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Kate Pamela Kostelnik
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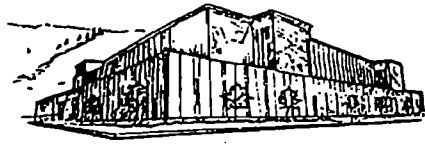
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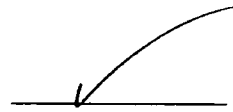
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My Immoderation

by

Kate Pamela Kostelnik

B.A. Colgate University, 2001

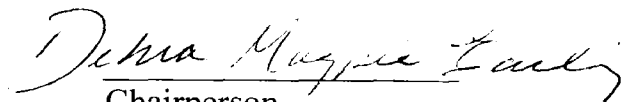
Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements


For the degree of Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 31, 2005

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Chairperson


Dean of Graduate School

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Table of Contents

Part I.

Bob at Sea.....	2
Phys Ed.....	21
Cameo.....	35

Part II.

Admissions.....	52
Oscar's Alice.....	68
The Dancing School.....	89

I.

Bob at Sea

Cammy was away at the mid-afternoon buffet when the ship's doctor talked to Bob Baranski about Chlamydia. In an exam room just bigger than a bathroom stall, the young doctor explained:

"It's treatable, not terribly serious, but thirty percent of females with an untreated Chlamydial infection become sterile."

"Reproductive damage isn't my main concern." Bob said. His eyes stopped on the stirrup table before he could avert them to a poster of a baby seal on the ceiling.

"I would be concerned. Your daughter has a pelvic infection – perhaps it would be better to discuss this with the girl's mother."

Bob petted the velvet box in his left pants pocket but then withdrew his hand. It might have appeared obscene. He explained to the doctor that Gillian's mother, Camille, was his girlfriend. Bob planned to propose on board.

"Technically, she isn't my daughter."

“So you have no relation to the girl and you brought her here without her mother’s knowledge?” The doctor seemed too young to Bob. He looked around the room for a diploma. Maybe the cruise line had picked up the guy from one of those non-accredited medical schools in the Caribbean, where they were currently cruising on a ship named *The Sovereign of the Seas*.

“She was in a knot on the floor of the cabin. Of course I brought her. But I thought it was just dyspepsia.” This was true, but he still felt nervous. Something he’d eaten the night before at the midnight buffet was snaking through his stomach, gurgling and churning.

“I gave her a dose of Zithromax. I’ll put it on your Carnival account. She shouldn’t engage in sexual activity for a week. She was pretty dehydrated so I gave her some Pedialite. I also gave her some ibuprofen for the pain in her legs. She’s growing too quickly.”

“I’m aware of that,” Bob said as he left. He pulled his pants higher on his waist and heard the change in his pockets jingle.

In the waiting room, he tapped the sleeping girl’s shoulder and told her they were done. Gillian scratched her downy right knee and said, *wait a while*. Kathie Lee Gifford sold the Aruba cruise in a poster above her head. Bob studied the ad rather than watch the girl stretch, yawn, and then extricate her shorts from the crevice of her behind.

Their beds, three of them, were bunks that folded from the wall of their cabin, an expensive 8x8 closet. Camille’s was under her daughter’s and Bob’s was on the opposite wall. Their luggage was stowed beneath, but Gillian’s things were everywhere. She left out open bottles of nail polish, bathing suit tops, Tampax, tiny sharp earrings, and balled

up thong underwear. He didn't know how small the bathroom was since he hadn't used it. He'd surrendered it to the women and used a public one two decks below. Bob pulled down Gillian's bunk. She'd taped up pictures of boys with funny haircuts on the wall above her pillow.

"Stop the rocking," she said kicking the covers off as soon as she'd climbed in bed. She rolled onto her stomach and Bob took in the length of her legs, the creases behind her knees.

"Ship's too big to rock. You're just hung over. I won't tell your mother about that, but this other thing - you have to tell her." She asked what he meant and he told her not to be coy. "You'll need to go another doctor for the whole fertility thing."

"Who the hell cares about fertility?"

"You will someday."

"That's exactly what I don't need, Bob. I'm fourteen years old."

"Don't remind me."

"If you tell her, I'll tell her about what you did to me in the bathroom last month."

The fluids sloshing around his intestines became insistent. He locked the door behind him and wasn't sure if he could make the two deck descent. As he jogged towards the restroom on the Riviera deck a gray-faced man wearing sock garters and threadbare boxers leaned out of a cabin door. He scolded Bob for running in the halls. "I was napping."

"I'm sorry." Bob stopped.

"Something chasing you?"

"No."

“Men our age are too old to chase things.”

In the bathroom, Bob looked in the mirror above the sink. He looked twenty years older.

That night, Bob and Camille watched a boy turn a block of ice into an angel and then ate cream puffs shaped like swans at the midnight buffet. Actually, Camille had three in addition to some manicotti rolled fat as baby’s arms, mango ice cream, a cup of pudding garnished with a drink umbrella, fettuccini alfredo that had separated, and an egg salad sandwich shaped like a starfish. He recognized that last item from the lunch buffet and was worried that it might have spoiled. Camille looked happy biting each point and saying how tasty starfishes were, so he didn’t say anything.

As they passed the steel drum band on the Panorama deck, Bob studied the honey-skinned musicians and tried to seem imposing. He posed hoping the sea breeze would fill the hollow spaces in his blue wind breaker. These boys had been sniffing around Gillian for the past week. Now they didn’t give him another look, but it seemed that nobody looked at Bob when the girl wasn’t around.

Bob slept well that night knowing that Gillian was in her bunk, too tired to taunt stewards and busboys.

“Off with that t-shirt Cammy.” Bob said. “Let’s see that bathing suit.”

“Not after all those pastries last night.”

Camille did take it off after Bob reminded her that they were on vacation, the only vacation that she had ever had, and she should eat and wear what she wanted. They were

in chaises on the Lido deck. Children splashed in a saltwater pool surrounded by sun-burnt travelers. A frothy pink drink melted beside their deck-chairs since Cammy had decided it was *too boozy for the afternoon*. They were en route to Labadie, the cruise line's private island off the coast of Cuba. Camille claimed she could see Castro's little hat as the ship passed.

"I'm perfectly happy," she said rubbing zinc on her nose. Bob studied the floral pattern of her bathing suit. The fabric warped over her stomach, elastic flowers stretched to their limits. He was deciding where her belly button was, considering how he knew her entire surface, when Gillian, belly button exposed, distracted him. She jogged towards them in a bikini top so small that her breasts peeked out beneath like twin crescent moons.

Bob shook the creases from his week old *USA Today* and started to reread an article as Gillian and her mother argued about money. Bob gave her a ten on top of her mother's twenty hoping it might occupy her longer.

"It's hot as dick up here," Gillian said and then left them for the pool.

"What did she just say?" Camille asked before replacing her sunglasses and lowered herself one vertebra at a time.

Bob and Camille had met two years prior in an insurance office in Utica, New York where they worked. Camille answered the phones, played solitaire, and hated when the office manager bought the cheap pens. She complained above the percolating coffee maker to her co-workers, so loudly that Bob, who was the office manager, was embarrassed. He apologized by placing a box of Bic Rollerball Deluxes on her desk and

then nearly knocked over a potted palm as he raced around cubicles back to his safe office.

The next day she brought him a pen from the pack and asked him to lunch. At Arby's that afternoon Bob let Camille have the last curly fry. As he watched the kind, thin-lipped woman tap her chin with a napkin he was glad he got out of his office.

Gillian posed by edge of the pool with her back to Bob and Camille. A small sun-burnt crevice smiled vertically above her suit bottoms.

The girl's recent transformation made it difficult to believe that she was really Camille's. Gillian stood at nearly six feet with a smooth aquiline nose and high cheekbones. Camille was shy of five feet and had a turned up nose. She had told Bob, "He played football, on the team, you know." So Gillian was a giant with big, hard, high breasts. She'd shot up with such force that all her baby fat fell off at once. She wasn't beautiful; something about the closeness of her eyes prevented that. He'd never seen anything like her but he was sure that he didn't like her. Even before her transformation they'd never connected; but things were easier then.

When Bob had met Gillian she was twelve. liked horses, lisped, and leaned across the booth at Pizza Hut to whisper to her mother. Not secrets. Camille would listen, laugh, and then report back to Bob that Gillian thought he looked too old and that he had hair in his ears. He was 45, Camille's senior by fifteen years, but knew he seemed older in his brown sweater with holes worn at the sleeves and hairline at the apex of his head. Gillian was chubby and had her mother's mannerisms: tying cherry stems with her tongue, overeating and blushing at anything. He ordered her an extra batch of cheesy breadsticks, said that he liked horses too, and thought it had gone well.

Bob's own daughter, Lucy, had been raised by his ex-wife, Sharon. They divorced when Lucy was two. Sharon claimed Bob bored her, and Bob didn't argue. In her photo on his desk Lucy was pretty in a purple sweater, with shiny lips and a slight overbite. Over the phone he told her to wear her retainers and mind her mother.

He'd secretly attended some of her basketball games in junior high. She played center as a seventh grader on a team called the Lady Tigers, but Bob had a hard time keeping his eyes on her. She'd get lost in the galloping mass of shrieking teens and swinging ponytails.

Now married and living in Saratoga Springs, Lucy repaid his polite detachment with frosty phone conversations limited to PTA gossip, church bazaar disasters, and terse gratitude for the checks he sent.

Gillian floated in the salt-water pool on the Lido deck with her breasts rising above the water like sister islands.

"The next cruise, let's do an Alaskan: polar bears and glacial bays." Bob said forcing his eyes away from the girl.

"Bears make me nervous," Camille said.

The cocktail waiters and the towel boys dawdled on the perimeter of the pool and waited to see Gillian kick off the side and do a back flip. A pool technician checked the pH on all sides. She arched her back and rose above the water before making a turn under the surface. An activities director held up ten fingers for her score. Camille wasn't watching. She gave the pink drink another sip.

The girl got out, wrung out her hair, and then took off again.

"Don't be late for dinner," Camille yelled.

“I think that we should talk about Gillian,” Bob said.

“Bob, you know how much I appreciate bringing her along. I couldn’t have left her home. I can pay you back if that’s what you mean.”

“No, no, that’s not what I mean at all.”

“When I was her age, I never did anything like this. Well, I wasn’t much older than her when I got pregnant. This must be fun for her.”

“Well, yes, I guess it could be.”

“Do you think that she’s happy Bob? She’s been quiet lately. And she hasn’t made any girlfriends on board.”

“Cammy, she doesn’t have any girlfriends at home either.”

“That’s just the age. But do you think she’s happy?”

“Happy?”

“Yes, happy.”

“Cammy, I think your daughter is miserable.”

“Oh, no, you’re wrong. Pretty girls can’t be miserable.”

Bob looked at the pink polish on Camille’s toes. She rubbed her feet together and then stretched out beneath the sunshine. He wanted to tell her that she was beautiful and wonderful in a way that the girl could never be.

“I need a dip,” she said before he had a chance.

Bob used the ladder to lower himself into the pool after Camille. Moving through the heavy water, he passed small children wearing swimmies and old women in white floral bathing caps. He came up behind Camille and touched her waist. Droplets fell from her short hair as he lifted her, light in water. She told him to stop fooling around.

Holding his nose, Bob plunged downward to kiss her big toe, like a pink shell at the bottom. Beneath the surface sunlight undulated on the pool's floor. Four small girls in bright bathing suits were having a tea party. Kneeling in a circle, they mimed the pouring and sipping with their pinkies erect until they all needed air and stood up. He watched their headless bodies in a circle beside him, thin and fidgety, spasming rather than swimming. Their splashing hands broke the surface and reached for him. Bob ascended to fresh air and Camille. He reached for her again and pulled her through the pool like someone teaching a child to swim. In that hollow filled with salt water, high above the blue ocean her legs trailed behind her as the sun burned her skin. She laughed and Bob believed that she *was* perfectly happy. He knew that she would say yes.

The Gauguin Dining Room's ceiling was thatched and the light fixtures looked like torches. Copies of heavy footed nymphets stared at Bob from menus, mural portions, and embossed dinner plates. Apparently, the master was also chatty and his quotations were copied onto cocktail napkins.

“Women want to be free. That is their right. But surely men are not the ones standing in their way. The day they stop situating virtue below their navels, they shall be free. Perhaps, healthier too,” Camille read aloud and then sighed. “I wonder why they picked such an odd one.” Bob didn't think she understood what it meant, but he wasn't sure either.

Gillian pretended to eat a salad while Camille lifted piles of steaming lasagna into her thin-lipped mouth, always fixed in slight smile even as she ate.

“Why don’t you try something with protein? I saw a lovely veal Florentine on the far end of the buffet.” she offered.

“No,” Gillian said and set down her fork.

Gillian would eat, not a lot, but enough. The anorexic act was nothing more than a demonstration of self control. When the girl mooned at herself in mirrors and spoke through clenched teeth Bob had thought that she might be a little slow. She had barely spoken during her thirteenth year. He avoided her and signed checks for a speech therapist. Transformed by fourteen. she showcased powers beyond appetite suppression and flirtation: she could fool her mother.

“Sure Mom, would you please get me some of that Veal Florentine.”

Camille never noticed that Gillian never ate the compromise meal, and she didn’t notice that this veal was cut into pieces and then pushed around her plate over the face of Tahitian Eve.

Gillian was watching the tables at the center of the dining room: the captain and VIPs whose staterooms had windows and beds that didn’t fold from the wall. Bob followed the tilt of her head and lips. in full pout, which then pointed towards Portuguese bus boys, teenagers stealing sips of beer. Hispanic waiters, and the multicolored group of kitchen runners who poured containers of slick sauced chicken with mango chutney into the buffet’s steam tables. Every time Camille saw a new or intriguing item she rushed to the buffet before the elderly crowd could beat her. Someone from a far table exclaimed: *crab cakes*. Camille was gone.

“I see that you’re feeling better,” Bob said to Gillian.

“I wasn’t that sick.”

“That doctor said that Chlamydia is serious.”

“I took some medicine and it`s done.”

“Look, Gilly, you`re a lovely young lady. but you can`t treat men like you do.”

“What do you know?”

Bob smoothed the breast pocket of his Hawaiian shirt. “I`m going to need to tell your mother what happened.”

“Then I`ll tell her about what happened in the bathroom back home.”

“Fine, tell her. I just don`t care anymore.”

The girl`s pout twisted into a frown.

Camille returned and began loading their plates with breaded meats and pineapple pieces.

After dinner they went to the theater on the Rivera deck. There was a Broadway review and Bob noticed that most of the dancers had been spending time at the buffet as well.

As soon as Gillian took off for the casino, Bob bought Camille a glass of champagne and asked her to marry him. The ring fit snug on her swollen finger. They looked for stars but the lights in the Sky Deck bar were too bright to see the night sky.

Bob`s bunk groaned beneath their lovemaking that night. He was glad that Gillian didn`t come back to the cabin.

“Who the hell wants to go to Labadie? Why aren`t we stopping in Haiti?” Gillian asked. People poured from the vessel like ants. *The Sovereign of the Seas*. too much

like a giant white ant farm, would anchor off the tiny private island for the night so guests could frolic on a beach. buy the locals wooden chotchkies, and eat spit roasted swine.

“Gillian, believe me, you don’t want to go to Haiti. It’s currently the worst place on earth.” Bob was glad to get off the boat.

He bought Gillian a carved jewelry box shaped like a turtle before the three of them reclined on sagging chaises and dug holes in the sand with their feet. Elderly passengers under umbrellas snored beneath the afternoon sun. Just as the smell of hot pig began to overtake the little island, Camille made the announcement.

“Gillian, when we get back to New York, Bob and I are going to be married.”

“What the fuck?”

“Watch your language young lady!” Bob said but it felt wrong. Would he ever be comfortable disciplining the girl? Despite the ninety-seven degree heat he remembered the cold Utica mornings waiting for Gillian to get out of the shower so he could shave. Her floral soaps and lotions stayed in the steamy air. They made him feel unsteady and tired. The lock on Camille’s bathroom door was broken and Bob never got around to fixing it.

