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### Beautiful Disaster

Laura Scholes

*The University of Montana*

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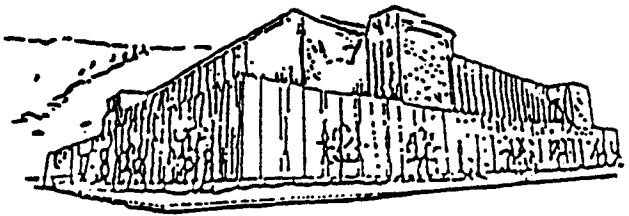
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# A beautiful disaster

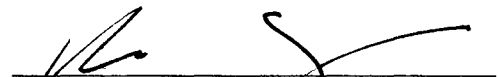
stories : essay

by

**Laura Scholes**

2002

Approved by:

  
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**stories**

## Oracle Road

The clock in the break room said 10:42. Josephine picked up an Oreo from the six-pack she had gotten from the vending machine and watched the second hand glide smoothly around the clock face. She munched quietly, arms folded under her small breasts trying to keep herself warm in the stale refrigerated air pumped in through grey vents. The walls were brilliant white, decorated only by the clock and a poster explaining the proper procedure for a choking victim. At 10:45 she carefully wrapped the remaining three Oreos in the package and put them in her locker. She pulled her orange smock off a hook and slipped it over her head. She pulled up the leg of her jeans and touched the bandage on her calf without looking, making sure the surgical tape was in place and that it wasn't leaking. Second nature. She headed down the concrete steps, her clogs echoing loudly in the stairwell, back to her place in the joints and fasteners section.

As she passed the swinging doors out to the garden center, Josephine paused and put a hand up, touching the window. Everything outside was green and lush; the rows of lattice scattered diamonds of sun across the concrete. Juan Carlos was helping a man with a cane pick out a healthy ficus tree and he waved when he saw Josephine. She pointed at the pansies and held up three, then four, fingers. He gave her a thumbs up sign and a smooth nod of the head.

Inside, the wide aisles were full and noisy with contractor chatter and rattling wheels from overloaded carts. A short man with Carhartt work pants and a Ken's Paint



and Body Shop t-shirt pulled too tightly over his stomach started toward Josephine. His nicotine-stained fingers were cracked and peeling. He held out a list written in pencil on a dirty gas company envelope.

“I’m sorry sir, there’s no smoking in the store,” she said, hand up like a traffic cop, as he approached. She managed, at the last minute, to turn on her “I’m not just an employee, I’m an owner and stockholder” smile. The man blew the smoke out over his right shoulder and tossed the cigarette to the concrete floor. He extinguished it with the twist of the toe of his left Wolverine, with a mean squint of the eye. She maintained her smile, wondering for the tenth time that day how she had let George talk her into coming to Arizona and how she had actually ended up at the Oracle Road Home Depot. She watched the man’s mouth ask her a question while picturing George in a sunlit classroom filled with smart, pretty people debating the rationalist view of Descartes in the empirical age and wanted to throw up all over the “How to Dig a Post Hole” display. Her leg throbbed.

“I’m sorry, sir, could you repeat the question?” She was 27 years old. She had a degree in linguistics.

“Oh forget it.” He waved his hand in her face and she felt the slight draft and smelled turpentine and cheeseburger.

• • •

“What in God’s name do you expect me to do in Tucson, Arizona, George?” Josephine’s voice was loud. “Has that crossed your mind? What I’m supposed to do?” She had been working in the garden when George came to her. He was nervous, rubbing the back of his neck. One hand was in his shorts pocket fingering change that wasn’t there. She had known immediately something big was up.

“Of course it’s crossed my mind, Josie. You think I’m that big of an asshole?” He looked sleepy and impossibly young. His eyes were pleading and only slightly ashamed.

“Well I don’t know, George. Let’s go over this,” she said, leaning on the hoe. Her fingernails were crescents of dark earth. A streak of brown slashed her left cheek. Sweat trickled down her back and legs. Small rivers. “Number one, you apply to grad school without so much as a word to me. Number two, you apply to a school in the middle of the fucking desert. Number three, you accept an offer by said grad school in middle of the fucking desert. And, by the way, just when did you take the GRE? Did you not have to make vocabulary cards like the rest of us? Where were your vocabulary cards, George?” She put her hand up to wipe away the sweat that had pooled with a tear in her eye. She only cried when she was angry. The begonias were starting to wilt in their little plastic trays.

“In December. I took the GRE in December when you went home for Christmas. But Jo, I didn’t want to jinx it. I didn’t really think I’d get in, actually. That’s why I didn’t tell you. I promise. Please. I’m telling you now.” He grabbed her hand. She pulled it back. It slipped out pretty easily she thought. His fingers left vague tracks in the dirt on

the top of her hand. "I'm telling you now because I want you to go with me."

She almost believed him. It was that almost part that caused Josephine and George all of their trouble. There was so much almost between them that there was no room for anything else. She felt for the scab under her left arm. It was hard and real. She picked at the curling edges.

"Why do you want me to go with you? Have you really thought this through, George?"

"Of course I have. Why do you think I waited this long?"

"I don't know." Suddenly Josephine was very tired. She wanted to go inside where it was cool and pull the shades and crawl into bed. The sheets had just been washed. She didn't know if she could do all this.

"Josie, I want you to go with me because I think it would be a good thing. For both of us."

"For 'us us' or for each of us separately? I mean is there an 'us us'?"

"For each of us separately and for us together, too, I think. Oh god, I don't know." His voice cracked and made Josephine's limbs ache. Neither of them knew anything for certain. The number of things they did not know for certain was too big to count, a wide canyon. They accepted this about each other on most days.

"When would you leave?" Josephine imagined the orange and white U-Haul parked with a painting of spiky cactuses on the side that promised new and exciting adventures ahead. It was in front of their house and George was loading it with an

awkward, contained giddiness while Josephine pretended to read the New Yorker on the couch. The couch was hers. It was staying. He was leaving. Going on to bigger and better things in a gleaming rented truck.

“I—we—would leave mid-August,” George said. “Wait. Are you saying you don’t want to go with me?”

“I’m saying I feel like you’ve put me in the middle of a fucked-up situation and I need to think about it. Go away. Please.” The edge of the scab was now free. She exhaled a very big sigh. She dropped her hand and looked away and pawed at the weedy ground with the hoe.

• • •

Josephine was working the early shift and was exhausted by the time her lunch break came. In the break room, she sunk into a chair and arched her back to unkink it. LaKeesha and Frieda who worked in the wallpaper and carpet department were already there. They had both brought food from home. Cloudy, scratched Tupperware filled with strong smelling leftovers.

LaKeesha was 17 and had a 8-month-old boy named Moses. She wore a big button with his picture on it every day. He smiled, looking surprised, eyes wide, leaning on his elbows in a sailor’s suit. LaKeesha’s current boyfriend, Curtis, worked down the street changing tires at Western Auto. They lived with LaKeesha’s mom in an apartment

complex on Eden Street. The baby slept in a basket next to the bed LaKeesha had laid on in grade school cutting out stars from construction paper. No one knew for sure if Moses was Curtis's or not.

