lay down in the sand, millions of grains clinging to her body. That's when she realized that she'd lost her panties in the ocean. It didn't matter. She was one with nature now.

Two or three yards away from her, a mother turtle was burying her eggs. The turtle's shell was probably four feet in circumference. Alex knew to be very quiet while she laid her

eggs. At this time of year, flashlights and vehicles were never allowed near the turtles. After the mother turtle finished scooping sand over her eggs, she made her way, slowly, back to the ocean. Alex wanted to touch her but knew it might frighten her. Instead, she watched as the mother left her babies on their own, at least for a while.

When Alex stood up, the sand clung to her body. She felt like a monster and wanted to haunt the beach. She didn't want to hold her feelings inside anymore. Farther up on shore, she saw a dock and made her way to it. There were no lights on this part of the beach. She didn't even know where she was. But something led her towards the dock. A desire to explore.

She walked under it, into the darkness. For a second she thought she heard Morgan's voice in the distance, calling her name. She'd never seen the sand go so low under a dock before. Shouldn't she hit the water going this deep? The path took her farther and farther under the dock until she couldn't see the starlight anymore. Up ahead, a candle glowed faintly. It looked like she was in an underground mine of some sort, but that couldn't be possible on the beach. Crabs crawled along the walls. The air smelled like sulfur. The ground under her feet was damp sand.

Following the now lit path, Alex made her way into a large, circular room. Sitting on a throne made of sand was what looked like a giant crab, but must have been a person in a crab suit. Its pinchers danced around like bacteria. She felt like she was in another part of Narnia. She looked about the room and cocked her head to the side.

"Where am I?" Alex asked. She didn't feel self-conscious about being naked because her body was covered in sand.

"How did you get here?" the crab asked. Its voice was high and accompanied by a clicking noise.

“I followed the path under the dock,” Alex said. “How can this exist below sea level?”

“You weren’t supposed to get here,” the crab said. “Now that you’re here, you can’t ever go back.”

“Can I live here?” Alex asked.

The crab nodded. “You’ll have to be tested, to make sure you aren’t carrying illnesses that the others could catch. Well, obviously you have one illness.” It seemed to laugh, but the noise that came out of the crab was more of a seizure of clicks.

“What? I’m not ill!” Alex said.

“You don’t realize where you are?”

“Where’s Morgan?” Alex asked.

“Is Morgan the one who got you here?” the crab asked.

“Morgan is just this kid I met today while I was working. Where is he? He’s probably scared ...”

“Stories aside,” the crab said, “if you make your way deeper into the cavern, you’ll find more like yourself.”

Alex nodded. “Okay, yeah, okay.” She made her way deeper into the cavern, away from the beach and Morgan, and along a path hardly lit by candles, where darkness remained a certainty.

#

By the time the sun lifted into the sky, clouds already covered it. Morgan had been pacing the beach for hours, now hopelessly, searching for Alex. She hadn’t driven anywhere. Had she drowned in the ocean? He could only imagine. Or maybe a homeless guy had taken her. Why had she swum so far away, and so quickly?

His legs weighed him down. They felt like putty. Sand whipped against his calves as a faint breeze blew. His voice hoarse from calling out to her all night, he tried once more. “Alex. Alex where are you?”

Morgan gave up. He went to sit under a dock. He curled up under the wooden planks and lay against the wall of sand to sleep.

VELVET AND BOTTLES

We come home from college and sleep in our parents' houses, sometimes on the couches and sometimes in our old beds, if younger siblings haven't usurped them, changed the color of the walls and bedspread, replaced boomboxes with iPod hook-ups and laptop computers, replaced Nirvana and No Doubt posters with Justin Beiber and Miley Cyrus—it's a crime really—while our parents listen to Pink Floyd and purse their lips.