“You can’t marry him. He’s so old and dull.”

“Gilly, don’t be rude,” Camille said softly.

“But mom, you can’t marry this old pervert. He walked in on me in the shower. He’s going to molest me.”

Bob knew that this was coming but he still wasn’t prepared. When he would wait for his turn in the bathroom he’d get close to the door. the wood was warm on his face.

The smells were peachy and then powdery. Something she used reminded him of strawberries even though it smelled nothing like the original fruit.

“What’s this?” Camille asked Bob.

His sunburned face got hotter and he envied a bearded man asleep on a beach towel to his left.

“Sure. I walked in on her, but it was an accident. I thought it was you in there.”

“But Mom, he saw everything. He watches me all the time.”

“Yeah. I looked, but just for a second. It was an accident and she’s been holding it over me for weeks now.”

Gillian was up and running through the sand back to the ship. Her mother rose to follow her.

“Listen, Camille-” Bob began but his fiancée wouldn’t.

Bob was alone with a thousand chaises as the sun moved closer to the sea. He clasped his hands beneath his belly. When he closed his eyes he saw Gillian’s small shoulders and sharp hips. One nipple was more erect than the other and her skinny legs bowed outward. These things were precise in his memory. Bob the office manager, kind man, and father, had taken meticulous stock of her body in that shower so that he would never have to look again. If he opened the bathroom door once and looked just once, he could still be innocent. Alone on the beaches of Labadie, he knew that he wasn’t.

When he boarded the ship, he stopped at his bathroom on the Riviera deck. The doctor who had treated Gillian was standing in the doorway of a nearby cabin that Bob recognized. It belonged to the old man who had scolded him. The doctor supervised

two stewards carrying out a black body bag. As they passed, he told Bob that these things happened on cruise ships all the time.

Gillian didn't make it to dinner that night. Camille ate her Chilean sea bass silently. In the girl's absence the waiters and bus boys neglected their table. Shrimp tails spilled off of Camille's plate. Bob's mouth was dry without water refills or a second scotch and soda. He sucked on his ice cubes until his mouth was moist enough to talk.

"Camille, I love you, and I won't let you down. You have to believe that I'd never hurt your daughter either."

"Christ, Bob, of course I don't believe Gilly. I might not be the best parent but I'm not an idiot." She reached for his hand over the table and elbowed a puddle of cocktail sauce. "You're going to help me with her. We'll do this together."

Bob didn't answer but smiled until one of Gauguin's yellow women on the wall distracted him. Why had she sided with him so quickly?

"You weren't even a little worried?" he asked. She finished chewing, laughed, and then asked what he meant. "You don't think that I'm capable of something like that?"

"Are you trying to be funny, Bob?"

"No. Do you think that you know me well enough to marry me?" He bit down on an ice cube.

"Of course, I do. I know you, Bob." She released his hand.

After dinner they wandered the decks looking down at the black ocean. Bob remarked on how it was such a wonder that gravity could hold so much water. Camille

said it was lovely with the moon on it and she was right too. They were walking over the shuffle board courts when Bob looked down to the deck below and saw Gillian with her skirt hiked around her waist. She was pressed between a spool of rope and a steward with black hair. Whatever noise they were making was carried off by the evening sea breezes. Camille, still standing on the shuffle board lines, hadn't seen them.

Before she could make it to the rail, he grabbed handfuls of her short hair, turned her away from the view and kissed her.

"Are you alright?" She put her hand on his chest. "Your heart is racing and you're sweaty."

Camille turned away from him. The scalloped edge of her slip hit the back of her calves and he could smell the cloud of perfume around her, like her world had its own atmosphere. His shoulders relaxed and his heart slowed. He recalled the way she hooked her brassiere back at home in Utica, fastening it in front and then straining to pull it around. She bleached her upper lip and hid Twinkies in her sock drawer. But as much as he tried to make these images terrible, they really weren't so bad. She was guileless and honest, exactly who Bob wanted for a wife.

He managed another look at the couple below. They had finished and Gillian yanked her skirt down. It rode up again as she crossed the deck away from the steward but she did nothing to fix it. She was like a little girl on a playground, not aware or embarrassed enough to be modest.

His daughter, Lucy on the Lady Tiger basketball team had been like that: elated, boyish and bold on the court. Her older teammates, spastic and self-aware with small breasts could barely control their limbs. Bob assured himself that he was fixated on this

difference, the few months separating the worlds of fearless little girls and demure new women. He watched them play behind wired glass windows, separated from cheering parents and shouting cheerleaders. He'd attended every game one season until the school principal asked him to leave.

"Lucy Baranski is my daughter," he explained but still felt guilty and left without further argument. He searched the court one last time not for his daughter, but his favorite player: number thirty-three with long white arms, little breasts and orange hair. Bob never went back to the school and witnessed Lucy's maturation in the progression of school photos that Sharon sent. Despite her growth she would always remain the little girl with the decent lay-up, nothing at all like Gillian.

"Let's go to bed," Bob said to Camille.

He forced a smile, gave Camille his arm, and took her to their cabin. He unlocked the door but didn't follow her inside.

"I'll be back. There's something I need to do."

"Even if you don't find her, you're still going to be a good father," Camille said as she shut the door.

The phone booths on the Lobby Deck were empty. Bob pulled the folding door shut in the farthest one. Lucy's husband answered the phone, didn't seem to remember Bob, but then told him to wait while he woke her up.

"What is it Bob?" she asked. He apologized and told her he only needed a few minutes.

"How are things?"

"Bob," she said impatiently.

He took a deep breath and began,

“I need you to tell me things you never told your mother.” he said and then looked out. A group of cabaret performers in tights passed the booth watching Bob like he was a fish in an aquarium.

“What?”

“What were you like as a teenager?”

“I was fine. What’s this about?”

“Were you promiscuous?” he asked.

“I was in the Key Club.”

“But were you, um, active?”

“I can’t talk about this, you’re my father.”

“Only technically, Lucy, and whatever you tell me isn’t going to matter because you don’t give a damn about me.” He listened to her breathe for a few seconds while he waited.

“Yes, I was having sex. That’s what we did after Key Club.”

“How many guys?”

“Bob, please.”

“And what else?”

“Lots of stuff. There’s plenty of trouble to get into in upstate New York.”

“Did your mother know?”

“Of course not. Can I go to bed now? Carpool in the morning and Joe has an early meeting.”

“Does Joe know about this stuff?”

“He wouldn’t care, I was just a kid.” she whispered. “What’s going on Bob?”

“Nothing you’d care about. You’re lucky I wasn’t around when you were growing up.”

“Fine, now can I go back to sleep?”

He told her good night and then hung up.

Bob had a five dollar beer at the Casino bar and considered what should happen next.

At breakfast he told Camille that he wasn’t ready to re-marry. She set down her orange juice and didn’t seem surprised.

“I know I told you that I wouldn’t let you down,” he began, but she stopped him. She didn’t punish him even though he wanted it. After breakfast she folded his shirts and repacked for him.

“I know this is about Gilly,” she said shutting his suitcase. Maybe she had known all along.

“She had Chlamydia,” Bob said.

“I don’t doubt it, but you have to know she’ll grow out of this. She’ll turn out fine and you’ll be a good father.”

Bob had already realized that Gillian would get past it. His own daughter had turned out just as boring as him. But he didn’t care what Gillian would become.

The cruise line offered Bob an empty room on the Riviera deck, an expensive solution. He would finally have a private bathroom. It didn’t disturb him that the former occupant was the man who had scolded him in the hallway, the man who had died on

board. This room, smaller and darker than his first, was well below the surface of the water. He imagined giant squid and schools of bluefish passing in the night just beyond the wall of the ship, close to his head on the pillow. Alone, he felt safe, like closing his office door back in Utica. Nothing could tempt him.

Phys Ed

Vic, Dick and Mickey

Mary's nylon jog suit swishes between her thighs like whispers as she crosses the classroom. She's passing out dittoed anatomical diagrams of male genitals for her class to label. All the PE teachers at Ocean Regional High School are assigned different supplemental courses that convene in classrooms rather than on baseball diamonds. Teachers with tenure get CPR and Driver's Ed, but Mary Stollo and her boyfriend, Kevin Spinoza, are each stuck with a section Sex Ed for freshmen. Kevin's in an adjacent room and she can hear his class laughing through the southern wall.

"I can label everything from the vas deferens to the epididymis," the girl in the front row says without raising her hand. "I can draw it too; we were quizzed on that in grade school."

"Of course you can." Mary hands her a ditto. She doesn't remember the girl's name, but can tell from the fresh smell of her clothing and light smear of lip-gloss that

she's from Little Falls, the nicest of the ten towns that feed into the regional school. The Little Falls middle school prepares their college-bound pupils with conversational French and Algebra I. These kids, with PTA parents, SUV's and high standardized test scores undermine Mary every class period.

One row over, Vic is doodling on his ditto. The scrotum gets Mickey Mouse ears; the urethra is drawn into a bong. Vic is from Union, a town an hour away that buses kids rather than build them a school.

"Now, Victor, at least try to label that penis. This is important," she says. Vic sucks on his candy necklace and continues to make dick into Mickey. Mary is glad that he's quiet this class period but worries about next week. As per the curriculum stipulated by the board of education, she's planning a lecture on the dangers of alcohol during pregnancy. The textbook, *Health and Feelings*, has pictures of fetal alcohol syndrome victims with sloping foreheads and far-set eyes. They could be pictures of Vic and his brothers.

Vic shows his graffiti to a boy with a pierced lip behind him. The Union boys, clustered in the corner, have cystic pimples and pants larger than clowns'. They chuckle and pound fists while two black girls with heavy earrings suck their teeth and whisper. Some of the students seem high and a few haven't acknowledged the assignment. The Little Falls kids, with the leather bottomed back-packs and roller ball pens have finished. They're either watching the clock or playing Tetris on their graphing calculators.

Mary teaches sexual education to the gifted, over-privileged, poorly fed, deprived, intoxicated, apathetic, and even retarded; nobody learns a thing.

I's Getting Married

The next period, Mary is in her office behind wired glass in a corner of the girls' locker room. Students get seven minutes to change into gym clothes. She watches for fights and suspicious stomach bulges.

"Hello, Miss," an attractive 11th grader named Shawnletta says from the doorway. She's wearing a pair of sweatpants, new Nikes, and a red push-up bra. She has honey colored skin and speaks with hard emphatic syllables followed by, either clicks for approval or "for real?" for dissatisfaction.

"Shawnletta, did you forget a T-shirt?"

"No, Miss. You's play'n, do I look like a retard or something'? It's real important," Shawletta says holding up her left hand and looking away. The sparkly thing on her ring finger is resplendent, even beneath florescent bulbs. Mary asks if it's an engagement ring even though she already knows.

"Duh, Miss Strollo. I's getting married," she says and then flips off a group of white girls with died black hair by the lockers.

"Do, you need to see the nurse?" Mary asks.

"No, Miss. I'm in love," she says clearly. "Shit gets all stolen in the locker room, I'm not stupid. Lock it in the office."

Mary takes the ring from the girl, tells her to watch her language and finish getting dressed. The rest of the girls line up by the door to the gym. They are pimped, overweight, purple-haired, arrogant, anorexic, made up, pierced, misplaced, terribly, terribly insecure and doing what they can to endure the humiliation of high school physical education.

It had been worse for Mary as a freshman ten years prior in a tougher regional high school in Newark. As the meekest most passive girl in her gym class, she absorbed frustrations and submitted to verbal abuse. Once she got a chunk of her hair cut off.

At Rutgers she majored in Education, determined to make everything easier for her students but she's mostly frustrated and mystified. Her semester of student teaching had been fun, playing soccer in East Brunswick with Hispanic kids. They eventually taught her about the game. Days after she'd been hired by Ocean Regional the school board turned progressive. They changed the freshman section of health from *Health and Hygiene to Sex, Protection, and Feelings*. Had she known she'd have to discuss the IUD and field inquiries about *rim jobs*, she might have taken the safer route and taught Spanish. Conjugation is much easier than coitus.

Fifth period is her lunch hour. She eats tater tots in her office in front of a typewriter loaded with a blank sheet of paper. This will be her resignation letter if she ever makes up her mind. She spins her whistle on her finger until her free time runs out.

Beer-B-Q

Kevin lives in Union in an apartment complex that reminds Mary of a barrack. They sit beside it in the late September sun, eating hot dogs and listen to the neighbors' pop music and screaming altercations. Mary leans in to wipe a gob of mayo that makes a snail trail on Kevin's chin before landing on his Mets t-shirt. She uses the same napkin to pick up a few cigarette butts and fast food wrappers in the grass. Kevin's dirty lawn chair has left a stain on her jeans.

Kevin Spinoza had slapped the seat of Mary's nylon gym suit in the teacher's lounge two weeks prior. It had made a solid thwack and Mary, somewhat chubby, feared it revealed just how tightly she was packed into her pants. She agreed to go out with him.

The PE department has to stick together at Ocean Regional High School. The other teachers, with master's degrees and proclaimed *love of the challenge of diversity*, don't include them in faculty lounge fun. They don't get the gossip, and when Kevin goes out to smoke, bringing Mary with him for the company, the English teachers with chalked-up dress pants constrict their circles and don't permit people in sweats to enter.

"Aren't you afraid of sleeping so close to crack dealers?" Mary asks cutting into her burger with a plastic knife.

"It's meth actually."

"This neighborhood is scary."

"This neighborhood is fine. I'm saving for a house anyway." He fixes his fourth hot dog.

"I saw a cute starter in Little Falls on my way to work yesterday." She hands him the ketchup.

"Little Falls? Hell no, do I look like I'm made of money? A house right here in Union. Ed Casey says there's one in his neighborhood."

"Ed that does driver's Ed? Doesn't he have like eleven children and can't afford anything else?"

"Nine actually." Ed Casey was a former Rutgers basketball star until he ruined his career with barbiturates. They slowed his speech and gave him enough patience, or

dementia, to teach driver's education to sophomores. The English department referred to him as Ethan Frome, but Mary kept forgetting to look up who that was.

The last bite of dog churns in Kevin's mouth as he asserts that Union *is good enough for him*.

After doing his dishes and tossing the spoiled food from his fridge, Mary sits beside Kevin in his basement apartment. He's watching Sports Center and during a commercial break he asks her to stay the night.

"I can't, I have to put together my lesson for Monday, the IUD." Mary says. She finds her windbreaker and kisses him on the top of the head. A hard mess of stiff hair prickles her lips.

"Those who won't do, teach," Kevin says and then laughs. He doesn't follow the curriculum in his section of Sex Ed. Rather than embarrass himself and his students he lets them watch movies. It infuriates Mary that he gets away with it but his students adore him.

"You should try it Kevin, trying to explain this shit to them. I don't think you could do it."

"I know I can't do it. They're old enough to make their own mistakes."

"And what do you suggest that I do?"

"When they ask you a question, answer it. That's all you have to do. It wouldn't hurt to learn their names either; we're a month into the semester."

Real Men Don't Eat Pussy

"What if I can't breathe during cuntylingus?"

“That’s cunnilingus, Gerry, and I’m sorry but that question is inappropriate.”

Mary says, even though all the questions are.

“My father said that real men don’t eat pussy.”

“What does it taste like?”

“I once saw a guy with one nut bigger than the other!”

“Well, yes, that can happen,” Mary says, attempting to hush them by pushing down the air in front of her.

“What if I have to piss during sex?”

“Well, perhaps if you had labeled the penis ditto from last week, Jerome, you would know that the urethra is blocked during intercourse, and it is physically impossible to urinate,” she says although she questions her own explanation. Mary has just finished the lecture on the dangers of smoking during pregnancy and asked if anyone *had any further questions on the subject of birth defects.*

“What’s a trip ‘round the world?”

“I don’t know what that is.” Mary says as one of the girls with too much eyeliner in the back row laughs so hard she snorts.