Frieda was a retired cafeteria worker from the middle school on the south side of town. For 30 years she had served corn dogs and 8-oz cartons of whole milk to white kids and then later to kids of all different shades. Her own three girls were grown and all living in different time zones. Now, with her husband dead early of a bad prostate and her mother propped up in her living room in a rented hospital bed, Frieda was partial to striking up the most trivial of relationships. She had taken to meeting the garbage men on their early morning rounds with specific and cheery instructions on how to dispose of her well-bagged trash. On Thursdays, she greeted the patrons at Home Depot #466 with a similar enthusiasm.

“LaKeesha, you and Curtis got any plans for the weekend?” asked Frieda brightly. She had her lunch laid out on the table as if she were at home with real silverware and a Corelle plate that she washed and dried everyday after lunch. Her napkin was tucked into her shirt under her chin.

“Nah, Curtis got to work both Saturday and Sunday. They run him ragged over there I swear,” LaKeesha said. “I’m thinking of going to the outlet stores on Saturday. Momma said she might buy me and Moses something. I hear they got Baby Gap out there now for real cheap. Myself, I want some new panties and one of those lacy bras from the Victoria Secret.” She paused to study her fingernails and then looked off to the

distance. Josephine wondered if LaKeesha was picturing herself as Tyra Banks hovering over a hot and bothered Curtis on the twin bed, Moses gurgling in the near distance.

“Oooh. That sounds like fun,” Frieda cooed. “What about you Josephine? You and George got anything special going on?”

Josephine looked down at the sandwich she held in both her hands. Her fingers were gray from a morning of scooping hex nuts and penny nails out of galvanized bins. “No, George has a paper due so he’ll be at the library all weekend, I suspect,” she said.

• • •

Josephine met George movies in Memphis. She was there by herself on a Friday night with a box of Raisinettes and a bottle of Coke in her purse. She noticed George while she was waiting to buy her ticket. He was twirling from one end of the concession counter to the other, handing people straws and dispensing extra butter. He had the sexiest, most genuine smile she had ever seen. She decided she could splurge on popcorn just that once. She looked down, smiling, face burning when George started to hand her the popcorn but didn’t let go of the bag. He asked her if she wanted candy or a drink with that, nodding at her purse and winking. She said no. He said I get off at midnight, wait for me and we will have an adventure. She said ok. Later, George would tell the story that he had fallen in love with her right there in that line, the reflection of the dancing snacks cartoon glowing on her face. How he knew it was different, how he was smitten from the

first sight of her. She still felt it sometimes, his thick, blanket-like attraction.

After her movie was finished, she had kept George company while he flushed the syrup lines on the drink dispenser and restocked the nacho bin. They had gone back to his apartment in Central Gardens where they talked until their voices were scratchy, interrupting each other to finish sentences, speaking only of things for which they shared a similar view or a great passion. When they had found enough of those things, they started taking their clothes off. There was no discussion, just denim and zippers, skin and mouths. She kissed him hard when he asked her what had happened and pointed to the thickly crusted gash edged in bright pink on the underside of her right bicep. He seemed to allow himself to forget she hadn't answered. He asked her again the next morning when they were lying next to each other in his bed as if waking up together was something they had been doing for a long time. He rubbed his fingers lazily over the rough surface of the cut, back and forth. Back and forth. She said, "Maybe later," and ran her hand up the inside of his thigh.

It was a month before she told him that she cut herself on purpose. A month of long kisses and legs wrapped around one another and knowing looks across rooms at parties before she explained how it started as something else but now she thought cutting herself would keep her from getting sick like her mother did at 28, that the small injuries she inflicted were keeping something bigger from happening to her. She told him she knew it didn't make sense, but she was too scared to stop now. It was only a little while longer. She put her cool fingertips on his face, lightly, and said she understood if he wanted her to

go away. But by that time it was too late. He kissed her hard and then pulled her up to her feet and said, "Let's go get some ice cream."

It was another 10 months before they left Memphis for Tucson. During those 10 months, George moved in with Josephine and they created a couple life of sorts. George played basketball and guitar with his friends during the day and worked nights at the theater. Josephine worked days at a flower shop in a neighborhood where people had a lot of money to spend on her elaborate arrangements. It was a coasting life. It didn't require much of Josephine.

It was only sometimes that her cuts got in their way. She would keep the bathroom door closed for a bit too long sending George into a sulk for the better part of the day. Or if he touched her in a new place by mistake she would flinch and he would flinch and there wouldn't be any touching for days afterward.

• • •

The fall sun was low and weighty on the horizon when Josephine got home. Blu met her at the door with a tennis ball. They went straight to the backyard where Josephine pitched the ball in high, arching throws that Blu followed intensely and then leapt, twisting torso, full of grace, to catch in her white teeth. Josephine clapped and called for Blu to return the ball. The dog scratched a hairpin turn in the dry grass, sprinted toward Josephine and then sat ghostly still in front of her. Josephine laughed and stroked



Blu's head. Josephine felt most like what she thought normal must feel like when she was alone with Blu. The dog didn't know about the disease she was waiting to get. Or that she lived her life in slow motion hoping she could blur through the bad parts. Or that her cuts had left scars that she couldn't look at in the mirror. She leaned down to cup Blu's chin with her hand and gave her a soft kiss on the top of the nose. Both of them were startled by a tap on the kitchen window. Blu ran to the back door and barked.

"Hey," George said, opening the door to let Blu in. "Did you know you and Blu both close your eyes when you kiss her? It's a beautiful thing."

The wind caught a strand of Josephine's almost black hair and blew it across her cheek. She pulled it off with a hook of her index finger. "No, I didn't realize." She looked down and turned sideways to slide past George in the doorway. He put his hands out against the wall and caught her between his forearms. She held up the muddy tennis ball in front of his face, did a quick duck and kept walking into the kitchen. "What are you doing home? I thought you were going to be doing research tonight."

"I was, but I got antsy at the library. It's Friday night—we should go out and have some fun, right?" He walked up behind her at the sink where she was washing the tennis ball and leaned into her with his whole body. He bent down and kissed the tight little muscles of her neck. She smelled like Dove soap and WD-40. Blu watched every move. "How was the Depot?"

Josephine rubbed the ball under the faucet with her thumbs. The water pushed away the brown dirt and sent it swirling down the drain. She watched the fluorescent

green felt reappear like a message in invisible ink. She waited knowing George probably didn't want an answer. His life had a pace and ease that begged not to be disturbed. He was so casual about everything. He had no concept of what was at stake in this world.

George bit her lightly on the neck and sat down at the kitchen table. "Josie, why are you doing this? You know you shouldn't be working retail, much less selling power drills and pipe fittings," he said, tipping his chair on its two back legs. "Come back to school with me. It would be fun. We could skip class and meet under the bleachers."

"We came here for you to go to school, not me," Josephine said, pushing on his knee to get the chair down on all its legs. Her fingertips left four small wet dots on his jeans. "It will be fine once I get out in the garden center. Hamilton says by the end of next month, maybe sooner."

George grabbed her hand and pulled her down on his lap. He put his chin on her shoulder and wrapped his arms around her. He rested his clasped hands on her hips. Blu barked and wagged her tail, sending stray bits of grass gliding across the linoleum. "But just because we came here for me doesn't mean you can't do it too," he said. "We both know you're way smarter than I am."