We spend our nights on the beach, throwing out brown beer bottles into the black ocean, under the diamond watch of Orien, The Big Dipper, and Venus. We lay out, tasting salt, our eyes fixed on the stars, our limbs thrashing through the cool pebbly sand while sand fleas hop over our feet and turtles bury their eggs only yards away from us. This has not changed. I grab a beer and you, you ask me to open yours, so I bite the top off, like I learned from trying to drink while driving. And you are my best friend. My best friend.

We had a hell of a first year at college—the freedom tasted so sweet like freshly picked raspberries from Grandpa's backyard in Maryland. Succulent and juicy and new, so new. We tried drugs like ecstasy, acid, mescaline, and ketamine. We rolled for three days straight and tripped for four. We slept when we felt like it, after snorting white lines because after a while we could—we could sleep and eat and fuck on it. We neglected our classes because they weren't important. What was important was us.

We developed panic disorder, acquired it like Europe acquired the West. And so to calm the shaking, the vulnerability, the numbness, we drank. We drank to stay warm and to cool off, to quench the thirst and to feed the part of the brain that crosses out memories, drops them like an aging actress. And we can't function anymore, so we drink, and we drink, and we drink beers under the velvet sky. And we throw the used green glass bottles into the ocean and we throw our own bodies into the ocean, strip down to nothing, and when we can't swim anymore, we end up on the beach, lying in the sand, moving our arms. Moving our arms through the frictionless sand.

THESIS READING LIST

1. Alvarez, Julia: *In the Name of Salomé*
2. Barthelme, Donald: *Snow White*
3. Boswell, Robert: *The Heyday of the Insensitive Bastards*
4. Camus, Albert: *The Stranger*
5. Card, Orson Scott: *Ender's Game*
6. Chekhov, Anton: *The Witch and Other Stories*
7. Coetzee, J.M.: *Foe*
8. Collins, Suzanne: *Hunger Games* trilogy
9. Currie, Jr., Ron: *Everything Matters*
10. Deane, Seamus: *Reading in the Dark*
11. DeLillo, Don: *White Noise*
12. Dostoevsky, Fyodor: *Crime and Punishment*
13. Douglass, Frederick: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*
14. Egan, Jennifer: *A Visit From the Goon Squad*
15. Eisenberg, Deborah: *The Collected Stories of Deborah Eisenberg*
16. Ellison, Ralph: *Invisible Man*
17. Eugenides, Jeffrey: *The Virgin Suicides*
18. Fante, John: *Ask the Dust*
19. Fitzgerald, F. Scott: *The Great Gatsby*
20. Flaubert, Gustave: *Madame Bovary*

21. Forster, E.M.: *Aspects of the Novel*
22. Gaitskill, Mary: *Bad Behavior*
23. Gay, William: *I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down*
24. Grossman, Lev: *The Magicians*
25. Hemingway, Ernest: *The Short Stories*
26. Hubbard, Susan: *Ethical Vampire Novels*
27. Johnson, Adam: *Emporium*
28. Joyce, James: *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*
29. Kerouac, Jack: *Book of Blues*
30. Knapp, Caroline: *Drinking: A Love Story*
31. Link, Kelly: *Stranger Things Happen*
32. Lightman, Alan: *Einstein's Dreams*
33. McCarthy, Cormac: *The Road*
34. Moore, Lorrie: *Self Help*
35. Nelson, Antonya: *Bound*
36. O'Connor, Flannery: *A Good Man is Hard to Find*
37. Orwell, George: *1984*
38. Paley, Grace: *The Little Disturbances of Man*
39. Poe, Edgar Allen: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*
40. Rowling, J.K.: *Harry Potter*
41. Salinger, J.D.: *Catcher in the Rye*
42. Sartre, Jean Paul: *Nausea*
43. Sedaris, David: *Naked*

44. Thompson, Hunter S.: *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*
45. Tolstoy, Leo: *Complete Short Stories*
46. Tower, Wells: *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*
47. Updike, John: *Rabbit, Run*
48. Vonnegut, Kurt: *Slapstick*
49. Walls, Jeannette: *The Glass Castle*
50. Wroblewski, David: *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*