“My sister had to get a C-section and now she’s Franken-belly.”

Mary exhales. This is a subject she can talk about.

“My sister, Angie, had to get one too. She’s not big like me, tiny-thin. She takes after my mother. She complains that you can see the scar when she wears a bikini, but scars fade. Well, that’s what I tell her.” Mary says looking down at her stomach.

“Will we be quizzed on your pathetic life, Miss Strollo?” the girl that can label the *vas deferens* asks. Her pretty friend, Liz, sitting to her left, nudges her and frowns.

“Melissa, that’s rude,” Liz whispers. The entire class is silent now. Even Vic, who had been loudly humming Metallica, shuts up.

“I’m sorry, Miss Strollo, but this is such a stupid class and I don’t see why we have to take it. I mean of course we won’t use saran wrap instead of a condom, and most of us in here aren’t stupid enough to get knocked up.” Melissa says. Some of her Little Falls friends confer with nods. Liz crouches low at her desk.

“Fuck-you, you little rich bitch,” Tanya, a tattooed Union girl says from the back row. “You think you’s better than me?”

“Why do you think that that there aren’t abortion clinics in Little Falls? There are like three in your town. There’s evidence.” Melissa says. Tanya stands, ready to attack.

Mary absorbs the force of Tanya’s sturdy body as she charges toward Melissa. Her ring-laden hands flail and Mary hears her jacket rip. Desks screech and a male voice announces, “Bitch fight!”

Mary holds Tanya back. Melissa has backed into a corner. Tanya’s body slackens; she’s already quit. She outweighs Mary by at least twenty and could have tossed her aside to get to Melissa if she really wanted to.

Everyone is still shouting when Mary takes Tanya by the shoulders. Tanya’s pupils are huge and she hasn’t caught her breath. She holds her clawed hands at her side, not able to relax yet. Either sweat or tears melt Tanya’s makeup and a tan drop rolls down her nose and into her mouth.

“You got her,” Mr. Moore says from the doorway. He’s one the larger hall monitor/bouncers at Ocean Regional who must have heard the struggle from the hall. He says something into his walky-talky.

“She’s not worth it.” Mary says to Tanya before Mr. Moore takes the big red-faced girl by the arm. “And her too.” Mary says pointing to Melissa in the corner.

“That’s ridiculous,” a blonde Little Falls girl says. “That piece of trash tried to jump Melissa and she has to go the principal, too? I’m telling my father about this, he’s a lawyer.”

“Fine, tell him,” Mary says, as Mr. Moore escorts both girls out of the classroom.

The Twenty-Minute Mile

It isn’t a race, not even close. A handful of kids jog on the innermost lane, but most move in pairs like flaneurs. Some have refused altogether and are lying in the crabgrass at the center of the track.

It’s mile running day and all four PE teachers have combined their classes to stimulate competition. They sit on the bleachers beside the finish line with stop-watches all ticking past the eleventh minute of the one mile run. A boy that Mary recognizes as one of Kevin’s students runs by holding up four-fingers to signify his last lap.

“That one there, he’s cheating. It’s not his fourth lap, only his third,” she says pointing. Kevin looks up, touches Mary’s thigh, and then goes back to his *Asbury Park Press*.

“Let him skip,” he says. “Kadeem’s having a rough week. You gotta let some stuff slide.”

Ed Casey is spending an inordinate amount of time going over a grocery list. Mary looks over his shoulder and sees that he writes in loopy lower case letters like a

child would. The 'p' in "pancake mix" is backward. He folds the list and puts it into the pocket of his shorts.

Ms. Blaze, on his left, is still fixed on her stopwatch. She's been a gym teacher for twenty years and has to order her fanny packs specially to accommodate her waist. She screams "go, go!" to the only two joggers from her sophomore section and then glowers at a white student with a red afro supine on the grass.

"I'll see your big head in summer school, Mr. Silverstein!" she yells as he rolls onto his stomach. She turns to her coworkers and says, "These kids are a bunch of turkeys. I've nearly had it."

"Come on Blazy, nobody likes mile day," Kevin offers.

"I'm failing half my class this semester and that's just the way it is. They need discipline."

"These kids behave exactly how they're treated," Ed says and then pulls out his grocery list again before walking away from the group.

"I'll never be as good with my class as Ed is," Kevin says. He folds his newspaper.

"But, you're great. They love you," Mary says. "I wish I could reach them like you can."

"It gets easier," he says before inviting her over for another beer-B-Q.

Sandwich

Three weeks later Kevin has closed escrow on a split-level Union house with bad drywall work, a wet bar in the basement, and one bedroom. Mary knows it was the bar

that sealed the deal. She's sitting on his black leather couch in front of his entertainment system. His kitchen supplies are still in boxes, but the speakers are wired and his framed picture of Patrick Ewing is above the cinder stained fireplace. He hands her another beer before removing his t-shirt. His pants and boxers come off in one motion but the socks stay on.

"Can we go into the bedroom?" she asks, trying not to look at his penis. He explains that he hasn't put the mattress down yet.

"Well, okay." Mary says, pushing a sub wrapper aside and reaching for her purse. "I have a condom with me," she says, holding the red plastic square beside her smile.

"No condom. I hate those things."

"Kevin, please wear a condom," Mary asks, still smiling.

"No, no way, no dice. Those things are for *bucaiolo!*"

"Please. Kevin, it's important."

"Why? I'm clean."

Mary doesn't answer. Facts from her last lesson scroll through her head.

Condoms are the third most popular form of contraception in the U.S. after female sterilization and the pill. Condoms should not be used with petroleum based lubricants. Condoms must be used consistently and correctly to provide maximum protection. None of these are good reasons.

"Condoms are effective against pregnancy, HIV, and other STDs," she says and already feels like a jerk.

"Look, I'm not one of your students. You gotta let some stuff slide."

Of course he isn't one of the stupid kids in third period. It's sex with an adult and it's Kevin; he's wonderful.

When she wakes up she sees the cleft of his naked ass in front of the television. He's holding another Subway sandwich and watching Bryant Gumble. He waves the sandwich at Mary and some of the shredded lettuce falls on the floor.

"No thanks," she says. She isn't hungry but he convinces her to take a few bites.

"You like the place?"

"It's not so bad." She looks around for her t-shirt.

"I bought it for us."

Mary considers that marrying Kevin may not be so bad either. It would be a good excuse to quit her job.

Population Control

"Don't tell me that you're engaged too, Liz," Mary says to the girl who appears in her office before third period. "There are three engaged girls in this school under eighteen."

Liz, one of the few polite Little Falls girls is pale, nearly blue and when Mary looks down at her hands she sees that Liz's nails are chewed bloody to the cuticle.

"Is something the matter?" she asks but already knows what's going on.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Stollo. I couldn't tell anyone. It's really just embarrassing that something so stupid could happen to me."

Mary asks who the father is and the girl says that she isn't sure.

"Everything is going to be alright," Mary tells her.

“What the hell does that mean?” Liz asks.

“It means I’m sure you’ll make the right decision.”

“That’s bullshit Mr. Strollo, and you know it,” Liz says before leaving the wired-glass office.

During Family Life, Mary doesn’t feel like delivering her lecture on STDs so she gives them a free period. Liz’s seat, in the cluster of Little Falls girls, is empty, and they titter about the upcoming homecoming dance and the PSAT. Mary balances her checkbook and notices more than a few checks made out to Subway. She’s been Kevin’s girlfriend for over a month. A Union boy’s voice rises above the quiet chatter. *“Miss Strollo, Jerome told me that it hurts when he pisses. Does he have VD?”*

“If Jerome is having a problem with his genitals he should go to the nurse,” Mary says, without looking up. The class is hysterical but she hears Jerome’s feeble attempt to rise above the bedlam. “You lying, that ain’t true, he’s playin. ain’t nothing wrong with my cock.”

“Miss Strollo, do I have to wear a condom even if I’m a virgin surgeon?”

Mary looks up but doesn’t catch who owns this one. They’ll keep going if she doesn’t take control now.

“You should always wear a condom, to prevent the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases as well as to prevent pregnancy. You should never have sex without a condom.” She puts her checkbook aside.

“Condoms and birth control are just a means to control population explosion of the wrong kind of people.”

“Birth control and sexual health are not class based issues”

“But I hate those Jimmy hats. They chafe my junk and my girlfriend don’t make me wear ‘em.”

“Well then you need to be the responsible party and put one on yourself. It isn’t worth the risk.”

“My man just won’t wear one. He just won’t. I ain’t gonna force him. I mean I agree with you Miss, but what can I do?”

“You don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to do. Your body is your own. If your boyfriend is forcing you into an unhealthy relationship, then he shouldn’t be your boyfriend.”

The class is chaos. They are loud, laughing, unresponsive, arrogant, abrasive, angry, misguided, misunderstood, irreverent, ugly, and ignorant. There really isn’t much more she can do for them. She winks at Vic before leaving.

Mary is standing outside Kevin’s classroom looking through window in the door. The room is dark and they’re watching a movie but Mary can’t see which one. Kevin is in the front row with his legs resting atop a desk. His hands clasp over his head and he is laughing and occasionally clapping. His students seem happy. She has her hand on the door-knob. A month ago she might have gone in and asked for his help, but not today.

By the trophy case she breaks into a jog. One of the hall monitors gives her a dirty look but she doesn’t care. Outside it’s warm for October.

Cameo

I knock the tray of deviled eggs from the sill when the three of them walk into the party. Ali is standing in the middle of two other girls and she's tiny, in a new body. I recognize her cameo necklace first, and then her face, however uncomplicated by folds of flesh, becomes familiar. She's a sapling bolstered by two stiffer stakes on either side. Her protectors don't give me a second look but Ali seems to recognize me. My lovely eggs have fallen onto the snow two stories below. I can't let her distract me; I'm cooking.

It's late January and I'm catering, pro-bono, Super Bowl Sunday at Tom's second floor Jamaica Plain apartment. Tom said he'd rather get drunk and high than fuss with the *squaw work*. I'm an excellent cook even if it is simple fanfare.

Egg yolks break and then gush up between my fingers as I assemble meatballs. It's a sensational texture, fleshy and wet, a massage of ground-meat. I tell Tom that the buffalo wings are almost ready and that the sauce is *magnificent*.

"That's super. Patty." Tom says. He is wiry and handsome. I'm neither of those things. I usually correct people when they use the diminutive and carefully pronounce *Patrick*, but Tom can call me whatever he likes. I'm in love with him.

Ali backs away from the kitchen table as the fifth platter of seven-layer dip is put down. There are thirty-five layers of toppings oozing with orange grease and only three bags of tortilla chips. I could run to the store before my meatballs brown but I'd have to pass Ali standing in the vestibule. And what am I going to say? The last time I saw her she was fatter than I am and she wanted to have sex with me.

It's getting harder to maneuver around the kitchen amongst the party guests. The keg line is inconveniently close to my work area and a tall, broad-shouldered blonde steps on my foot.

There are a lot of girls here. Tom has too many girlfriends. At least that's what he tells me from over the cubicle wall that divides us at work. He says things about them, the things they can do and the things they let him do to them: things that I couldn't repeat without blushing or laughing. He feels the need to highlight his virile heterosexuality but he isn't immature: he's hiding something. Tom also tells the other guys at work and most of them are here today. We write code for a firm near Faneuil Hall called, Techstar.

Matt, in encryption, is already drunk on wine coolers. He punches my elbow and says, "Nice balls. Patty," and then lifts a meatball from the pan. His glasses fog up as he dips it into the sauce on the back burner and dribbles on the stovetop. Some gets in his long wheat colored hair as he takes a bite.

"Well would you look at that sassy wench." Matt says pointing at Ali with a piece of broccoli. Matt, or Mathias, as he likes to be called, re-enacts medieval battles on

weekends. I went to one with him in Waltham last summer. Drunk on ale. he let me kiss him behind the port-a-johns for a few minutes before pushing me away. He told me he respected my lifestyle choice, was flattered, but just wasn't *that way*. Techstar brings in sensitivity trainers every month.

"Stop disturbing the vegetable arrangement." I swat the floret from his hand.

"Relax, big guy." Matt says. "It's just food." Finally he leaves me for the game.

People spill over from the living room into the kitchen and stand in small clusters with handfuls of chips. I don't know many besides the guys from work, but they've all got that Jamaica Plain vibe; liberal, self-righteous, earnest, with hand knit sweaters, and a propensity for world music. I can peg them even more specifically. Compulsively neat law students with fresh haircuts are talking torts and Bush-bashing. A glassy eyed girl isolated in the corner scribbling notes into an empty box of Marlboros. A few freaks from the Berklee College of Music in black turtlenecks make a meal from the hors d'oeuvres.

And then there's Ali still slumped in the vestibule. The friends she arrived with no longer protect her. The last time I saw her. maybe a year and a half ago. she was at least 150 pounds heavier. Is that even possible? I peer around the fridge to watch her. I stroke my beard and feel the fold of skin and then the roll of my double chin beneath my facial hair. It's supposed to hide the extra weight on my face. my mother's suggestion. I'm hiding behind facial hair and a fridge, but I'm still fat. Ali is thin. Ali is so damned thin.

**

On a Sunday in September. I took the T to the Brigham Circle stop. clumsily maneuvered out of the plastic bench and around the other commuters. Overweight

people are never popular on public transportation. I had enrolled in a study at the New England Baptist Hospital in Boston. University hospitals pay hefty sums just to measure body fat indexes, push pills, and probe into family histories. That particular study fed me a cocktail of ephedrine, Ma Huang, and a pharmaceutical grade speed (unless I was one of the unfortunate test subjects who got stuck with the sugar pills), for around a grand.

My mother had read about it in the *Globe* and called to tell me that it was the launching point of my life. I didn't give a damn about losing the weight or launching anything, but the money sounded good. I frequent Italian restaurants in the north end, the ones that make their own pasta. Hand rolled gnocchi has made a mess of my credit.

According to mom my weight has ruined me. She's one of those mawkish, pretty women who believe that *life begins with love*: that's the way she talks too. She knows I'm gay, but believes that there isn't much point to my preference if I'm not a handsome, gym-addicted, *GQ*-looking homo. She phrases it more eloquently, but that's her version of queer theory. Shamelessness and happiness are incongruent to her. I meet plenty of men, of course none of them look like Tom, but I do okay.

The hospital was at the top of a rather steep hill that might have prompted a cardiac emergency even before reaching it if it weren't for Ali rescuing me in a cab. I was about a quarter of the way up, near the 'Noodle Wok' on Calumet Street when I had to pause and lean against the building.

I had pondered what one might wear for a study that morning when I dressed. A fat homo in a poor neighborhood going towards the hospital in a sweater vest, of course she picked me out.

"Excuse me, but might you be headed up to the Baptist for the thyroid study?" she called out of the cab window. She had a big, pretty face--round and soft, a large place to put many different shades of pink makeup.

"Well, yes, indeed I am," I said. As soon as I got in beside her I noticed that she was heavier than me by at least fifty pounds. The flesh of her legs spread wide on the hot vinyl upholstery.

We introduced ourselves with a moist handshake and a series of *why it's a pleasure to meet you* and *I'm delighted to make your acquaintance*. Neither Ali nor I had an offhand, comfortable quality to our speech. Our conversations commenced in chat-rooms and in hypothetical daydream dialogues.

After she paid the cabby we were high above Boston. Ali stood large against the blue sky. The Prudential building was the size of a crayon behind her. The famous oversized Citco sign lined up below her ear like a delicate earring. She told me it was her third study at the Baptist and it paid better than Mass General. She was saving for nursing school.

"You've been doing this for quite some time now and you're still--" I stopped myself but it was already too late.

"Well, a few of the studies were sleep deprivation trials," she said. She searched the neck of her blouse until her hand uncovered her bra strap, wide as duct tape, cutting into her flesh with the burden of her giant breasts. Her fingers followed a gold chain around her neck to the cameo hidden in the folds of her shirt.