"That's been well established," she said, brushing the hair out of George's eyes and wriggling out of his grip. "But still, I'm not ready. Besides, it's just not right if no one in the household has a paying job. If you had gotten to meet my father, you would know better than to even suggest it."

George sighed. "I bet your father would thank me for trying to get you out of

Home Depot.”

“Oh no. He would have thought graduate school was absolutely a diversionary tactic.”

“He was smart, too,” George said, his mouth right against her ear. He then blew hard into it and stood up quickly. Josephine reached for the edge of the table, but he caught her hand and brought her to her feet gracefully, like they had been dancing. “Come on, let’s go get a bottle of wine and take Blu to the river.”

On Monday during their morning break, LaKeesha brought out a big shopping bag from her locker.

“Oh LaKeesha, this is the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” said Frieda, holding up a pair of tiny red denim overalls by the straps. “Don’t you think so, Josephine? What else did you get?”

LaKeesha worked to separate the baby clothes from the tissue paper. “We had so much fun. I’m kind of glad now Curtis had to work. It was the first time we’d done something like that, just me and momma and Moses. I think it made her happy to see we were doing all right.”

“Mommas love being with their little girls, even when they’re grown, isn’t that right, Josephine?”

Josephine didn’t answer. She looked away and eased her right hand up under her pants leg. She felt for the bandage and peeled off the tape silently; the little hairs on her

calf pulled out from the roots. She ran her fingers over the rough wide cut, such familiar terrain. She remembered the nights of not knowing whether she had given her mother too much medicine. Of watching for hours, her forehead resting on a cool window, for her father's headlights to pull into the driveway. He was the one who was supposed to know. She was too young to count the pills right. She started in on the cut. It was big and sore and tender, but she couldn't stop.

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey," said Frieda, patting Josephine's bony wrist.

"Sorry—for what?" said LaKeesha, continuing to sort the bright little t-shirts and socks with footballs stitched on the cuff.

Frieda shot LaKeesha a look.

"My mom's dead," said Josephine, looking evenly at LaKeesha. "My dad, too, for that matter."

LaKeesha gawked at Josephine like she had just witnessed a fiery car wreck.

"Everybody has their time to go," said Frieda, trying to create a distraction by waving her hands around in a fanciful gesture. "We just don't know when it's going to be and it's not up to us anyway. God has his plan for everyone and we shouldn't ever question it."

Josephine slipped her arm out from under Frieda's pudgy hand and went to her locker. She rested her bare shoulder on the cool metal. She felt a trickle down her leg.

"Girl! You got blood all up on your shoe," said LaKeesha, pointing with one hand, a pair of miniature basketball shoes in the other.

“Oh Lord Josephine! It’s dripping all over! ” Frieda jumped up snatching a bunch of thin napkins from the dispenser on the table and knocking it over. She rushed to Josephine while fumbling to put her glasses on, but Josephine blocked her at the last second.

“Frieda, look, I’m fine. Really.” Josephine’s voice was harsh and final. Frieda withered and shuffled back to her seat. LaKeesha kept her attention on Moses’ new wardrobe.

Frieda picked up a cardigan sweater and twisted on the buttons for a few seconds in silence. “I’m going to go get Mr. Hamilton, Josephine,” she said, dropping the sweater to the table, in charge again. “You shouldn’t be on the floor with open wound. And I’m going to call George to come get you.”

“No!” Josephine snapped. “Don’t do that. I do not need him here.”

Frieda looked at LaKeesha, who shrugged her shoulders, and then she ran from the break room to get the manager.

Josephine turned to stand with her back to LaKeesha. She faced the dark cavern of her locker and closed her eyes. Except for the hum of the fluorescent lights, the room was intensely quiet. She felt intoxicated, lightheaded from the relief of the cut, the warmth of the pulsing blood.

Mr. Hamilton called Josephine over the loudspeaker. He sat behind a desk where he had brought out an industrial-sized first aid kit just in case. His brow furrowed deeply when he insisted she take the rest of the day off. She went back and hung her orange

smock in the locker and collected her other things, feeling somehow like she had been dismissed for bad behavior. She wondered if people would treat her differently when she came back to work, give her looks of pity mixed with just a small amount of condescension.

Josephine walked out to her '87 Honda Civic with a barely perceptible limp. Her keys felt heavy in her hand. When she got to the car, she saw Juan Carlos had sneaked the pansies into the hatchback. They sat there, a whole trunkful of them, upright and perky, blue and violet and fuschia and yellow, waiting on her. Josephine smiled at the unexpected tenderness of the gesture and forgot the pain in her calf for a moment.

In the distance, she heard thunder. She thought first of Blu, who had an almost paralyzing fear of loud noises, and then of George, and wondered whether he had put the top up on his Saab. Probably not. It was an issue. How she thought his family's money—and now, recently, his—had made him careless and prone to take shortcuts, easy solutions, bad advice. George didn't think so. Whenever it came up, he would laugh at Josephine and give her a hug that was too tight, which almost always made things worse. She headed towards home where it was quiet and she could re-bandage the cut and then get into bed with Blu and read to her while the thunderstorm gathered.

The clouds were rolling in fast and dark. Josephine still hadn't gotten used to the way nature in Tucson seemed to grab you by the hair and shake you with its excess and beauty. In Memphis, you were just either hot or nothing at all. She decided without really

thinking about it to head west and take the road along the Santa Cruz River to watch the storm come in on the way home. It was a clear view across the wide and shallow river. She drove slowly and hoped the thunder wasn't as loud in town as it was out by the mountains.

Big fat raindrops started to fall. Slowly at first, and then suddenly water was gushing from the sky. The Civic's old wipers couldn't push it away quickly enough for Josephine to see. And she couldn't see behind her either.

"Shit," she said out loud and banged the gear shift. "Shit."

The cut on her calf had started bleeding again. More this time. The dark stain on her jeans was spreading. The thick earthy smell of the pansies filled the car. She wasn't sure what to do next. She put her turn signal on and hoped there was a shoulder to pull over onto. She caught her breath and her adrenaline surged when the car hydroplaned. But then in the next moment she hit the crunchy gravel and the car straightened out and she was able to slow down until she was stopped. Her legs were shaking. She put her head on the steering wheel and closed her eyes. The rain pounded the roof like an angry herd. There were no other cars on the road. She wanted to cry. But she only cried when she was angry and right now she was just scared. She wished Blu were with her.

After a few minutes, she pulled her sleeve down over the heel of her palm and rubbed away the fog that had built up on the windshield.

The river was rising. Quickly.

She turned the key in the ignition to see if she could get the weather on the radio,

but got only static.

The river was halfway to road level now.

She eyed the glove compartment where there was a cell phone that George had bought for her and insisted she carry for emergencies. She had never even turned it on. She looked at her watch and knew he'd be home by now. He would want to help. All she'd have to do is dial the numbers. It was only seven numbers.

The key stuck going into the dirty lock on the glove box, but Josephine jiggled and tugged until she got it to pop open. The black phone was tucked in the corner. She pulled it out and turned it on. She recited the seven numbers and then imagined herself dialing them. She tried to think of what she would say. She couldn't. She looked out at the river again and was mesmerized by the swiftness and power of it. The phone rang. It startled her so much she dropped it by the emergency brake. She found the phone first and then the talk button.

"Hello?"

"Josephine! Thank God. Where are you?" George's voice was shaking.

"I think I'm in the wrong place."

"Well come home then! This storm's a bastard."

"I don't think I can."

"What do you mean? Where are you? Tell me and I'll come get you."

"How did you know to call?"

"Frieda called here and told me what happened at work. Josephine, are you OK?"



Let me come get you.”

“I’m fine. I’ll just wait here until the storm passes. Don’t worry. Is Blu OK? Is she scared? You know how scared she gets.” The rain was not stopping, not for an instant.

“Blu’s fine. You don’t sound fine, though. Goddamn it Jo. Tell me where you are.”

She didn’t know what to say so she said nothing.

“Josephine, please. I love you, truly, but you’re really pissing me off. I’m walking out the door right now to come get you. Tell me where the fuck you are.” She heard him pick up his keys and whistle for Blu.

She thought of her mother suddenly, a full memory this time, a rare and awkward thing. Josephine’s father had just picked her up from the hospital and they drove straight to Josephine’s school for a visit. The principal came into her first grade homeroom and whispered to the teacher. Mrs. Rutherford smiled and called Josephine’s name. The principal took her to the teacher’s lounge where her parents were dressed up and waiting. Josephine sat down in a chair that was too big for her. Her feet didn’t touch the floor. She smiled at her father but felt shy with her mother. Her face was hot. No words would come out. She couldn’t look her in the eye. It had been a long time. Her mother put a hand to Josephine’s temple and then tucked Josephine’s hair behind her ear. She handed Josephine a pair of moccasins she had made for her in arts and crafts, like she’d been away at day camp instead of the hospital. Josephine took them and said thank you very

much. She stared at the blue and red and yellow beads. She wanted to cry but knew she wasn't supposed to. She flicked at the soft suede fringe and swung her legs up and back. Up and back.

"Josephine. I never know how to help you. Do you have any idea how bad that feels?" George's voice had softened. He sounded so sad. She pictured him standing in their bright warm living room, Blu running around him in circles. His hands were beautiful. He was tall and strong. He still sent her handwritten love letters in the mail.

The river was coming up onto the road now. The blood on her jeans was dark and wet.

"I'm over at the river, on Mission," she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth. She could not catch them. "I think somewhere near 22nd, but I'm not sure. I can't see anything. Oh God, George. It's so much rain." Her throat was tight and her eyes were salty and stinging.

"Fuck. Stay in the car. No. Shit. There should be higher ground near there somewhere. Wait! 22nd! You should be near Sentinel Peak. Get out of the car and just start walking up. Now! I'm going to hang up but I'll call back when I'm close. Keep the phone on. I'll find you. OK?"

Silence.

"Josephine, just walk up. Look for me. I will be there. OK?"

"OK. Yes." And then, yes again.

When she opened the car door, the river was already above her ankles and rushing.

Rushing. She ran down the road that was now part of the river and turned toward the mountain. She left a wake in the water. The blood from her cut ran with it downstream.

## **Homo emeritus**

In the space of the week that it took Gloria Buchanan to die, the list of things Arthur Buchanan did not know grew unbearably long. He did not know how much a stamp cost. He did not know how long it took for his shirts to be laundered. He did not know his daughter's telephone number. He was surprised when he ran out of milk for his Raisin Bran that the groceries did not replenish themselves. He left the empty milk container in the door of the refrigerator and checked it every day, scanning the face of a missing child in Detroit, while he shook the weightless carton back and forth, listening to the silent, no-milk sound inside. He had to look at pictures of Gloria to recall the details of her face. It went on like this for three months after the funeral, until Emily had called him.

"Dad, you're freaking me out," Emily said. She called him on her lunch hour. She was an architect. Arthur thought she kept her hair too short. He suspected that was why she wasn't married yet.

"What are you talking about Emily? Speak English to me." Arthur looked over the wall of faded pictures in the living room while he talked into the cordless phone. The frames were dusty. There was one of Emily in a softball uniform looking serious. He didn't see himself in any of them. He was nowhere to be found.

"You know perfectly well what I mean. This 'helpless' routine is scaring me. You act like you don't know how to do anything since mom died. You don't go out; you're

starting to look tired.” She paused for effect. “And old.”

Arthur Buchanan was astounded by getting old. He still didn’t believe it, really, especially now that Gloria was gone. When she was here, he had an object of measure, a frame of reference. He saw her as he had always seen her, and that was not as an old person; she was just Gloria. Now, he squinted to blur his edges and smooth his wrinkles whenever he looked in the bathroom mirror.

“Dad, really. You’re in that house all day. You don’t go out. This isn’t good.”

“I am a professor. We don’t go out. It’s why we suffered through graduate school and wrote tedious papers on particle physics.”

“*Were*, Dad. You *were* a professor.”

“Well, Professor Emeritus if you feel compelled to put that fine of a point on it, Emily. I’ll be on campus one day a week this fall. The city’s pretty in the fall. I’ll walk. Would that make you happy, dear one?”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“Who’s patronizing who?” he asked.

“Whom.”

“See?” Where were the pictures of him? Why weren’t there any pictures of him?

“OK, just stop. Look, all I’m saying is it’s not good. I’m worried, Lancaster’s worried, it’s...”

Arthur interrupted. “Michael Lancaster called you about this? That officious prick.”

“No Dad, I called him. He said he hadn’t talked to you since the funeral. That he’s left you messages, but didn’t want to push..”

“I didn’t call him back because I didn’t want to call him back. Your mother never liked him you know.”

“Michael Lancaster? Dad, that’s bullshit. Mom was crazy about Michael. Don’t you remember how she made him a pineapple upside down cake for his birthday every year because he told her once it was his favorite? And she always wrote him a funny poem for the card.”

“Well, he bores me.”

“Dad, you and Michael have been friends for 30 years.”

“Exactly.”

“No, not exactly. You’ve been friends for 30 years because he’s brilliant and you’re brilliant and you have conversations about things nobody else can understand and you love it. This is what I’m talking about. You’re being...weird.”

“‘Weird’? Precision, Emily. How many times do I have to tell you to be precise with your language.”

“You know what I’m talking about, Dad. Don’t fuck with me.”

“I’d say ‘Fuck’ is more descriptive than precise. Try again.”

They debated like this for nine of the ten minutes Emily said she had pencilled in for the call. At nine minutes and thirty seconds, she said it was either he went to see a therapist or he started going to the Senior Center. She had evaluated all of the options and

this was what she had narrowed his choices down to. She didn't say what would happen if he didn't take her advice, but he knew better. He thought for a minute. He knew some people in the Psych department. He thought they were all kooks; fuzzy science. He imagined Emily looking at her watch and anxious to get on to her next project. He said he'd go to the Senior Center. But it was just to get her off the phone. He had no idea she was going to pick him up the next afternoon and drive him. And wait. Like he was a child at a piano lesson. It was mortifying.

But he had gone that day and the next Tuesday and the next. And Arthur Buchanan had, against his wishes and better judgment, grown fond of the ease and comfort that he found at the Prescott Street Senior Center. *"Retirement is often just the chance people need to really get busy and live life to the fullest!"* The people there did not ask him questions that caused him to search the deteriorating catalog of his brain looking for answers that used to be there but weren't there anymore. He could sit a card table covered with a damp plastic tablecloth and let his mind drift, lulled by the withered voices of the others while they talked. About the arthritis that made it practically impossible to open a jar of peanut butter. About which local news station had the best weatherman. About whether they preferred pancakes or waffles as a breakfast food. They could talk for hours about the narrowest range of subjects and ideas and never say a thing. It was like academia for dummies. It made Arthur feel smart.