In her hand was the head of a beautiful woman. She touched the pretty ivory profile and frowned. I was afraid that her swollen thumb would crush the cameo's

delicate curls and tiny nose. My mother had a necklace like that once but not nearly as pretty. I stole it from her jewelry box when I was twelve and wore it to school. I lost it somewhere on the playground.

Ali didn't speak to me in the lobby during the hour that it took to fill out the twenty-page questionnaire. Subjects wearing sweatpants, wide shoes, anklets pressing into flesh like sausage ties, and shirts with enough fabric for five shifted on the shallow couches and breathed heavily. Harsh, I know, but that's how we looked. Everyone was separated for the weigh-in and physical. After I was stuck, band-aided, and dismissed, I picked up my check and vial of pills. I waited for Ali at the entrance.

"Please allow me to apologize for my rudeness. I'm really sorry."

"It's quite alright, really," she said walking through the automatic doors with her head down. It wasn't alright.

"Well, listen. We should have coffee sometime. Would you like to, as the English say, take tea? Or maybe we could dine together?"

Her head came up and she was already gushing. Her face blushed deeper shades of pink.

"I could cook for you. I'm a rather talented chef. You could come to my apartment. When can you come?"

Obviously, Ali was hungrier than I was.

"How can you still be hungry after that big dinner, Gus? How can that be?"

My red-mouthed mother started calling me Gus when I was ten. She stopped buying sweets, but I was resourceful. I finished off left-overs from the fridge after she'd

tucked me into bed. By day I poached in the pantry. She'd find pocketfuls of baker's chocolate in of my overalls. I ate dry spoonfuls of Nestle Quick and uncooked packages of Ramen Noodles. I would eat ready-made pie crusts before she could fill them. I loved the bland fatty taste of shortening; the flaky pastry on my tongue. Before she could bake for birthdays I would take down cake icing served up on my fingers, certain that Betty Crocker intended it to be eaten straight from the container.

"You don't always have to be full, you know."

I knew things that most ten year olds did not. For example, I could name the cuts of meat that come from a swine; the belly corresponds to strips of bacon, hams from the upper leg to shank, either loin chops (extra thick) or spareribs were my favorite. I could fry French omelets in our copper pan with unsalted butter. My palate had matured well before my body and it salivated for double crème brie and pâté. I wanted a small blow torch for the crust of crème Brule, but mom drew the line. That's when she introduced Gus, the goat who ate until he exploded.

She sat me on the couch and inserted a cartoon sing-along video entitled, 'Barnyard Animals Know Best'. There was a rude ewe who gained some decorum, an unkempt chicken who learned to preen her feathers, and a stingy cow who suddenly and gratuitously gave her milk to everybody. Gus the goat ate from everyone's trough, the farmer's table, and finally all the hay in the barn. His big horsy teeth marks were all over the farm. The words on the bottom of the screen prompted me to sing along. And I did:

"Self control is saying no.

Self control is saying, that's enough.

Self control is saying whoa, whoa, whoa.

But that was news to Gus."

Gus ballooned to the size of the barn and then popped. My mother pried the tape from the machine and then drummed on it with her acrylic, coral nails.

"Do you have any questions?"

She would use the same line a few months later after showing a video called, "The Miracle of Life".

"Can we have a boneless top loin roast for supper tonight? With a honey glaze too, please."

*

"Ali, I'm sorry about what happened that night in your apartment," I say.

"Do I know you?" She flicks her cigarette out the same window that held the tray of deviled eggs. Of course she recognizes me; I haven't changed. Even if she thinks she's a new person, her former fat self is excited to insult me.

"You smoke, now? It's Patrick, from the obesity study at the New England Baptist Hospital. We ate cabbage soup together."

Her face doesn't flash into recognition, but she smiles with half of her mouth and says, "Oh, yes. Pat. I remember you."

She takes a sip of her beer and then the little bone woman perched in the notch of her clavicle leaps with her hiccup. The way her cotton t-shirt is stretched over her rib cage reminds me of a picked-clean turkey carcass wrapped in cellophane. Her voice has changed; her vocal cords must have contracted.

"So, the study did the trick?"

"I guess it did." She looks out the window and crosses her arms over her chest, hiding her hands in her armpits. It's snowing now.

"I had to withdraw from the study. I think I was allergic to cabbage," I say. She doesn't respond. I take a backwards step and pick out a chip. Ali watches me coat it on both sides with even layers of guacamole. She cocks her head and follows the chip from the dip container to my mouth as if she might be watching a rare bird fly away.

I hear Shania Twain holding out a note in the living room. There's a rush for beers. It's halftime. Ali moves away from me into the corner and begins to dig through her purse. She's still searching for something, trying to look busy as I knead dough for pizza. I'm evenly distributing cheese on the first pie when I see Tom invade her corner.

"How 'bout a binger?" he asks. She doesn't answer and pulls a cigarette from her purse.

"This is Ali," I say approaching them. "We used to be in a study together at--"

"Allison. I'm Allison." She takes the first drag. Her hiccups have subsided. Immediately after inhaling she flicks her cigarette. She isn't a real smoker. She's a faker. I want to tell Tom, but Ali/Allison has agreed to whatever a binger is and they're headed toward the bedroom with smoke seeping under the door. Ali walks so contrived. Her weak hips should pop from her sockets the way she is tossing them. I watch until I realize that Matt/Mathias is beside me eating my pizza toppings.

"How do you know that girl? Is she your hag?" he asks. He eats pepperoni rounds like cookies.

"Stop eating my food." I say.

"Maybe you should stop eating your food." His mouth is blackened with chunks of olive.

I see the back of my hands in front of me before I shove him towards the stove. My left hand slips off his arm and the force of my right is not enough. His feet stay planted. He chokes on an olive and then spits a chunk on the floor. He's laughing now.

"You fat little faggot." He's still laughing as he walks back into the living room.

**

Rows of stuffed animals waited for Ali on her bed and couch. She populated every crevice of her apartment with a happy figurine. A cat with a banjo beside the soap dish in the bathroom watched me urinate. Her salt and pepper were shaped like chicks. A monkey with a plastic microphone popped out of the plant hanging in her window. Pandas peered at us from atop her cabinets as we ate boiled cabbage from Mickey Mouse plates. Donald Duck was on the bottom of the bowls that held our cabbage soup. I didn't finish mine, but Ali said he was there nonetheless.

"Do I look thinner to you? I feel thinner." She didn't.

"One of the doctors told me it would take a while to notice significant weight loss." The cabbage was going to give me terrible gas any second so I rose from the table and thanked her.

"Look, I'm sorry the food was so terrible. I need to stay on this diet."

"The food was fine."

"Well, do you think maybe you'd like to date me again?" Her hands moved down her wide dimpled thighs; I could see the topography of her flesh beneath her pants. Then she rubbed her cameo.

"No, Ali. I don't think so."

She dropped the pendant and then threw up her hands.

"Well, then would you at least like to *fuck* me?"

I flinched. It's such an ugly sounding word.

"Goodnight, Ali. I'm sorry." I said.

In the parking lot, I looked into her kitchen window. She was pulling Pyrex dishes from the fridge and arranging them on her table. Then she began to circle eating from all, passing herself from dish to dish. She was cheating on the diet. Of course, I was rushing home to do the same.

Mom caught me warming a frozen cylinder of store-bought cookie dough with my palms. I was sitting in the center of the kitchen on sticky linoleum. I'd already emptied a can of cool whip and ate a couple of sticks of butter like they were candy bars. Just as she began to yell, the dough became soft enough to bite into. I closed my eyes and felt the coldness on my teeth. Sugar grains coated my tongue and frozen chocolate chips hurt my teeth. She began to cry.

"Why can't you stop, Gus?"

"I'm hungry."

"No, no you're not! It just isn't possible." she said standing again. She grabbed my doughy arms and pulled me up. Her hand came down on me while she sobbed.

I reached up to cover the throbbing cheek, smearing dough on my face.

"No one is going to want you," she wailed.

I felt my bottom lip spasm and fold downwards onto my chin. I cried too. I was ten.

“I’m sorry, Patrick,” she said pulling my Star Wars sheets to my chin after dragging me to my room. It wasn’t even dark yet. I remember how her eyes seemed a richer shade of green from her tears. She sniffled and wiped her nose and mouth, a smear of lipstick down her chin. Her hair was darker, a different color near her scalp and there were gobs of something black in the corners of her eye. I thought they were tiny raisins.

“You need to learn some self control, someday, before it’s too late.” I heard her lock the door from the outside.

What seemed like hours passed and she still hadn’t retrieved me for dinner. Shadows traveled up the wallpaper as the sun went down. I was hungry and had to go to the bathroom.

“Mommy, please! I’m starving. I’m going to die.” I screamed into the door. Back in bed I cried until I don’t remember crying anymore.

Hungry and bored when I awoke, I pulled the covers over my head and began to lick the dough that had dried and cracked on my palms. It moistened back into a paste and tasted just fine. I reached my hand down below the tight waste-band of my underwear and palmed my bald genitals. The grainy, roughness of the sugar and the stickiness of the fatty paste felt fine too. It was different from the friction of just skin to skin that I had experimented with before. It was better.

I worked my hand up and down, sometimes tight and sometimes loose. It would take years to figure out what I liked. That night nothing happened, but for a second I

forgot I was hungry. I fell asleep with smell of yeasty sweet dough on my sheets and my hand fastened around my little scrotum, sealed with a layer of crust.

*

A few people have baked cookies and someone has iced cupcakes with little drawings of footballs. Tacky but nonetheless tasty. When Ali walks into the kitchen I'm washing down my second with a can of Coke. I'm jealous of the time she's spent with Tom so I fix my face into a scowl and tell her she's emaciated.

"No I'm not," she says eyeing the leftover pizza.

"Just so you know, that isn't a compliment."

"It's awful."

I ask her what she means but am not really interested.

"I can't eat anything now but that's not as awful as the way everyone looks at me. I don't have privacy anymore. Last night some guy followed me off the T and asked me for my number. Why would anyone want to be around such a disgusting person? I just want to be left alone. I can't go back to the way I was, but I can't deal with this. Everyone treats me like a totally different person."

It seems like this might be the monologue she rehearses in her bedroom mirror in front of all her stuffed animals. Cheers and angry voices rise from the living room as she waits for me to respond. I've got the circular pizza cutter in my hand and I hate her more than ever.

"What is it that you want from me?"

"I don't know. I guess I just thought you'd understand."

"I think you should eat," I tell her.

She fondles her cameo for a moment before turning back to the food. Could she be that weak? She begins to do exactly what I've told her.

Ali moves around the table like when I watched her through her window a year ago, passing herself from dish to dish. She's faster now. She cuts through the coagulated layers of dip with sharper chips. After the third one breaks she sets in with a spoon and continues. She stacks slices of pizza, eating two at a time. At first she covers her mouth to chew entire meatballs, but then she forgets and lets chunks of brown chuck fall from her lips. Ali sucks the meat from chicken bones. Lustrous clumps of cheese oil change the face of her cameo. What else can I do but match her pace?

Shouts and cheers come from the living room again, but I only hear them when I stop to take a breath or a sip of something to wash it all down. After we're done, the paper tablecloth is covered in grease and crumbs. Pyrex dishes and foil-covered trays are all but empty besides brown splotches of burnt cheese. Bare bowls are gaping mouths in awe.

Ali stands straight again and her face changes as if she has woken up. She arranges her hands on her bloated belly and around her neck. Her thumb leaves a print beneath the line of her jaw. She's as pale as the woman at the end of her chain.

Tom enters the kitchen and pumps himself another beer from the keg. His long curly hair reminds me of a Botticelli.

"Lady, you don't look so good," he says and offers to take her outside for some air.

"Don't touch me." she snaps as he reaches out his hand.

I follow her down the stairs to the backyard. Fresh snow is blue in the moonlight. She's hunched over with her hands on her knees.

"Ya know, Patty, it's really a shame," she says maybe laughing, maybe crying. "He really isn't my type." And then she's laughing.

She lifts her hand to her mouth. I'd never seen anyone do this before, and I'd imagined it to be a stabbing motion. Ali steadies her head with her knuckles pressed under her chin. I hear her gag and then a gurgle.

And then I understand.

I imagine the cheese, still stringy with elasticity, stretches from her gut, through her esophagus, and past her eroded teeth. I see it pile and coil in the snow. Chunks of ground beef, whole salad leaves, and chip triangles are suspended in a yellowish goop that I assume is beer based. After the first session she rises and breathes before going in for more. I reach down and hold her hips to steady her. They feel like chicken bones.

"Fuck," she says after finishing. "I scratched the back of my throat with my fingernail." Her face is flushed and puffy but it pales again after a few seconds.

"Do you do this often?"

"No, not often." She un-wraps a mint from her purse. "Sometimes, I just lose my self-control. It's just like going back in time and correcting your mistakes."

"I think it's disgusting."

"No you don't. Why did you watch me?" she asks this too fast. I want her to be awkward and formal, like she used to be. "That crap at the hospital doesn't work, Patty. It's the best way. I'm just trying to help."

"I'm fine with the way I look." I say.

“You’re lying,” she says twisting the necklace.

Ali is tall and thin. People see her, watch her, and want her. But she isn't beautiful. The only thing beautiful about her is that cameo necklace, even if it hangs big and sloppy in contrast to her body like the tag on a dog collar. She holds that beautiful head in her hand and throws her razor hips back and forth like a metronome when she walks. She has power and control; those are the only things worth wanting.

I see the deviled eggs that fell from the window ledge hours before sprinkled with snow. Leaning forward I can feel the mass of my stomach press against my thighs, making it difficult to stay in position. I insert my finger and it's almost sensuous as it penetrates my moist lips, the fleshy smoothness of the inside of my cheek, cradled by my tongue to the bobbing nodule at the entrance of my throat. I pluck and push it until I feel something rising inside. Everything gushes up and I can't breath. As I panic and thrash against it, it comes up and out onto the snow. The former contents of my stomach clump in the fine flakes and I think, *well it isn't so awful.*

Some has splashed onto her shoes, but she doesn't jump back. Stroking my hair, she tells me, *it's okay.* I wipe my mouth as we ascend the stairs to the party, to Tom. Everything is about to begin.

II.

Admissions

Emily watches Ice boats move through Alexis Green's bay window fast enough to be falling. She can't hear their scrape but knows the sound in her mind. Her house is on the other side of the river, but she can't see it.

“Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look.”

“Julius Caesar.” Emily answers.

Alexis Green serves as a satellite admissions officer for Forrester University. She invites the young hopefuls of Ridgewood, New Jersey to her home, serves them tea and scones, and asks for their specific opinion about a trade embargo or a congressional sanction she's read about in the *Times* that morning. The Shakespeare quotations are too easy for Emily Biggins.

She schedules interviews with girls who have a chance and her recommendation weighs heavy on the university's decision. This has little to do with her selection process, but with the sizable yearly sums her father gifts the university. If Emily gets into Forrester, she will need a full ride.

“I guess that sometimes I worry that you kids are more prepared for Jeopardy than for actual problem solving,” Mrs. Green says and Emily doesn’t disagree.

The central heating is loud. It takes a lot to fill the glass sun-room off the kitchen. All of the Green’s rooms are very hot.

“I read one of your lab reports about the white fruit flies.”

“Drosophila,” Emily corrects her. “It was a study on genetic mutation in albino *Drosophila melanogaster*.”

“Yes, I remember.” Mrs. Green refolds her cloth napkin before standing up and walking towards a row of dustless framed photos. This is routine. “My son, Daniel,” she says holding up a school portrait of a boy with mild acne; chrome braces encircle a forced smile. Mrs. Green’s body seems sterile, too stark and hard for breeding.

“He’s had some difficulty in school. Behavioral issues. I blame unnecessary vaccinations.”

“Oh.”

“It’s unfortunate what young boys have to overcome these days.”

“I could help, sit for him, maybe.”

Dan Green at thirteen doesn’t need a babysitter but Mrs. Green clasps her hands above her chest and smiles wider. Emily wonders which breast, both small under her silk blouse, is real.