A month later, Arthur Buchanan still hadn't told Michael Lancaster or anyone else for that matter about his Tuesday afternoons at the Senior Center. *"Beginning Line*

*Dance: No partner is needed. Great fun and great exercise!*" And he started going on Saturdays as well for Bingo Night, which he knew would get a laugh and a dry and ironic comment from Lancaster if he heard. It made Arthur's face go hot if he thought about it.

Arthur still cared about these kinds of things, these kind of appearances. At 74 years old, he was still a good looking man. He was tall, six foot three, and walked upright and carefully to compensate for the effect of his slight limp, which was due to a bout with polio at age seven. The polio had been caught in time and had left just a trace of disability.

Arthur learned early on how to capitalize on his good looks. He learned that there was almost nothing that was more attractive than exceeding, if sometimes feigned, self confidence, and an ability to give explicit and detailed compliments. It was so simple, really, and he wondered why so few other men had figured this formula out. Arthur's formula had led to a long history of extremely short affairs: with graduate students, though never his own; secretaries; adjuncts whose husbands were stuck in Rochester being adjuncts; registrar assistants; waitresses at the coffee shop across from campus. These were always socially anonymous women. No wives or daughters of colleagues. No college or work friends of Emily's. Certainly no friends of Gloria's. And he was strict about age: over 25. Even when he was an adjunct himself and young, 25 was the limit. Always. No exceptions.

Arthur had theories that applied to his infidelities, just like he had theories that applied to his research. And he considered the measure of his infidelity could not be found in the simple statement of the numbers of women he had had sex with, but in a



more complex and elegant equation that added together the numbers of women, divided by the number of years he had been a professor, and then factored in the number of advances he had turned down (a surprisingly large number) as well as the number of women (albeit small) that he considered his intellectual equal and therefore had only screwed in his head. It was not an unhealthy sum. But it was a sum that was just close enough to commonly accepted behavior to earn him the admiration and not the scorn of his male colleagues.

It had ended though, the history of infidelity. Later than most of his friends, and he was proud of that. That and the fact that as far as he could tell, Gloria had never found out about any of it. It ended just three years before with a 48-year-old real estate agent he met at Kinko's. The copier in the Physics department was broken—again—and so he had been gone there to Xerox his course syllabus. He saw her at the machine to his left, and he felt a tender sorrow for her with her briefcase spread out sloppily, papers protruding from every pocket. She had a pen in her mouth and her auburn hair had fallen out of the barrette in the back. He imagined her adding up potential commissions all day in her head, over and over and over, spending the dream money on massages and expensive handbags and weeklong self-help seminars and then never actually seeing anything close in her biweekly check from her broker and how tiring and sad that must be. He had offered to help her pick up a stack of lease-purchase agreements that she dropped on the floor and she had looked at him with such overwhelming gratitude, out of proportion, really, with his action, that he invited her to dinner. After, without discussion, they went to her apartment and had sex on the floor under the dining table her grandmother from South

Carolina had left her (her sheets were in the washer). He could still remember the urinary smell of the shag carpet and the “Go Cats” sticker an errant nephew had secretly put on the unfinished wood, the drawing of the ferocious animal with big teeth and revenge in its gold eyes.

He had slipped a disc trying to get to his feet while the real estate agent lay there with an expectant look on her smudged face and had thought that this was as good a piece of evidence as any that he was getting too old to keep repeating the “You’re a lovely woman, but...” speech. He cringed only just a small amount to think of how many times he had held on to a woman’s smooth hand with both of his own and looked into her eyes and recited his lines without even having to think anymore which word came after “lovely” or “married” or “I will never.” So that had been the end of it.

After Gloria died, Arthur’s attention to appearances broadened to include their house, which he had never even considered before. The house had been Gloria’s terrain. Of course, his study, which Gloria was never comfortable being in for longer than it took to tell Arthur dinner was ready or that Science Friday was on the radio, was pristine. It looked like a study from a movie set where everything had been chosen and placed with the greatest care. The walls were lined with books and monographs. Dark oak file cabinets, polished, were filled with perfectly ordered and labeled files of all of Arthur’s research.

And from the outside of the house, you would never know Gloria wasn’t living there anymore. The house was quiet and steady. The welcome mat was swept. The lawn

was finely manicured and the plantings carefully lush. It was still tended to twice weekly by an older black man who had called Gloria, "Miss Gloria," and whom she had called "Mr. Henry." This strange formality had endured throughout the 32 years he had worked there. Arthur called Mr. Henry "Mr. Henry," too, though only because he never had thought to ask his first name. He still wrote the monthly check just as Gloria had for all those years to "Mr. Henry."

If anything suffered after Gloria, it was her greenhouse.

The greenhouse was the only thing Gloria had ever asked for from Arthur beyond sporadic raises in the monthly allowance he gave her for all of the typical household and childraising expenses. She had done the drawing herself on graph paper, and it was magnificent, still. Elaborate, large, imposing, like something that you would happen upon with great wonder in a hidden corner of a garden in Europe. She had, in fact, copied some of the design after the conservatory at the botanical garden in New York where she had worked after college before Arthur convinced her that her life would never amount to anything in a city where people lived in such close proximity to one another. That there was no room for an idea of any importance to take hold. After a year of Arthur's letters full of logical arguments, emphasized occasionally with a meticulously clipped out newspaper story about a gruesome crime in Central Park, Gloria had come back South.

Gloria had worked for six months on the greenhouse drawing, making sure every angle was elegant, every pane reflected the sun into the greenhouse in the most

advantageous way. She hadn't shown the plans to Arthur, ever. He would have gotten too involved, taken it over. She knew that. She knew better. She had hired the builders, the plumbers, the heating contractors. And when it was finished, she picked out the plants, one by one, until the greenhouse practically breathed on its own, aching and verdant.

Now, the greenhouse was full of plants that were brown and cracked and so utterly dead that it frightened Arthur. The brittle plants climbed all over the iron skeleton and clung, even in their deathstate. He could see them in the corner of his eyes no matter where he was in the house or the yard. Could feel the absence of their breath on his skin. He had bought a big set of clippers once and had great plans to go in and get rid of all the dead plants once and for all. But as he raised them to snip at the largest trunk, he looked out the back of the greenhouse and saw a squirrel perch on the edge of the birdbath and lean over to take a drink. He stopped, clippers in mid-air, and thought of the first time he had seen Gloria. She had been at the water fountain in the main hall of their college, the same college where he went to work after graduate school and had worked now for 38 years. He watched her from across the gleaming wood floors. She closed her eyes, held her blonde hair back with a slender hand and leaned her bare lips into the water. Her face was smooth, without worry, full of questions, beautiful. He had used that water fountain almost every day, but had completely forgotten the event until that moment. He hadn't even needed a photo. He rested the clippers on the floor.

And the plants stayed.