“I think that everything is going to work out for everyone,” Mrs. Green says. It is a ritual she has repeated in her hot sun room. Like her predecessors, Emily Biggins is compliant. Emily, however, has no interest in admission to Forrester.

*

Danny Green, at seven, needed a babysitter. He ate his father's shaving cream, flushed car keys, cut the cat's whiskers, and ruined white couches with his mother's lipstick. Alexis Green's skin was yellow and thin, wax poured over bones. Her left breast had just been removed.

"Lena, please turn the heat up," she told her nurse and then added that she need not watch Danny. "There's a new sitter coming." Lena shook her head. Like the others who sensed something strange in the house, Lena wouldn't last another week.

Karen, a thick-legged girl with dark hair, came up the drive. Her skin was broken-out and she was wearing too much lipstick. Proud and pretty, like all the others.

"Is Mrs. Green awake?" Karen asked removing her shoes. Lena nodded and the girl went to the sun room to pay court.

"You're looking well," she said.

"I'm feeling better." Mrs. Green smiled despite the tightness of her skin. "My husband will drive you home later. He had a late meeting but will take the ferry back from the city."

"No, thank you Mrs. Green. I'd rather walk."

"Nonsense, it's frigid."

"No, I'll walk."

"I insist. He likes to drive you. I do hope that you've got your application in the mail." The girl nodded. She was utterly perfect, although certainly not smart enough for Forrester. Before Karen could answer Mrs. Green warned her that Danny had a slight cold.

They built a fort with bed sheets, chairs and clothes pins in the playroom. Danny jumped on the cotton roof with the girl inside. They played Nintendo until Danny got bored and grabbed the girl's breast.

“What's that?”

“You know what that is,” she said and removed his moist hand.

She used toy chests as soccer goals and finally tired him out. Before falling asleep he told her that, “daddy doesn't sleep in mommy's room anymore, not since she got sick.”

“Did someone tell you to say that?” the girl asked before she fell asleep too.

Headlights lit the marble eyes of stuffed bunnies seated on the far window sill. The car turned into the garage and the room was dark again. Karen was up with her coat half on. Her gloves fell onto the marble floor.

“Goodnight Mrs. Green,” she yelled towards the sunroom.

Running, she made it to the end of the long driveway before Mr. Green could get back in his car. She wasn't out of breath as she sprinted down Laurel St., but her hands were cold. The trees seemed coated in glass and the pavement around the gutters shined onyx under the street lights. Karen's white breath trailed behind her. There aren't many homes on the riverfront street, and the few are set far back from the road behind trees like the Green's Tudor. At a break in a high hedge she veered off the road. The headlights, close behind her, like twin spotlights, illuminated her lithe shape as it slid and then collapsed over a slick, black puddle. The car skidded towards her, so close she could see the tread of the front tire. She smelled hot rubber and oil and then him.

Karen wished she could bleed on his beige leather seat, but she wasn't hurt. It would happen again. She watched the gray sky until they stopped. Cold air moved across the frozen river into the car when he opened the door.

*

"Your sister never had a problem approximating her derivatives," Gerry Osterling says. His longish nails click on the screen of his graphing calculator.

"My sister was an automaton," Emily replies.

"She was such a beautiful girl."

It wasn't Mr. Osterling's eye for beauty that had gotten him fired from his teaching position at Ridgewood High School. It was Mrs. Anderson, the Spanish teacher, who had spied him jerking off Thomas Milstein, one of his pre-calc students, in the textbook closet on the third floor. Emily and a few of her classmates, deficient in college level calculus, weren't disturbed by the nature of Osterling's crimes but by what his termination meant to their grade point averages. They'd known about Tommy and two other underclassmen. Their grades were based on silence.

Today in the cluttered kitchen, Emily's mother, Anna, has put out cupcakes for them. Osterling is Emily's tutor at ten dollars an hour. Emily had done so well in his class that Anna hired him despite the scandal. His replacement at Ridgewood Regional High, a man named Mr. Jeffers, gave Emily the C's she earned.

"I'm getting into the house again on Monday night," Emily says.

"You're talking like a bad T.V. movie."

"That's what it takes."

“Actually it’s much less than that, but of course. I was never motivated by anything as trite as revenge.”

“Not revenge: justice,” Emily says. She tugs her ponytail across her cheek and puts the end in her mouth.

“Youthful optimism is so pathetic,” Osterling says putting his calculator away. Despite the guise of confidence and fine clothes, he’s ugly, simian-like, petite and pale. Being unattractive can make someone lonely, but somehow it made him perverse. She thinks it’s as simple as that. Emily is seventeen; everything is comprehensible.

“I need to pass Jeffers’s test. Am I ready?”

“It baffles me how difficult math is for someone like you.”

“What am I like, Gerry?” she asks following him out the front door. On the porch he lights a cigarette for them both.

“You’re nothing like your sister.”

“She’s only my half-sister.”

*

Before he was nothing, Karen’s father was Dr. Robert Williams, a dermatologist. He remained a good to five-year-old Karen even after his wife, Anna, divorced him. He gave Karen a computer, chemistry set, and a model 109-L microscope when she was ten. He injected cortisone into his thirteen-year-old daughter’s cystic pimples and promised tuition if she got into Forrester University. When Karen was fourteen she found him in his office, dead in the reclining aesthetician’s chair from an overdose of painkillers. He was broke.

Shortly after the divorce Anna remarried John Biggins and had Emily. John was a landscaper before he was nothing. Not dead, just gone away somewhere else with twenty two-year-old massage therapist.

Karen at sixteen was not good to her half-sister, Emily.

“You have to take me with you,” Emily said following Karen to the canoe at the end of their dock. Their mother was never around, working three jobs in order to pay for her gifted daughters’ educations. Karen, left in charge, locked her eleven-year-old sister outside in the muggy summer months so she could study undisturbed. Emily was covered in oozing mosquito bites. She begged her sister to take her out on the canoe.

“Fine, you take the back and don’t bitch if you get splashed.”

Karen, always a quiet girl, became stone silent and even stranger after finding her dead father. When she wasn’t preparing slides for her microscope or reading Emily Dickinson, she was out on the canoe with her head tilted high to dry out her acne. It worsened without her father’s treatments and Emily found it difficult to look at her. That was the one advantage of having the back of the boat. Emily could ask her questions without having to see her.

“Are you a virgin?” Emily asked and couldn’t help but giggle. Karen didn’t answer and used her paddle to send back a splash. The brackish river water stung Emily’s open bug bites but she didn’t bitch and stretched her legs out in the sun to dry. Sail boats with blue sails, motorboats towing water-skiers, and buzzing jet skis crossed in front of them making waves. Water sports in Ridgewood were for rich people: Karen’s was the only canoe on the river.

“Do you miss your father?” Emily asked as Karen steered them into the shallower waters, bristly with reeds. Emily overestimated her abilities even at eleven and thought all these things could be talked through. Karen didn’t answer.

“In 1915 two boys died in this river. Did you know that Em?”

“They drown,” Emily said still looking at the brown water, too murky to see the bottom. Blue-black rainbows made of gasoline slid across the surface.

“No, a shark ate them,” Karen said turning around to Emily. The boat rocked. Karen’s face was already sun burnt and her pimples looked worse.

“Shut up zit face,” Emily said and immediately felt bad. She asserted that sharks didn’t swim in rivers.

“They don’t mind brackish water.” Karen said using her body weight to tip the canoe over as far she could to the left. She only had to tap Emily with her paddle and the little girl was in the water.

A man on a jet ski heard Emily screaming and picked her up ten minutes later. Karen had paddled nearly to the ocean by then. He tried to calm her, saying it was like an episode of “The A Team”, a water rescue she could tell all her friends about at school. Emily liked that idea and was quiet.

*

He’s much taller than Emily had imagined. She knew he’d be handsome but she didn’t predict that she would return his smile when he opened the front door. He has brown hair and gas blue eyes with skin smoother than a department store mannequin.

“Emily. I presume. the newest sycophant?” He holds out his hand for her coat.

“Whatever it takes.” She’s sweating.

“Danny’s at his Playstation and shouldn’t be a problem. My wife and I will be back around nine. I’ll drive you home then.”

“Thank you but no, I’ve borrowed my mother’s car for the night.”

Mrs. Green descends from the second floor and Emily thinks she can hear her bones cracking, or maybe the stairs are old. She wears a silk scarf around her throat in a loopy bow. It’s translucent and the tendons in her neck look like cables.

“Pete Stevens supports the No Early Release Act for convicted criminals and he has a pool shaped like New Jersey in his yard,” she says.

“I married a democrat and continue to pay for it. We’re spending thousands to eat runny brie at some candidate’s mansion. We’ll see you later.” Mr. Green wraps his wife in a bulky fur. Emily watches the red tail lights wind down the long driveway and disappear.

Danny Green is drunk on Baileys in the play room. It’s advantageous, but would have been genius if she’d thought of it.

“No lock on the liquor cabinet?”

“It’s just under the wet bar,” he says hitting reset on the Playstation. He’s awkward with acne, but not enough to scar. His eyes are blue like his father’s and he’ll turn out at least as handsome.

“When you put it back, don’t add water to this one.” Emily says examining the Baileys bottle, a Christmas edition with a red bow on the label. “That only works with vodka and gin.”

“They never check anyway,” Danny says as a digital man’s head bursts on the screen. “Fuck!” he screams and then throws his controller at the television. It lands on the carpet in two pieces.

“Careful,” Emily says and then takes a seat on the couch in front of a row of stuffed rabbits. Before opening her calculus textbook she counts the rabbits, seven out of ten are pink. She looks up at Danny and laughs.

“They aren’t mine,” he says. He stands in front of a yellow dollhouse in the corner of the room as if he could hide it from her. The miniature house is wired for electricity and someone has turned on the porch lights.

“Really?” Emily looks into the small windows. Inside she can see tiny Renoirs with gilded frames and a chandelier.

“It’s nicer than my house.”

“All this shit is for my sister.”

“You don’t have a sister.”

“I was supposed to, but then my mom got sick.”

“Yeah, well I was supposed to still have one too,” Emily says opening the book. The numbers spread on the page as if they were spilled.

“She died?”

“She killed herself in college.”

“Why?”

“She was pregnant. She carved up her arms rather than do something about it. One night she cut too deep.” This is the story Emily uses, topical and tragic. Cutters have pop culture appeal, both creepy and vulnerable.

“Why are you telling me this? Why are you letting me drink?”

“You’re old enough to take care of yourself.”

“You’re a bitch,” he says but she doesn’t look up from the derivative she’s working on.

An hour later Danny demands a pizza with extra pepperoni. Emily orders one and when it arrives he sits close to her on the couch.

“I don’t feel good. Can I put my head on your lap?”

“No. Eat your pizza and then throw up, you’ll feel better then.”

“Do you want a beer?” he asks. His pupils are huge.

“No. Be quiet I’m studying.”

“You’re one of those dorky girls that kiss my mom’s ass to get into Forrester.”

“I can drink. But why the hell would I want to get drunk with you?”

He puts his left palm on her breast and leaves it there. “How old are you?” she demands slapping it away.

“I’ve done it before, to a ninth grader. I’ll tell my mother you molested me, if you don’t let me.”

“Don’t be a shit,” Emily says and leaves the playroom.

The house has walk-in closets, bidets, laundry shoots, and a centralized vacuum system. There’s marble on the floors in the foyer, walls of the master bathroom, and countertops in the kitchen. Mrs. Green’s vanity holds rows of pink lipsticks and a dozen different bottles of flesh colored lotions. A collection of crystal perfume decanters encircle her sink.

Mr. Green's closet has a motorized tie rack, a leather box filled with watches and cuff links, and two rows of tasseled shoes, all occupied with cedar stretchers. She taps on the back walls of closets and looks for false bottoms in drawers, but finds nothing. Mrs. Green has a mirrored cabinet full of pain killers and a dime bag of pot. Their stuff tells a dull story of the family; they seem common.

Emily sits in their dry whirlpool and smokes half a bowl of Mrs. Green's stash. It's weak, seedy stuff. The fixtures on the tub are shinier than the pile of watches and necklaces on her lap. She could pawn it or fling it onto the frozen river. They would just buy more, if they noticed at all.

In homeroom that morning she'd imagined poisoning his bourbon or hiding his heart medication. There aren't any crystal carafes of brown liquor and he doesn't have any prescription drugs in his bathroom cabinet. She can't bring herself to break the collection of Lladro figures on the mantle. In her daydreams they looked like hard candy and shattered just as easy.

She'll need a better plan. She's got her textbook on her lap in the sun room and is on her third beer. Alcohol makes calculus a little less frustrating and dulls her hearing.

The Greens are already through the door when she looks up. Mr. Green supports his wife by her waist. She thanks Emily and tells her *goodnight* before stumbling out of the sun room.

"Is she alright?" Emily asks tucking her book under her arm.

"She's probably in better shape to drive than you are," he says smiling. The empty cans are on the coffee table.

"It was Danny."

“Danny only drinks the Baileys. hasn’t developed a palate for beer.”

“I have to get home, my parents are expecting me.”

“Don’t leave just yet. I haven’t paid you.”

“Okay,” she says and pulls her keys from her coat pocket.

“If you drive out of here, I’ll call the cops. Forrester doesn’t admit applicants with DUIs.” he tells her smiling. She considers running while he disappears into the kitchen. He comes back with another beer and a fifty. She takes the money but doesn’t ask if he was kidding. She’s too scared to look behind her as she leaves through the side door.

The wheel of her mother’s Volvo is hard against her rib cage. She doesn’t feel inertia’s pull when black ice grabs the wheels. No cars follow her. The heater kicks on when she pulls into her driveway. Sweat makes her colder.

*

A Bull shark had attacked two Ridgefield boys in 1916, not in 1915 like Karen had said. Emily found the article on microfilm at the county library.

“You got the date wrong,” Emily told her. They were sunbathing at the end of the dock. Karen had a spot of blood on her thigh where she’d smacked a bloated mosquito.

“So what? Close enough. All that matters is that it happened. And it wasn’t necessarily a Bull shark. It might have been a White or a Tiger. They come in these waters a lot,” Karen said and then jumped off the dock.

“No, get out. It isn’t safe!”

Karen laughed, pushed off a piling and began the breath stroke. Emily watched her swim out until she couldn’t see her anymore.

*

“Yes, Mr. Green, I will need a ride later.” Emily is looking past him at the river. One week later, the ice is thicker.

It’s late afternoon but still light out as the Greens pull down the drive.

Emily makes a white Russian and puts it in the blender with ice cream. Danny has three and then decides that he wants to play hockey. She fits into a pair of his old skates. Emily can out-skate him even while smoking a cigarette.

“You’re good,” he says after she pushes him down the second time. A muted yellow sun sets on the white horizon. The houses and trees encircling the river look gray. The richest color is in Danny’s cheeks.

“My sister was a soccer star, but hockey’s my thing, both ice and field. Do you remember my sister, Karen? She sat for you when you were younger.”

“Did she have big tits like you?”

“Bigger and she had acne.”

“No, I don’t remember. I’ve had lots of babysitters.”

They race, skates scraping like sharpening knives. She’s beaten him for the fourth time when Gerry Osterling waves at them from the end of the dock. He has a long orange scarf wrapped twice around his neck and the wind takes it like a flag. He watches Danny Green carve a flawed figure eight.

“Lovely, lovely, lovely,” he mouths.

“That’s my calculus tutor, he’s here to teach us things.” Emily says motioning Danny in toward the house.

“You’re not supposed to have your boyfriend over.” Danny says following her.

“You`re a fucked up young lady,” Gerry says stirring a martini with his index finger. The suspended olive spins in the center of the glass. Danny is halfway into his fourth white Russian and has his head down on the sunroom couch.

“You`re a fucked up old queer,” she says and they both laugh.

“It`s a lovely gift.”

“It`s a thank you for tutoring me.”

“Sure it is.”