And in those months he called Triple AAA Glass and Mirror several times to

replace the old brittle panes that got cracked by a distracted blue jay. He learned to measure from the correct point of the mullion. He carried the small tape measurer in his pocket at all times and took comfort in the rhythmic metallic sounds it made under the fabric when he fussed with it like a worry stone. The new glass sparkled and Arthur was proud of himself for his attention to the small repairs on Gloria's behalf, but there was something in his work that didn't seem nearly as true as the original.

And in those months, Arthur had gotten comfortable with the plants and their warm deadness. He took an Adirondack chair from the back patio and set it up in the middle of the room. He sat there every afternoon and let the sun go from yellow to orange to nothing. When the fluorescent lights came on automatically, he knew it was time for dinner. He had soup, usually. With buttered toast and a glass of water.

Pretty soon he started shutting off the rooms to the house, one by one, and kept them shut. He brought in the trundle bed from the upstairs guest room and set it up in the corner of the greenhouse with a bedside table and a small reading lamp. At night, he lay on the weary twin mattress and imagined how beautiful it must look from the outside, lit up by the soft yellow incandescence of his lamp. It must look like a place you would want to go if you had been traveling far and it was cold. Inside, he just saw deadness hanging all around. He could turn out the light and make it go away, but he didn't.

Gloria was dead, too. He couldn't make that go away. She was dead because she had been walking to Arthur's office on a spring afternoon to bring him lunch—a tuna fish

sandwich on white bread, an apple, and a homemade oatmeal cookie—when a philosophy grad student (late for class, on a bicycle, earphones full of pulsing bass beats at what must have been maximum volume) hit her straight on. Someone who witnessed the accident said he would never forget the sound of it. The thick rubber tire squealing on the sidewalk. The metal hitting flesh. He said he would never forget how he could almost feel the blow himself. It was that hard. When Arthur’s secretary put the call from campus security through to him, Arthur could only make out every other syllable of the man’s gravelly voice. Arthur ran his fingers over the buttons on the phone and closed his eyes and imagined Gloria, already faceless, looking up at the sky, not paying attention, her mind calm and elsewhere. The next day Arthur found the apple by a blue spruce. Gloria died by the end of the week: complications due to internal injuries. The local D.A. gave Arthur the opportunity to press charges against the boy for involuntary manslaughter but he declined and had not yet regretted the decision. It was one of those things you read about in the section of the newspaper that runs the offbeat stories from far away places. It was one of those things that you can’t believe can actually happen until it does.

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On a Saturday a few weeks before the fall semester was to begin, Arthur had been at the house all day listening to the Cardinals doubleheader on an old radio he had found in the attic and set up on Gloria’s potting bench. The phone stayed in the main house. He

had stopped answering it altogether.

“Dad, it’s Saturday. It’s four o’clock. You’re there. Pick up.”

Waiting.

“Dad.”

Sigh.

“Dad. Please?”

Bigger sigh.

“OK, fine.”

Click.

At five, the grandfather clock in the front hall chimed a tired melody that echoed around corners and drifted into the greenhouse. Arthur opened his eyes from cut grass and warm cowhide and the crack of bats. He stood up, put on his cardigan. He turned off the radio right as Jack Buck was calling an out at third base and picked up his keys. The evening was unnaturally bright and sticky.

In the car, Arthur ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth and it felt thick and sour. He turned right instead of left on Garden Street to stop at the Quik! Mart to get some peppermint Certs. When he walked in, a tall redheaded boy with a pierced eyebrow and a dirty Quik! Mart smock glanced up from his glossy magazine and looked at him with dead eyes. A song Arthur thought he remembered from somewhere hung in the air, a half-sound song that fought with the hum of the Icee machine. He noted as he walked through the store that they sold Gold Bond powder. And shoe polish. And drain cleaner.

How odd. You would never have to go to the grocery store again, he thought. He hated the grocery store. The vastness of it. The amount of things he didn't need getting in the way of the things he did.

When he got to the candy aisle, he had to put on his bifocals to figure out which brand was which. There were rows and rows. When did candy become so complicated, he wondered. When did he become a man who wore bifocals? He never saw any of this coming. No one tells you about getting old, he thought. No one tells you that you still want to fuck and you still want stay up late drinking and telling stories and you still want to take stairs two at a time, but your body won't let you. No one tells you that people won't look at you anymore because you're just another old man, that you are no one when you're old.

He held the side of glasses and squinted, running his fingers over the bright colors and crinkly plastic. He found the Certs after a couple of minutes and was on his way to the counter with them, patting his backside, feeling for his wallet, which wasn't there. He felt the other side and then shoved his hands, one of which held the peppermint Certs, into the front pockets of his tan wide-wale corduroys. No wallet. Not even a piece of change. Just lint and the tape measurer. He never forgot his wallet; it was impossible. But the fact was that he had. He looked up at the checkout boy, who had long since turned his dead eyes back to the magazine, and contemplated his options. It didn't take long. He put his bifocals back in his breast pocket and kept one hand in the right pocket of his corduroys.



“Thank you now,” he said as sincerely as possible as he walked toward the door. The Certs felt heavy in his pocket, like a rifle cartridge. The boy said nothing. Just nodded his head and turned the page of the magazine. There was a soft binging noise when Arthur opened the door and he looked at the height chart on the jamb. 5 feet...6 feet...7 feet. He stood up straighter just in case and glided out into the oil-stained parking lot. *“Want to get out of the house and have some good clean fun?”*

When he got to his car, his legs were shaking. He hadn’t stolen anything since he was in elementary school. His scalp tingled and his palms were sweaty. He turned the ignition, still watching the redhead to see if he was going to do anything about this. He dared him to. Come on out here. I’ll rip that piece of silver right out off your brow bone you little shit, he thought and wondered where that thought came from. He gunned the engine and turned on the radio. He pulled the Certs out of his pocket and peeled back the foiled paper. He placed a mint gently on his tongue like a communion wafer. It was the most spectacular thing he had ever put in his mouth. He felt alive again.

At the Center, Arthur opened the glass door and the rush of cool air pulled him inside. Two women in flowered shirts were serving up spaghetti in styrofoam bowls at the canteen. *“Special desserts for diabetics available!”* A big blue banner with felt letters ran across the honey-colored paneling on the back wall: *LIFE BEGINS AT 50 AT THE PRESCOTT STREET SENIOR CENTER!* Every statement at Prescott Street ended in an exclamation point.

“Art, hey!” Ed Burton called out from across the room and stood up out of his

metal chair halfway, dragging his tie in red sauce. Arthur hated being called Art.

“Edmund, yes, hello. How are you this evening?” Ed had told Arthur months ago that he preferred “Ed.”

“It’s Ed, Art,” he said, wrinkling his forehead and then letting the confusion smooth away in the next breath. “Barb and I had to take Ronaldo into the vet this morning. He was throwing up like nobody’s business all night. We went through a whole damn roll of paper towels. It was no fun way to spend a Friday night, I tell you.” If there was one thing that Senior Center people liked to talk about more than their own ailments and bodily functions, it was the ailments and bodily functions of their pets.

“You usually have more fun on Friday nights, Ed?” Arthur said, looking around the room for Gerald Perrin, the only other professor that had somehow also wandered into this strange side show and stayed. “Would you like a Certs?” The roll felt like it glowed radioactive in his hand.