When Danny`s eyes close she tells Gerry she`ll be studying upstairs. He looks at the family portrait on the far wall. Mrs. Green`s face is painted full and pretty. Before she leaves Osterling asks Emily,

“Does the wife know?”

“I don`t think so. She`s not malicious, just insecure.”

Osterling waves Emily out of the room. She has another drink in the Playroom and turns on the radio. She doesn`t want to hear any noise from the downstairs. The stuffed rabbits watch her study.

“I guess you aren`t worried about getting caught,” she says on the ride home. Osterling is nearly giddy.

“What?” he yells. They`re smoking cigarettes with the windows rolled down. He`s wrapped his scarf tighter, but Emily`s coat is in the back seat.

“I asked if you were worried.”

He turns a knob on the radio and smiles at her.

“Little boys keep secrets. And even if he did squeal, his daddy would shut him up.”

“You`re sure?”

“I`ve been at this for a while.” He drops her at her house on the other side of the river. but she doesn`t go in right away.

She walks along the ice and looks for the Greens` lights, but she isn`t sure which are theirs. Karen had told her that one night she ran across the river to escape. She slid across the melting ice, thin with a layer of slush on top. She`d bruised her tailbone and sprained her ankle. But how had she made it across? It`s never solid enough on their side of the river.

Karen doesn`t greet Emily when she gets home. She`s folding laundry and is starved even slighter than Mrs. Green.

“Where were you?” she asks.

“Babysitting the Barrett kids.”

“What`s the point in protecting little kids?”

“I`m not sure. Is mom still at work?” Emily asks. Karen finishes pairing socks before she answers.

“Of course she is. So many sacrifices just for your education.”

“It`s not too late for you Karen.” Emily says even though she knows it`s the wrong thing. Her sister is the only person she can`t figure out. She`d do anything for her. Karen never got into Forrester and still hasn`t left home.

Oscar's Alice

Metamucil, depilatory, baby wipes, douches, Polaroid film, pomade, and a stuffed penguin passed from my hands into white plastic bags. Mr. Winters bitched about the smudged display case, told red-faced Billy not to sweat on the customers, took a Barron's from the rack and left at 9:07 pm. I worked the register at the front of Winters's Pharmacy: ringing up cough drops and ear wax removal kits for old men. Winters didn't say a thing to me before he walked out. In fifty-three minutes I'd have to go home.

It was Saturday; my first ever on shift with Oscar, the old shrunken pharmacist, and Billy, the sweaty assistant. They were thirty feet from me, running the pharmacy in back. I liked Billy, even though I'm still not sure why. He was calm, sustaining an unaffected smile even as he helped the nastiest customers, ones who waved fists and crowded the counters. Confidence, grace and even eye contact were things that I couldn't pull off.

I'm 6'1", not pretty with close-set almond eyes. almost alien. My mother told me that girls should use their looks. Mine make people uncomfortable and they leave me alone. I liked that then; I was twenty but felt much younger.

A woman with a small child curled around her leg approached Oscar's counter. He towed his dead left foot into the vitamin aisle and pointed to a blue bottle: his body hunched so low I couldn't see his face. On his way back he stumbled into the Spenco sock display and nearly took out the rotating rack of reading glasses. I watched it spin.

A man at my register was drumming his fingers on the counter. I'm not sure how long he'd been waiting.

"Well, I guess you don't need a bag," I whispered as he pocketed his box of condoms. When I looked back at the pharmacy counter, Oscar wasn't there anymore.

Billy's voice, sharper than I'd expected, overrode the music on the PA system and told me I could close down the front register. I met him in the pharmacy.

"On the count of three," he commanded before I could process the sight of Oscar asleep on the pharmacy floor in a puddle of purple and white pills, the bottle they'd spilled from still in his hand. I took his feet. Oscar was light, really. Small, hollowing beneath gray skin the way old men do. I could hear keys and coins shifting in his pockets as we carried him into the stockroom.

With Oscar as the hinge between us, I examined Billy, ugly with a big pumpkin head and dilated eyes. Dark holes as if someone carved them out but forgot the candle. He was older than me, but I couldn't tell how much. His skin was red and tears of sweat collected in the corners of his eyes and mouth.

The diaper pin that held my cinched skirt on opened into my back and stung me during the transfer but I didn't scream. Winters demanded proper dress at his store. He did well selling marked up toiletries and aspirin in an affluent town of commuting New York executives and many who didn't work at all. The dress code made us seem even poorer than we were in stained, second-hand business suits cut from fabric that might melt when ironed. That night Billy's tie was tiny and I wore my mother's mustard yellow suit skirt.

We put Oscar down on the Arts and Leisure section of the *Sunday Times*. Someone had already arranged them into a narrow cot, two rows of three. The front pages, when they arrived from Raritan, would get added in the morning. Arts and Leisure was always early. Billy slipped the old man's glasses into his breast pocket and then fished a ring of keys from his pants.

"I forgot your name," Billy said.

"I never told you. Lisa," I whispered.

"You don't do Saturdays."

"I'm filling in for Deana."

"Good, she's a little bitch."

Deana was another cashier and I didn't like her either. When I asked if we should call 911 but Billy smiled and said *of course not*.

"The old guy really digs codeine," he said over his shoulder as we walked into the pharmacy. I didn't know what codeine was. Billy reached behind a stack of empty vials and pulled out a bottle of gin. He lifted it toward me but I refused.

"Fine. You run the register and I'll play pharmacist."

He was on the platform. two or three feet to my right. sampling pills. He didn't tip his head back or wash them down. I imagined that his throat worked like the body of a digesting snake. The more he swallowed, the more he sweat and his fingers stuck to the gel coating of pills. But he seemed to know what he was doing.

Billy took bottles down from the shallow shelves. spilled them onto the pill counter, and then repackaged them in orange vials. He told customers. *Be sure and take this with food, This may cause dizziness or drowsiness, and this will most likely give you some bowel discomfort: cramping or diarrhea.* He stood at the computer terminal typing as if he was playing a rag on the piano. I wanted to meet his eyes, as if to tell him, *you don't scare me.* But he did.

At 9:56 he told me to *count out.* I didn't know what that meant. Standing beside me, Billy was a little taller and. it occurred to me then, not so ugly. His shiny skin wasn't repulsive; it was moist and firm. like the flesh of a nectarine. When he smiled his huge, dilated eyes changed and expressed something that might have been madness or smartness, I'm still not sure. He was something that I hadn't seen before.

I'd been with plenty of boys before. Skinny, guileless, guys who were more afraid than anything. My last boyfriend, Carlos, couldn't grow a mustache and broke up with me when his mother found out how old I was. Carlos was sweet, a hand job and a kind word were all it took to keep him happy and close to me. Billy would be tougher to know than the others.

He emptied my register. shuffling dollars like cards. We'd been busy and there were more bills than the spring-loaded stays could secure. When he turned his back to adjust the radiator, I slid my hand into the bank deposit bag and found myself a twenty.

He grabbed my forearm; the wetness and force of his hand felt like a mouth on my skin. Billy's giant, hot head was close to mine and his breath smelled like cough syrup. His shirt was wet but somehow didn't stink the way that sweat should have. It was sweeter.

"Give it back."

"What?" I put my foot out to keep from falling into him.

"The twenty. I need this job."

"But the -"

"Pills aren't missed. Listen." he paused and pushed his damp hair out of his eyes. "Take a couple packs of smokes. Whatever girls like you need. Just help me carry Oscar to my car and then you can go out and have your Saturday night. Laura. Don't work Saturday again."

"It's Lisa," I whispered as we lifted Oscar up from the newspapers piles. He seemed lighter than before.

We installed him in the front seat of Billy's Chevy and fastened the seat belt. I leaned against the car. Burgundy paint peeled off the roof like sun burnt skin. I crumbled a chip in my hand as Billy locked the store with Oscar's keys.

"He takes the bus to work, but I've never been able to just dump him when he's like this," Billy said pulling Oscar's seat belt taut. He was pliant and might have even been smiling.

"Can you manage?" I asked.

"I always do, Lisa," he replied.

A bus approached, slowed but didn't stop. And then I was standing there in the parking lot behind Winters's Pharmacy watching Billy's taillights. At 10:11, that section of town was empty. It was both humid and cool, the breeze a wet breath. Damp leaves stuck to my car windows. I lit a cigarette. It tasted like shit and I started to feel hot and a little sick. I stomped out the cigarette and looked up the road for a while longer.

At our duplex, thirty-seven minutes from the pharmacy, my mother was washing her only pair of pantyhose out in the kitchen sink. She worked at a bank and wore the same white pumps and tan stockings everyday, an extremely careful woman. Aromatherapy was her hobby then and she favored the earthy oils of myrrh, marjoram, and juniper. She thought they had restorative effects despite stinking up our apartment. Diffused aromas promoted healing and happy thoughts but Fen Shui was full of shit. *Who the hell do they think they are? Forcing everyone to rearrange their furniture,* she would say.

On weekends she cleaned houses in the wealthy neighborhoods surrounding Winters's pharmacy. The rich ladies liked her; she wasn't an illegal, never broke any of their crystal knickknacks or stole sterling-topped salt shakers. She was always busy but kept our apartment immaculate. She vacuumed my grandmother's needlepoint projects and had our silk flower arrangements dry-cleaned. It was crap, but it was our crap.

"Dinner's in the fridge," she said centering herself on the couch. A fresh jug of Almandine wine was already open beside a bucket of chicken; opaque spots of grease were windows to the wilting bird thighs inside. The wine was too sweet; it made my teeth hurt and the chicken was tasteless. I ate standing up over the sink with her hose

below me in a deflated pile. I stopped myself before wiping sticky hands on the mustard yellow skirt. I unfastened the safety pin and stepped out of it.

“That’s a good girl,” my mother said. Her pumps, on the floor, had already been buffed scuff-less.

“You can take the car again if you drop me at the Epstein’s in the morning.”

“I don’t know. I have to be at the Pharmacy before nine.”

“It’s on your way,” she said.

Mrs. Epstein came into the pharmacy a lot. My mother might have been cleaning her toilet while I rung up her panty liners and lavender guest soap. I told my mother, *alright* and then sighed.

“You going out tonight?” she asked before picking up her water-beaded wine glass. She took all her alcohol with handfuls of ice.

“It’s 10:30.”

“It’s Saturday. Why don’t you call someone from school and go out to a bar.”

“I’m not legal yet.”

“I guess things have changed since I was young. But call someone; get them to take you somewhere.”

This was routine, her urging me out of the house. We usually watched television with a jug of wine until her then boyfriend, Al, got off work. Since graduating high school I’d worked as a waitress at the shore and done a little temp work, but not much else.

She baked me a sheet cake and threw me a party when Winters gave me the cashier job. A very little party: just me, her, some wine, and Al. She gave me three suits

she'd outgrown: mustard, sun yellow, and teal. I was confused when she pinned the mustard skirt on me with a diaper pin. She's shaped like a soft pear and her skin is rough with scars. But she's picky about her appearance: wearing make-up, covering her grays, and meticulously cleaning her JC Penny jewelry. She was the one that told me never to iron rayon suits. The shitty ones melt and that's the only way to prove that they're cheap.

I'm nearly two feet taller than my mother, blond and I don't gain weight. The mustard suit was about a foot too wide and short through the arms. I have scoliosis and this is before I wore a back brace so I looked like a giant, overripe god-damned banana.

"You'll alter it before I start? Right?" I asked showing her how I could spin the skirt on my waist.

"Why? You'll grow into it. I was thin like you once."

I think that sums up her aspirations for me. She'll be shocked and begin to mistrust me when I get into nursing school in three years and then finish at the top of my class.

"Evening, kiddo," Al said after the storm door slammed behind him. I'd left him some chicken. Al was much older than mom and always had a dirty, grinning, face. I still don't know where he worked. Like her prior boyfriends, he left me alone and made mom happy. Al was an alcoholic and was interesting only when he was drunk, but not an angry drunk. He was harmless, goofy almost. Only very smart people or very stupid people make trouble; the average ones aren't capable of real damage.

I took a second glass of wine and one of mom's novels into my room. The pages were stained with cypress oil and the author used the word *cavalier* a lot but it didn't seem important enough to look up. An hour later my mother had stopped laughing and

was snoring. The heroine of the novel had been bedded in a white castle. I decided that it might be nice for someone to take me somewhere.

“Wait a while!” Winters said when I knocked on the door to his office the next morning. He’d summoned me over the PA.

“You plan on helping me, Lisa?” my seventeen-year-old coworker, Deana, asked waving a box cutter. She was slicing open bundles of *Times* front pages and assembling the Sunday papers, slowly destroying the Arts and Leisure bed.

“Maybe later.”

Deana had newsprint smudges on her pink cheeks and ironed, white blouse. She was still in school, thought she was hot shit, and came to work high from time to time.

“You filled in for me last night?” she asked. She chewed her nails, painted messily with blue polish. When I nodded she asked how it went. I told her it was fun.

Winters opened his door before she could ask me anything else. I moved a stack of merchant catalogs off a chair and sat down. His age-spotted hands shook above a stack of bank deposit slips and I realized that I was going to have to put on another pot of coffee.

He asked how last night had gone and I shrugged. He pushed his glasses up to his forehead and waited.

“It was fine. I can do it every week, if you need me to.” I’d already heard that Deana wouldn’t do it anymore. Billy was fair game.

I ran gum, greeting cards, glue, enemas, and thermometers under the scanner. Typed in the amount tendered and the machine made the calculation for change. Twenties, fifties and hundreds went beneath the drawer. Sleeves of pennies could be cracked open on the side of the drawer like eggs. *Please put your phone number on the checks, twenty dollars is the return check fee. Would you like a small bag? Matches with your cigarettes? Don't you want your penny?* All week, the drawer opened and closed, opened and closed, and then it was Saturday again.

That afternoon I watched Billy walk through the pharmacy like he was moving through water, store aisles the lanes of his pool. He stocked suppositories gracefully and his massive hands were steady as he straightened rows of Robitussin and arranged packages of bath beads.

At 9:03, Winters took his Barron's, told me to order more gummy bears, and left. I closed my register and brought the drawer to the back. I'd rung up 77 customers before we were alone.

"You taking over for Deana?" he asked. When I said *yeah*, he asked why.

"I wanted to see what happens next." I kept my head down, looking at a hard, black bubble-gum stain on the carpet.

"And what *does* happen next, Lisa?"

"I don't know. You tell me." That was the right answer.

He took my drawer and handed me a coffee mug of what looked like Tang. It smelled like hairspray but I took a sip anyway. Gin and kool-aid, the little packets were on aisle four.

I tried to take it down in one swig, but couldn't. As I finished, Oscar made his way past. He limped and his eyes scrutinized the floor as if he was looking for something. He took the fetal position on the papers and we went back to work.

Everyone needed birth control pills, laxatives, condoms, aspirin, Viagra, lipstick, tic-tacs, and bubble bath. Saturday stuff. We took turns checking on Oscar. When I finished my second cocktail Billy mixed up another batch in a beaker by the sink. The walls of my mug were still warm from his hands.

"Does your car have a backseat?" Billy asked at 9:56. His Chevy had died. The width of my Buick's backseat was exactly Oscar's height. I held out my keys to Billy but he didn't take them.

"No, you're driving," he said getting in the passenger's side. I opened my door but didn't get in. I told him I was too drunk to drive.

"We need to get out of here. Get in the car, Lisa."

"You're not even drunk. Why can't you drive?" I asked as I got in. He told me that he didn't feel like it.

"It's illegal. I mean, I can't drive drunk."

Billy cracked his neck and said, "Yes, you can."

And that sounded true to me. I could do whatever I wanted. Most people figure that out themselves by age twenty.

I pulled onto the road. The pedals and signals worked just as they would if I were sober. That surprised me. I expected the wheel to melt in my hands, the dashboard to drip and then slump into my lap, the street lamps and telephone poles to leap in front of my bumper. But everything was fine.