“No thanks,” said Ed, pointing at the spaghetti with his fork. “I think Ronaldo’s going to be fine. Just a little flu virus that’s been going around, vet says. Gave us some suppositories we have to pop in him every 6 hours or so. It’s a good thing Barb handles those sorts of things around our house. If it were left to me, that little terrier would end up choking to death on his thrown up Alpo, God bless his dog soul.” He closed his eyes and crossed himself at the thought.

“Oh yes, God absolutely favors the animals. No worries there,” Arthur said, moving away while Ed continued to talk about Ronaldo and his vomiting and his

suppositories to Albert, a retired engineer from the Union Pacific railroad who was blind from cataracts and couldn't hear a thing at this point but a Santa Fe diesel whistle and the Hammond organ pipes at Mount Olive AME Baptist church where he still played on Sundays.

When he didn't see Gerald Perrin, Arthur decided to forego the spaghetti dinner. He wasn't hungry in the least, a fact he credited to the residual excitement from the adrenaline rush of the Certs "heist." He smiled to himself at his exaggeration and glanced around the room to see if anyone was looking at him in an unusual way. No one was. No one knew a thing. It was odd to feel so exposed and not have anyone know a thing. He wanted to stand on his chair and shout: "I've got the answer you're all looking for and it isn't bingo or swing dancing or recreational day trips!" He would use exclamation points! But instead, he let himself be absorbed, smugly, by the cries of I18 and G12 for game (BINGO!) after game (BINGO!) after game (BINGO!) until he didn't feel like shouting anymore. Until the Certs weren't so heavy in his pocket. They were just breath mints for christ's sake. He was suddenly embarrassed by his bravado and snuck out the back door when Marietta Davis hit on B3 and claimed one of the biggest pots on record (seventy five dollars) at the Center.

Outside, it had turned dark and he had trouble picking out the right key to unlock his door in the underlit parking lot. The second he reached for his bifocals, any residue of his petty theft high dissolved. *"People find that they have the freedom to dedicate time and energy to lifelong hobbies and interests, as well as try things completely new and*

*different!*” Arthur had no hobbies. His interests were uninteresting. His skin felt heavy. His heart felt small. Without another thought, he drove straight over to the Barnes & Noble on the I-40 service road and lifted a biography on Robert Kennedy and a Cat Lover’s Page-A-Day calendar. He had lived a long time. He had worked and played by the rules, mostly. He deserved these things. He went home and slid the book under his mattress and hid the cat calendar in a philodendron pot.

He was amazed at how completely and quickly he inhabited his new persona. He stopped reading the New York Times and followed only the crime stories in the local paper. He started watching Cops on the 13” black and white television instead of the sunsets out the roof of the greenhouse. He looked at women again and he thought that they were looking back. His heart felt stronger and faster. His blood pumped, swift and efficient, around his body.

And soon, a ritual of sorts developed. He started going to the Center every day, leaving half an hour early, giving himself just enough time to stop in Wal-Mart or Goldsmith’s. At first it didn’t matter what he stole. He was indiscriminate. A box of greeting cards. A lavender bra. A tube of Neosporin. A quart of 10/30 motor oil. He was not suspicious. He did not fit the profile. No one ever noticed him, an old man. It was the easiest thing he had ever done. And that release he felt in the parking lot! Once his Buick came into his peripheral vision, he knew he wasn’t going to get caught. His heart would swell to double and he would start singing a Frank Sinatra song or something casual and light to carry the mood. His interests were interesting now. He was a man who had a

hobby. And though it wasn't something he could very well discuss with the people at the Senior Center, he understood it now.

“Arthur, it's Lancaster. Are you there?”

Waiting.

“I just wanted to remind you about the department meeting Friday the 29th. Two o'clock. 106 Bishop. Brennan says it's mandatory. Whatever the hell that means. I suppose it means it's mandatory. Call me. You won't, of course. That's been established. But call me anyway.”

Click.

It didn't take long—three weeks or so—to graduate from Quaker State to Armani. An understated silk tie. A beautiful cotton shirt in the purest white. An entire three-season wool suit, gray pinstripe, flawless. The suit was difficult. He had to walk around the hushed, red carpeted men's department for an hour before he found the right moment to deftly take it from the rack, slide it off the thick wooden coat hanger, fold it neatly into a small square (he had practiced at home) and tuck it into a big pocket made from a dish towel and affixed with duct tape inside his Arnold Palmer windbreaker. He saw a pimply skinny-necked boy in the shoe department look shiftily and say something into his headset as Arthur walked out of men's furnishings and into women's fragrance. He was sweating by the time he got to the mall entrance and plunged himself into the throngs of people shopping for back to school clothes.

Outside the mall in the hot August sun, he couldn't catch his breath. He had to

steady himself on to the edge of his trunk. Something was wrong. Things felt different. He didn't go to Prescott Street. He went home to the greenhouse. He was still anxious and trembling when he unlocked the greenhouse door. Inside things felt shifted and too bright. He looked around. Cellophane wrappers remained intact. Tags still hung on sleeves. Seals were unbroken. He never used or even touched any of the things he stole after the fact. He had everything stashed in hidden places. Under a dead palmetto leaf or a terra cotta saucer. Behind a lemon tree. This felt different, though. He threw the suit down on the trundle bed. It looked cheap. Wrinkled and wadded.

“Dad? What's going on here?” Emily's voice bounced off the glass walls and ceiling, filling the room as she came in from the main house. She had an unopened Makita drill box in one hand, a cashmere woman's turtleneck in the other. She was in her work clothes. Black pumps and a herringbone suit. Her cheeks were red with heat and worry. She was so beautiful Arthur hardly recognized her.

“Emily?”

“Of course, Emily,” she said. “Dad are you OK? What is this stuff?” She held out her arms to him.

“An experiment,” he said. “Research, maybe.”

“I'm confused,” she said.

“Me too.”

“Why is the house all closed up? Why is the guest bed in here? None of this is making sense.”

“How true,” he said. “Precise, in fact.”

“So, what is this? Where are all the pictures that were hanging in the living room?”

“I have no answers for you,” he said. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

Emily walked over to the far wall of the greenhouse and leaned over. She picked up a gold metal frame, the softball picture. And another, Gloria on the beach in Florida in a wide-brimmed hat. On each, he had taped a polaroid of himself, smiling. The entire wall was lined with them. “What’s going on? Is this about mom?”

“Sometimes,” he said. “Sometimes it’s something else.”

“I didn’t realize you were having a strange time with this,” she said. Her voice cracked. She sounded young and old all at once.

“Strange. That’s one way to put it.”

“Dad. What can I do? There’s got to be something I can do.”

She put down the pictures and walked over to him. She put her hands on his shoulders. He stiffened at her touch and then felt himself shatter, like a dropped plate, everything in his body separating into small pieces under her the light pressure of her fingertips.

After minutes standing there together in the slanted light of early evening, he felt himself come back. He promised Emily he’d call Lancaster. He promised her he’d come to her house for dinner on Friday. He would bring wine. They would talk about things, about quantum theory and the Guggenheim in Bilbao. They would talk about Gloria, too, maybe. When she left, Emily kissed him on the cheek with embarrassment and chapped

lips.

After Emily was gone, Arthur picked up the suit and took it to the attic to find a place for it, a place that he wouldn't see.