Billy cranked his window halfway down and the cool air felt good. I eased back into the seat and moved one hand off the wheel. I considered that I could close my eyes and still be fine. But instead I watched the shapes of trees, black against a navy sky. We drove west, away from gated estates and ocean views. Houses competed for space on little lots and the further we went there weren't many trees at all. That's North Jersey, mansions five minutes from shacks.

I smiled at Billy but he didn't smile back. His black eyes reflected the lights on the dashboard. Oscar snored in the backseat.

Billy pointed to the house in a modest neighborhood and we pulled into the back. Some lights were on in other homes and the shifting colors of televisions came through a few windows but Oscar's house was dark. A jet flew low in loud with red and blue lit wings.

The back door was open and we maneuvered Oscar through a small kitchen with a sticky floor and rotten garbage stink. We climbed a flight of stairs too fast for my eyes to adjust. Billy led, walking backwards. Oscar's head rested, neck wrenched, on Billy's stomach. Our feet were silent on the carpeted stairs.

"Don't worry," Billy whispered, "Oscar and his wife don't sleep in the same bedroom."

Billy took us into a room with only a dresser and a bed with a cross above it. The room smelled of Ben-gay and mothballs and we lowered Oscar on the bed. He rolled onto his stomach and whispered clearly, "Thank you."

I stepped back and told Billy that I didn't understand.

“Of course not,” he said and then placed Oscar’s keys on the dresser. I followed him down the stairs into the living room. Weak light from the street lamps and moon showed the shapes of hanging plants, wing-backed chairs, and TV trays.

Billy dropped to the couch and I sat beside him. I ran my hand along a doily atop the coffee table and made out the contours of ceramic animals and Hummels at its center. Some of the figurines were broken, headless; so sharp that it didn’t hurt when I cut my finger. Everything was covered in dust thick as fur. I was still drunk; or, at least, I wanted to believe I was.

“Does his wife leave the door open for you?” I asked.

“Yeah, we sort of have a deal.”

“What’s she like?”

“I don’t know; she’s old. Her name’s Alice. Oscar talked about her all the time before he got really bad. He told me weird things: the shape of the brooches she wears to church, the smell of the apple blossom oil she uses, how much salt she puts on her eggs. I never met her.”

Billy pulled a handful of his shirt up to wipe his half lit face.

“Billy, why do you sweat so much?”

He told me in an innocent, small voice that it was a side effect of a drug called Wellbutrin, one of many he stole from the Winters’s stash.

“Oh,” I said. I didn’t know what it was.

The couch was covered with a crocheted afghan that was beginning to irritate the back of my neck. As I fidgeted Billy lifted his hand as if he was going to touch my shoulder, but didn’t. He fluttered his fingers and watched the motion as if this was

mesmerizing. Still staring at his hand, he told me to relax. I couldn't so I did what came easier.

It was like opening myself into an engine. My tongue moved onto his and then I felt his teeth and the rippled roof of his mouth. A breath as hot as his should have melted everything. We released our own buttons and zippers and moved parallel. As we accelerated his hard legs and barrel chest pumped on me. When he came, it burned inside of me like an infection. We caught our breaths. It was different than it had been with other boys. Not an ordered system of moves building up to sex: everything seemed to happen at once. I liked that.

Oddly shy, he turned from me to tuck his penis back into his pants.

"We should get going." Moonlight highlighted the shine on his forehead. I shook out my skirt and put it back on.

After a quiet ride, I dropped him off. He lived near a bunch of abandoned factories in a brown stucco apartment building that looked like a giant mud brick. I imagined a gray room with a hot plate and wiry dogs beneath the window that barked all night. But it was quiet. I could live there. It wouldn't be so bad. My mother would probably be happy for me.

"I'll see you next Saturday," I said.

"Yeah," he answered but didn't get out of the car. It was my turn to talk again.

"Another week with that asshole, Winters."

"Winters isn't so bad. It must suck having to deal with a bunch of people like us." And then he got out of the car.

As I pulled away, he waved with his entire arm like a child would. My clothes smelled of his sweat. I wondered if he stood in the street long enough to watch my taillights disappear into the dark. I'm nearly sure now that he didn't.

When I got home my mother was on the sofa; she sat low in her worn spot.

"I've met someone," I told her. "That's why I'm late. We went out for a beer."

"Oh," she said and then looked at her watch. "I was waiting for Al." I told her his name was Billy and she looked annoyed.

"Is this one another fifteen-year-old?"

"No, he's older than me, taller too. He's a pharmacist."

"Well, that's something."

She cleaned out the cut on my finger but was more concerned with my dirty palms. I stayed up with her that night, waiting and drinking. We watched infomercials: countertop rotisserie, aerosol-hair, Magna-duster, Thigh-master, the Gazelle, and the Weed-weasel. She finally fell asleep when the six A.M. newscaster came on. When I pulled a blanket over her shoulders her eyes opened.

"When you were a baby, I nearly left you. My boyfriend wanted to take me to Mexico, and I wanted to go. Grandma would have done a better job anyway." She closed her eyes again.

"I forgive you," I said turning off the television. I'd heard the story too many times before.

"Why? I should have gone."

Exhausted, I don't remember walking into my room.

Shoelaces, Epsom salts, baby wipes, tampax, toothpaste, tootsie-rolls, pantyhose and pocket size packets of tissues. Miles of receipt tape. The dates on the newspapers were increasing; six numbers adding up to Saturday. The register rolled open and hit me in the stomach. I counted coins and pulled bills from under the spring-loaded stays. *And \$4.73 is your change. Would you like a bag?* The hook to rip the plastic bags from was empty. I called into my microphone for more and Billy appeared minutes later. The pile of white plastic bags draped over his arms like a wedding dress. Romanticizing is so much more dangerous than pills and gin.

As soon as Winters left I deposited my drawer in the safe. In the pharmacy Oscar was counting out syringes for a diabetic, but he kept losing count. The plastic around the individually wrapped needles vibrated in his hands. I eased a handful from his fist, counted out ten, and then put them in a bag.

“Well, Thank-you, sweetheart,” he said aiming a smile towards the left of me. I’d never heard him speak so much before. “Aren’t you a pretty gal? You should go home, pretty gal,” he told me before leaving the pharmacy.

“Want some?” Billy asked shaking a bottle of pills in my face. “I know that you’re curious. They’ll make you happy.”

“No,” I said because I thought I was happy.

“What do you want then? Oh, I know.” He reached behind the empty vials for the gin.

“I think I want you to take me places,” I whispered into my chest. He smiled and handed me a drink.

The cider was from the cooler on aisle two, and the heat was from the coffee maker, but I still thought it was from Billy's hands. He rested them on my hips as we passed each other in the pharmacy. He was just moving me aside, but I liked the attention.

I checked on Oscar. His churning feet ripped Arts and Leisure. A picture of a red pagoda had been torn in half. His bristly mustache needed to be combed and there was a slight stain on his brown slacks. My mother had trained me to notice these things. Alice might have given up by then, or maybe she just missed these details.

"Everything cool?" Billy asked when I returned.

I told him everything was fine and then leaned into the counter, propped on my elbow, to watch him fill scripts for a while. He had a system of peeling the stickers from the printout, popping on the lid, and then applying the label. He did this every time. His routine nearly hypnotized me until I heard a loud voice coming from the end of the counter,

"Hello is anyone working? Is there anyone here? I need my heart pills!"

I followed Billy, tugging the wrinkles from my shirt. The customer complained about prices as her husband petted a stuffed dog from the Gund display. I crouched low to find a bag large enough to hold her toilet paper. I rooted around beneath the counter when she started to yell again,

"Where are you? What's going on here?"

I stood and she was startled.

"Nothing is going on. We didn't do anything wrong," I said and then I felt Billy's hand on my back.

“Get your shit together,” he whispered.

Oscar hadn't shifted since I last checked on him. I smiled at him before leaving through the back door. Of course, he didn't see it, but it made me feel better.

It was cold that night. I watched the customer constrict a scarf around her husband's throat as they walked through the parking lot. I shielded my lighter with my other hand. I still do this even when there isn't any wind.

Back in the stockroom Oscar's left arm had fallen onto the un-swept floor. His skin felt strange as I repositioned it. I thought it was me, that my hands were still chilled from outside. But they warmed and regained sensation, enough to feel that old Oscar was cold and dead.

I put my ear to his chest and heard only the echo of my own blood.

Billy came when I screamed. He still had a label stuck to his finger and a bottle in the other hand.

“He isn't breathing, and he's cold,” I said kneeling beside him. Billy stayed where he stood, applied the label, and then pocketed the bottle. He told me to stay calm, that he would handle everything. I believed him.

I watched Billy fill a white shopping bag with bottles of pills. He added a few candy bars and a pair of cheap blue-blocker sunglasses from the revolving display. But that was it. He put his loot in my car and then came back for Oscar.

Billy didn't let me drive that time, and I didn't want to anyway. I stayed quiet during the ride and decided that I would ask questions when we were safe and driving away from Oscar's house. Everything would be fine again when Billy and I were going somewhere, anywhere he might take me.

Billy laced Oscar's fingers together over his small stomach once he'd positioned him on the bed. Oscar's knuckles reminded me of trees' knots. We walked past the bathroom and I saw, by the light of a shell-shaped nightlight, a set of teeth in a glass on the sink.

The living room, when Billy hit the lights, was filthy: stacks of ancient magazines and cloudy, gray windows. I wiped my dusty hands on my skirt as I looked around.

"Don't even think of taking anything," Billy said loudly.

"I wouldn't. Be quiet, you'll wake-up Alice," I told him in a voice I didn't recognize as my own.

He came close, not touching me, but I felt his heat. His eyes dilated. They were once two pieces of coal with potential, like those of the characters in my mother's paperbacks. But in the light of the cob-webbed lamps his eyes were just dark and I wasn't afraid to look into them. He slapped me but I didn't turn away. It hadn't really hurt but as we left through the front I realized that Billy wasn't going to take me anywhere.

"If you keep your mouth shut they won't do anything to you. You never did anything wrong," he told me as we drove away. He'd taken the scratchy afghan off of Oscar's couch. Standing alone in the parking lot of the bus station, he wrapped himself in it and waved at me, again with his whole arm. That's where I left him. When I got home I washed the Hummel figurine I'd lifted from Oscar's coffee table. I'd managed to grab the only unbroken one, a kid with a goofy smile sitting in the crook of an apple tree.

*

The register rolled open and shut. Rolling papers, magazines, lubricant, adult diapers, and bubble gum went into bags. Billy's and Oscar's names got crossed off the schedule. I held the scanner on my arm and saw the crossing lasers cut my skin into red diamonds. Customers came to the register and left through the front door, usually tripping over the mat. Winters came too and asked if there was anything I wanted to tell him. *No, nothing Mr. Winters, I really had no idea what was going on.* Everyone believed me. Always underestimated, I used it to my advantage but that was the last time.

More vitamins, bandages, hemorrhoid ointment, pill boxes, and pumice stones. Then it was 5:03 the following Saturday and Deana relieved me from my register. Winter's had given the shift back to her. She'd told me that her thing was Ritalin, she snorted it like cocaine. I believed that but when she denied ever sleeping with Billy, I told her she was full of shit.

"Have you ever seen Alice?" I asked, handing her the register key.

"You really are an idiot. Alice doesn't exist," she said and seemed much older than seventeen.

"Yes, she does; I saw her teeth on the sink."

"*You're full of shit,*" she replied.

But I knew that any one of the elderly female customers who paid me for odor eaters and apple blossom bath oil might have been Oscar's Alice.

I know she's real. When I picture her she looks a lot like my mother, aged and delusional with dyed hair and high heels. Al left her from someone else so I stayed with

mom in our duplex. She vacuums our carpets until they smell burnt. I still live there.

Mom depends on me; some women are just like that.

The Dancing School

Phil and Kashmir are trading eczema remedies as she grinds on his khakis. Her son suffers from the same dermatitis as Sarah, our five-year-old. Neither Phil, my husband, nor Kashmir favors steroid ointments.

Our grocery money has bought twenty minutes of Kashmir. She'll ride his lap until she's gotten the car payment too but I'm not angry because she's good at her job. Kashmir is Phil's favorite stripper and this is just commerce. I wish it were more, that she were some insecure secretary who works at his office, putting on pearls, perfume, and thong underwear with my husband in mind. Or maybe she could be a neighbor girl, or even our babysitter; someone he could sincerely fall in love with so we could break up in a final, satisfactory manner. Instead faithful Phil hires professional Kashmir. I watch dulled and obliging with warm beer and antidepressants at a dive called the Dollhouse. Prescription drugs provide an excuse for not wanting to sleep with my husband, but don't make me any happier.

We've been visiting strip clubs every Friday night since I started refusing sex. Among other useful facts, I've learned that men find fake tans and flexibility sexy. The dancer on stage stands with her heels together, feet turned out before performing the next pas de deux with her pole. Men pant as she raises her thigh to her chest. Her leg, like a bloom, extends towards the ceiling. The gesture reminds me of my former friend, Leslie, whose legs were equally elastic and lean. Leslie at fourteen had showgirl sensibilities; she confused lewdness with sensuality and thought herself a small bawdy goddess.

"Isn't that Leslie?" Phil asks and I realize that it *is* her. Six years of wondering what happened to her and here she is, writhing before me in her underwear. She's still in her lank fourteen-year-old body. I excuse myself to get a closer look while Kashmir, petite atop the massive expanse of my husband, continues her lecture on holistic healing.

The Dollhouse operates out of a double wide off Rt. 9. If we take the Jersey Turnpike it's just five minutes from our house. The one fat guy pulling triple duty as bouncer, announcer and DJ doesn't stop me as I slip behind the curtain to stage left. The two other dancers on shift don't acknowledge me. They're at their dressing tables, one bundles dollar bills while the other hastily scrapes her inner thigh with a dry razor.

There are school portraits of scrawny kids taped onto mirrors. Lipstick graffiti, balled up thong underwear, curlers coiled with burnt hair, body oil, and dried up bottles of nail polish. When Leslie finishes her set she finds me at her dressing table trying on her lipstick.

"You're haven't gained a pound," I say to her reflection. Even under fluorescent bulbs her face, like her body, is unchanged, youthful. Despite heavy makeup, she is still plain and her hair, darkened with dye, is lusterless.

She welcomes me, lithe arms wide, but I'm uneasy about hugging a naked stripper and stop her.

"I had a baby," I explain.

"Not with Phil?"

"Yes, we're married. He's here."

"How's that working out?" she asks peeling off a false eyelash.

"Perfect," I say. "How's this?" I stir the air with my palm. Dramatic gestures are a habit. The bass shakes the far wall. We're still until I ask for a cigarette.

"I don't smoke," she tells me, but it seems like she should. She puts on an oversized green sweater. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be a bitch," she says and then asks me if I want to get a drink sometime. As I stand I knock a small pot of pink glitter across her dressing table and then tell her *no*, but can't invent a reason why. She lets me go with, "say hello to your husband."

At our booth Phil asks if it was really her.

"Yeah, I think so. But she was weird, kind of nice." Phil says something about growing up, or moving on and fortunately I can't really hear him above the music.

When Phil and I get home we still stink like the cocoa butter body lotion Kashmir lathers on her legs and as of yet, unaltered breasts. Phil drives the babysitter home before he changes his underwear and washes Kashmir off his skin. I check on Sarah tucked in beside her favorite Barbie. The doll's nylon hair is tangled around her chubby hand. Sarah was born with my husband's solid build and is already large for her age. I know she'll never inherit my long torso or narrow neck: I couldn't be happier.

*

“Ickweeday.” Translation: dickweed. Brenda’s older brother. Phil, spit tobacco and pumped Van Halen through his car stereo speakers, hence his nickname. Phil, a heavy-set nose tackle, drove Leslie, Brenda, and me to our Thursday ballet lesson in his tiny Yugo. Leslie and I, suffering in the back by the subwoofer, had been using pig Latin in car pool since we were little.

At fourteen we were too old to do a lot of things. We were dancers, little girls with center stage dreams that endured into our teens. Typical spoiled suburban dilettantes, we’d tried piano lessons and gymnastics, but ballet lasted. Both Leslie and I had the potential to turn professional, or so we thought. Brenda was more practical and planned to quit before starting high school. She was also slightly overweight. One of our favorite diversions was reminding her that principal ballerinas didn’t have huge breasts. Ballet was Leslie’s and my absolute elation. Brenda’s prudence, or any prudence, was contrary to our beliefs. Fourteen-year-old bodies seem boundless and invincible, but Brenda was never ecstatic like us.

In less than a month she would die from a depressed fracture over the frontoparietal region of her skull. The coroners told her family that she felt nothing when her murderer peeled off her pink tights and raped her.

Leslie leaned closer in the backseat to tell me. “You have to hold your breath and close your eyes.”

In the rearview mirror I watched my face, arranged in the practiced affectation of skepticism. I reacted with my entire body. It was a comical side effect of ballet training: the last man in the theater could see bereavement, elation, or chagrin but up close I was a clown.

“Atfay uckfay,” Leslie said when Phil turned the music louder.

He called us *itchbays* before dropping us off.

The Stephanie Streeter Dance Studio was on the fourth floor of a battered walk-up in Red Bank. New Jersey has hundreds of fire-trap, top floor and basement studios run by city emigrants: knocked-up Rockettes and failed chorus girls. Stephanie, dressed like a barfly in a tube top and hoop earrings, rested her ruined feet on the desk beside her odd son, Ben. She was painting her toenails pink.

Short and somewhat slow, Ben Streeter didn't seem twenty-two. If it weren't for sporadic patches of red beard and his muscular arms he might have passed for one of the unripe, spastic boys in my homeroom. Ben worked out daily with a set of free weights he kept in the studio storeroom, offsetting height with mass.

“Leslie your ass is smokin' today,” he said. It was difficult to pity him.

“Sit and spin, Fritz,” Leslie replied. Ben Streeter, as a less brawny more malleable momma's boy had taken class at the barre beside us. He had even played Clara's petulant younger brother, Fritz, in a production of *The Nutcracker* many years back. Since his retirement he had taken on a custodial role at the studio and spent his days doodling pornographic pictures behind his mother's Mackintosh IIGS. Never switched on, the computer supported Stephanie's ashtray.

We lined up at the barre and before the accompanist began Leslie whispered breathily that it *tasted like steak*.

“That's not true,” Brenda said behind us.

“And how would you know?” I asked.

“I’m not going to justify that question with an answer.” Brenda’s father was a lawyer.

Eleven girls of nearly uniform height stood in a row with sharp hip bones and hair in slick buns. Brenda sucked in her stomach and slouched but still seemed of a different species.

Ballet had limited my definition of beauty to pasty faced princesses who painted on stage make-up to compensate for indistinct features and worked their calf muscles until they were hard and jagged as modernist sculpture. It mystified me that boys at school preferred busty Brenda over waifs like Leslie and me. Brenda really was a lovely girl, even if only photos confirm it today. I took her composure and maturity as arrogance then, but these were the marks of experience.

Brenda was the prettiest, but Ben Streeter had always liked Leslie. He ogled her through a smudged window between the office and the dance room, pressing his snub, red face and small hands on the glass. Another voyeur was Stephanie’s boyfriend, Tommy, an impossibly thin man with wide-set eyes. I called him hammerhead. He had no business around teenage girls and had once told Melanie, an untalented classmate with white blond hair, that she was a *pretty filly*. Leslie said Tommy was sexy. and wasn’t she the end all authority on all things sexual?

“You ought to be careful when you bend your legs back like that, you might break one of em off,” Tommy told Leslie after class. He and Ben were behind the desk smoking Stephanie’s Misty Ultra Light Menthols. I filled a conical cup at the water cooler and watched a run in Brenda’s tights crawl up the back of her leg.

Leslie palmed her ankle and extended her leg up near her ear. She took attention from anyone and performed this contortion in supermarkets and at school. Tommy applauded. Ben's attempt at a whistle was soundless.

"I'm gonna go down to the beach. You could come. I could bring some beer. It'll be cool. We could drive." Ben said. he asked Leslie out every week, but this was the first I'd ever heard of a car. He seemed too scattered to pass a drivers' test.

Leslie was still laughing when Phil's Yugo rolled up to the curb.

*

"Maybe you should have an affair." Phil says to me as the Scorpions' "Rock Me like a Hurricane" tapers off. We're back at the Dollhouse on a Wednesday night and Phil is getting drunk. I try to keep up. When we drink we become best friends, offering sincere suggestions and laughing as if we aren't married.

"With who?" I ask.

"With whom," Kashmir corrects me.

"With anyone." he suggests. "Someone younger."

"You first," I say.

Kashmir offers a brief lecture on displaced aggression. She's more helpful than our last couples' therapist. I get up to use the bathroom while she rubs her breasts on Phil's beard.

When I come back Kashmir is with a new client and Leslie, barely covered in a gauzy red negligee, has sat down beside Phil. She's drinking my beer.

"We should get home soon, for the sitter." Phil says leaning close to me. I don't want to talk to Leslie either, but we're both too drunk to drive right now.

“In a little while.” I say.

“Go home,” she says touching my hand. “This is a terrible place.” Maybe she’s trying to be helpful but who is she to judge us?

“How much for a lap dance?” I ask. “Kashmir gets twenty-five. but she can make my husband come.” Leslie’s bare legs stick to the booth but she stands and tells us to go home again.

They’ve just changed the lighting and black bulbs have turned Phil’s white shirt purple. Some of his teeth are yellow and others are an odd glowing gray. I tell him we should sober up first.

“No, I’ve had enough.” He gets up and upsets my beer bottle. It spills but doesn’t shatter. The girl on stage pauses beside her pole and watches us leave.

Phil usually drives reclining, his seat way back, like in high school. But tonight he’s tense, up near the dash and he hasn’t turned on the radio.

“Nice job,” he says while we wait at a stop light. “You should give Leslie a break, talk to her. She can’t be doing so great. She told me that she doesn’t have anyone.”

“I guess I’m just jealous,” I say.

“Of what?” he asks. I know I should shut up but I can’t stop myself.

“She doesn’t have anyone; she didn’t drag anyone down with her. She’s free.”

Phil’s large hands harden into fists around the steering wheel and I feel the car decelerate. Rather than explain or apologize, I tell him that Sarah has a dentist appointment tomorrow.

“I think she has another cavity,” I say.

“It’s time for you to decide what you want.” Phil leans back and exhales. “I’m not the fool you think I am.”

*

The accompanist, engrossed in the adagio, continued to play while Stephanie Streeter threw up in the rosin box. We were five minutes into Thursday’s class. I stayed at the barre while the other girls attended to her. Leslie brought her a chair but Stephanie refused it and went home with smeared lipstick and a zip-lock barf-bag. Tommy took charge and let everyone use the phone but no one was home at Brenda’s house. Her brother would pick us up in an hour and a half anyway.

It was snowing so we waited in the office watching Ben and Tommy drink a case of Coors.

“I’d like a drink,” Leslie said.

“A drink, huh,” Tommy said laughing. “What do ya drink?”

“How about a Roman coke?”

Everyone laughed but Ben was hysterical and choked on his sip of beer. Brenda asked Leslie if she meant *rum and coke*. Leslie took a can from the box and I grabbed one after her.

“Maybe you should go home and take care of your mom.” Leslie told Ben. He already seemed drunk, supine on the dance floor with tired, narrowing eyes.

“No god-damned way. That bitch won’t leave me alone. I’m taking a break.” Ben said and then staggered toward the storage closet for his weights.

Three beers in, I liked the way the booze slowed everything and blurred my reflection in the mirrored wall. Leslie drank less than me, but acted drunker. She left

into elated grande jetes across the dance floor. her legs splitting mid air. Tommy watched her for a while. stolid with his back to the mirror. Ben grunted while he worked his delts, but Leslie was performing for Tommy.

Ben was the only boy we'd ever had in class. Back then he was less than a hundred pounds and partnering was out of the question. When Tommy offered to lift Leslie I remember wondering what girl wouldn't want a man to take her off the ground. His hands were large and red over her pale pink tights. However graceless, he didn't drop her and that might have been seduction enough.

"Let's go somewhere else, this place stinks like puke," Leslie said after he'd set her down.

"We could get a real drink," he offered.

The plan was to go to his apartment, less than a block away. Leslie didn't need to be convinced, but I was scared and felt I should go with her. Tommy nodded toward Ben, doing squats, in the corner.

"I can't just leave him here. I promised Steph that I'd watch him."

Tommy was more concerned with abandoning Ben than with bedding a fourteen-year-old. The police would ask me later, however gently, if that seemed strange to me.

Brenda hadn't considered it either.

"Don't go," she warned but Leslie already had her coat on. "Don't just give it away to him." Brenda's pretty fourteen-year-old face repeats that phrase regularly in my brain. Her maturity still alarms me.

"Brenda can watch him," Leslie said as we left.

She, Tommy and I went to Tommy's apartment, a depressing mess of dead hydrangeas, spilled ashtrays and a beer bong. A rerun of "Three's Company" played on the television while Leslie cuddled up beside Tommy on a dirty futon. I watched him touch her small left breast, his hand on her for less than a second, before she panicked, clutching herself, close to tears. I was prepared with a nail file concealed in my sleeve, but he only told us to leave. I chased Leslie and forgot my coat. When the authorities found it, they charged Tommy with serving minors, a small indiscretion I'd always thought him capable. Today, I don't predict what a man may or may not do anymore because I can't see good in any of them.

An accountant on the floor below the dance studio called the police when he heard what he described as splintering, rather than shattering. Brenda was already dead when Ben Streeter went to work on the mirrored walls with the fifteen pound dumbbell he had used on her skull. The responding officer stated in his report that *the mirrors crackled and webbed but did not come off the bracketing.*

By the time Leslie and I were outside the street was blocked off. Phil sat on the curb beside his Yugo.

*

It takes me a long time to get comfortable when Phil and I are alone, or even to believe that we are alone. We're home from the Dollhouse both pretending to read in the dim light of our bedroom.

I was more at ease on stage. At least then I controlled how I was watched. It's just us now, but it doesn't feel like it. We're not unlike those 9/11 couples with kids, brave survivors who embraced life. Our families treat Sarah as if she's some sort of

angelic. miracle child, even though she's the most moody little girl I've ever known.

Mine was probably the only praised teen pregnancy ever.

"I don't want to go with you to strip clubs anymore," I tell Phil and he closes his book. He touches my face, but it isn't endearing. "You should keep going. without me."

"You should have told me that it bothered you."

"I'm telling you now."

I wake up hours or maybe minutes later and he's gone. I'm halfway down the stairs when I recognize the score to Swan Lake. It's tinny and muffled. I can hear what sounds like an audience scuffling in their seats and coughing. Phil is watching an old tape of a dance recital, our last before the studio shut down. The tracking is all screwed up.

I sit beside him and let him take my hand. Dancers on stage are bright white and blurry but I recognize myself. I was Odette and Leslie, un-ironically, played Odile, the black swan. Brenda was a just a swan, the chorus, third from stage left. She doesn't look heavy at all.

He asks if I'm going to leave. I don't answer and he doesn't ask again.

*

After the studio closed, I took up smoking and put on ten pounds. Leslie enrolled in a performing arts high school up north and we lost touch. I tried a different dance studio across town but the girls there were bitchy and a few of them were better than me.

That fall I started at the regional high school. It was a daily performance of *keep it together, everyone is looking at you*. But really, nobody paid me much attention.

There were too many other teenagers who used catastrophes to conveniently define their

lives. My school had the entire spectrum of teen tragedy: stray bullets hitting little brothers, sodomite math teachers, suicide, daddies dying of testicular cancer, bulimia, and botched abortions. Little girls end up raped and dead all over New Jersey, all over television, and in too many novels.

By sophomore year my grades were still awful and my guidance counselor said it was time to stop grieving. Brenda's brother, Phil, actually milked the disaster worse than me. Rumor had it that he'd written about Brenda's murder in his college admissions essay and had gotten into Georgetown. That rumor was true, but he never made it to Georgetown.

"Need a ride to dance class?" he asked me one afternoon in the school parking lot. Two months later I was pregnant.

That's all I have to say about my marriage. It happened: we commiserated and then we had Sarah. I could construct metaphors to adorn our story with some romance, some heart maybe. But everyone already does that for us, so what's the point?

Phil hates his job, can't pay our bills, and knows I don't love him. He didn't go to college and like me, lost his youth. The situation is far worse for him though because he sincerely loves me.

*

Sarah carries on in the car but I tell her *no* she cannot sit on the console beside the front seat. Phil let her do it once last month on the way to church. I watched our child's tender head ascend toward the cracked windshield with each small bump. Don't worry, I made Phil stop the car and belted her into the backseat.

I watch her in the rearview mirror. She's singing something softly. Like most children, she's dangerously intuitive. I'm taking her out to the park and then to lunch although I haven't decided what I'm trying to tell her. She already senses too much.

On the playground I push her on a swing and spot her on the monkey bars. There are three poles extending from the jungle gym. She shimmies down the same one twice with too much grace for a five-year-old. I spank her gently and tell her to stay away from the poles; they are dangerous. Another young mother coaxing her small son onto the rope swing gives me a nasty look when Sarah begins to cry.

At the restaurant I put mounds of mashed potatoes and buttered rolls on her plate. Maybe the extra weight will isolate her from other girls long enough so that she'll develop a sense of humor, a mind of her own. I was hoping that school could be her thing. She's just average though. I've had her tested. Apparently her grasp on the alphabet is just 'satisfactory', which I don't understand, she either knows it or she doesn't. She drew stick figures for people and this was also a bad sign, although I don't remember why.

Sarah is into her second slice of blueberry pie when my cell phone rings. It's Phil. He's very drunk and it's difficult to hear him over loud rap music. He tells me twice that his car broke down but then admits he's at the Dollhouse and the bartender has taken his keys.

Sarah falls asleep while we're on the turnpike. It's late afternoon and traffic is already heavy. I pull into the farthest spot in the Dollhouse parking lot and tell her I'll only be a minute and not to get out of the car. I'm locking her in. Sarah stands on the seat looking around. She knows we shouldn't be here.

Two men in muddy construction boots arrive. Executives with loosened ties come out after long lunch hours. A lanky boy wearing a ball cap arrives on a moped. A landscaping truck pulls up beside us. I can smell sweet grass as a crew of dirty sun-stained men with cut up hands jump out of the back.

I cannot believe that their hunger is harmless. Women like Leslie look it in the face but that doesn't mean she isn't afraid. I watched Ben Streeter with naïve eyes but I scrutinize these men, not with hate, but with caution. Sarah, sensing their threat, is crying. Little girls must be locked away from them and watched over. This is my job.

I hold her, febrile and damp, against me, but she doesn't seem to feel better and neither do I. I know I won't always be able to protect my daughter from men. Nothing feels this terrible.

I won't leave her, so we wait, crouched low in the car. I tell her it's a game, hide and seek, us against everyone. She peeks to count cars speeding past on Rt. 9 and says they sound like ocean waves. Eventually her father stumbles out.

Over a bucket of fried chicken he tells me that he hadn't wanted to go to the club; it was a client's request.

"I'll never go back," he says and slowly I recognize the round, kind face of my husband again. Gentle, patient, and not like a man at all.

"I'd appreciate that," I say but really don't care where he goes as long as he comes back to take care of Sarah and me. She's on her fourth chicken wing and couldn't be happier. Her double chin is shiny with grease and bones are piling up on her plate. She is going to be a thick legged, sturdy girl. Independent and unattractive, she won't inherit Brenda's beauty or my slight build. She'll be just like her father: substantial,

steadfast, and miserable. It is, in fact, heartbreaking. Even before I tell Phil, Sarah knows that her parents are staying together.

After we make love later that night I say that it's not forever, but I'll stay a little longer. He folds his hands over his stomach and looks at the ceiling. Nobody is watching now, not even Phil.