Heat hovered in the rafters and dust floated slow, almost frozen by the day's last light bleeding through the dormer window. Each step felt like it crushed and bruised a new floorboard; they moaned under his weight. He started to put the suit in an open cardboard box marked "Emily—School: 1970-79" in Gloria's careful handwriting. But then he saw Gloria's hope chest in the corner.

He flipped the still-oiled latches. It was full to the top and everything was neat, tied in soft ribbons or wrapped with brightly colored rubber bands. There were old Playbills from Broadway shows. *Death of a Salesman*. *Kiss Me Kate*. There were napkins from Birdland and Tavern on the Green. There were letters from her college roommates. And her mother. And her sister who lived in Prague with a composer of some renown. He ran his fingers over the strange stamps and thin foreign paper. He put the letters to his nose to smell the time and distance that had gathered there. He read some of the letters. He was not mentioned in any of them. His name did not come up. He was nowhere to be found. There were a couple of pictures, too, of their dog, Scout. He was a sweet Airedale that Gloria had given to Emily for her sixth birthday, which had been too young, and so he had become Gloria's dog. Scout had lived to be 16 and had been Gloria's truest friend. The day he died, Gloria went away for a week. The note to Arthur had said, "I'll be right back."



At the bottom of the chest, Arthur did finally find a small packet of his own letters. Only three, tied with jute string. The envelopes were watermarked and mildewed. He was scared to touch them. He was scared to remember what kind of person he was then. But he made himself, and when he picked the letters up, there was a picture beneath that he hadn't seen in 45 years.

He had gone to New York to deliver one last ultimatum to Gloria. When he got to her apartment on E. 65th, she kissed him hello and put on a Glenn Miller record. They sat on the couch, side by side, knees touching and she listened to him, tapping her foot softly. When he was done, she said, "Are you done?" and he said, "Yes, I think I've made my point" and then she said, "Wait right here." She left the room and a few minutes later came back in wearing pearl earrings and a black silk chiffon dress that swum around at her ankles. She reached for his hand and said, "Let's go." Outside, the air was cold and jittery. She hailed a cab, his hand still in hers. She said, "59th and 6th."

At the window, so high off the ground, the entire city below, she took Arthur's hand again and without looking at him, said, "Isn't it the most beautiful thing?" At the table, a photographer took a picture. Flashbulb pop. Black and white glossy eight by ten. The caption said, "Fond Memories from the Rainbow Room." This was the picture Arthur found in the chest. Under his mildewed letters. In it, he is grim, stiff, unhappy, alone. In it, Gloria smiles wide, eyes shining, chin in hand, her other arm resting softly on his shoulders.

She burns the page, he thought. After 45 years. She burns the page.

• • •

The suit lies puddled on the floor. The sun is almost gone. Dust still floats.

In the car, he puts the suit on the seat next to him. Everything else has been put in the trunk. The pictures have been put back in the faded squares of wallpaper in the living room. The greenhouse is empty again. Except for the dead plants. It's late now. After midnight.

At Prescott Street, he opens his trunk and puts everything into the Senior Center Thrift Store donation bin in the back of the parking lot. He goes to a pay phone and looks up Ed Burton's address. At Ed's house on Briarwood, a porch light blazes. Arthur folds the suit neatly and puts it in the mailbox. He does not mind he is a man with no hobbies again. His breath comes easier now.

After, he takes the interstate. He opens the windows and lets the feathery night air whip around his ears. On his right, green reflective signs flash. Flash. Flash. "I'll be right back." He drives and drives, all the way out to Hamilton Creek and then west into town again. He drives and drives until it starts to get light out.

It's Friday now. He has a meeting that afternoon. His presence will be mandatory. He will have interesting things to say. People will look at him when he says these interesting things and nod their heads. They will call him Dr. Buchanan and ask him questions that only he can answer.

He drives to campus and gets out to walk in the dawnish light. The bell in the chapel tower sounds. Six times. Echoing off the hard stone. Sweet and sad.

He walks further. The blue spruce is there in the distance. His heart is slower, but very sore.

These small things might not be enough.

## Okay, Paris

“I’m getting divorced next Thursday,” I said, almost shouted really, to my girlfriend’s back, while she leaned over the yellow line watching for the headlight of the downtown number 3 train. “One-thirty,” I added. Like it was an appointment to repair a cracked filling or to have cable installed.

Jenny’s long brown hair fanned out around her head in slow-motion as she whirled to face me. Her eyes were wide and her eyebrows raised up so high I could count the horizontal lines on her forehead. There were five of them.

“Holy shit!” Jenny said, leaving her mouth slack and open, the words echoing off the tiles of the Union Square station.

I had not had any idea how Jenny was going to react to my news. Nothing had ever been said, but I got the sense that neither one of us knew quite for certain how we would feel when I wasn’t married anymore. Though we had been living together for a year, I thought our relationship had that pit stop feeling for both of us—something to indulge in while we worked up the appetite for something more substantial. The strange reality of a court date, a notary’s signature, a judge’s gavel, wood against wood proclaiming I was officially divorced had always seemed far in the distance, like turning 40 or finding your first gray hair. But here I was, almost 33 with a bittersweet reconciliation with my gray (figuring that gray hair was better than no hair) and a pending

clean slate.

The train blew in right then, the dull stainless and fluorescent interiors flashing like a strobe behind Jenny. It air-braked to a stop. The doors hissed open and I took her elbow and escorted her into the car, the conductor's voice incomprehensible over the Eisenhower-era speaker system. We sat down under a 1-800-GOT-PAIN? ad for a chiropractor in Flushing and I put my hand on her knee.

"So wait. Did you just say you what I thought you said?" Jenny asked once the train started moving.

"I don't know. What do you think I said?"

"That your divorce will be final next week."

"Not exactly. I said I'm getting divorced next Thursday. One-thirty. That's exactly what I said."

"Oh christ." She rolled her eyes. "Okay, when you get divorced next Thursday at one thirty, that means your divorce will be final, right?"

"Final's such a sad word, don't you think? Final exam. Final answer. Final resting place. But yes, final. Fini." I looked beyond Jenny and an old man on the seat next to her read a Bible in what looked to be Korean. The pages were so thin you could see the shadow of his fingers through them. They were marked by the dozens with different colored tabs. He held the Bible way up high next to his face, just inches away from his horn-rimmed glasses. His lips moved as he read. I wondered what he was looking for in there. A prayer for his dead mother or a reason to keep getting on this train. I wished right

then I could read Korean.

“Fini, huh? I’ll tell you what’s fini,” Jenny said.

I waited, but she didn't say anything.

"I can't believe I'm getting ready to be single again," I said instead of asking about fini. "I think I'll say that, in fact, when asked. You know how you have to check just one of those boxes on a credit card applications: single, married, divorced, widowed? I mean, technically I'll be single again. There's no harm in that is there?"

Jenny socked me in the arm. "We live together. That makes you definitely not single."

"But we're not married. The direct opposite of married is single, not divorced. That's the theory I'm operating on anyway," I said, studying the subway map behind a piece of scuffed plexiglass. I could never remember whether the number 3 stopped at Grand Army or 7th Avenue. "Jen, what's the biggest mistake you've ever made?"

"It's obvious why you're not married," Jenny said, half-laughing, with a look in her eye that said she knew things I couldn't begin to comprehend. This was probably quite true. "Or why you won't be after next Thursday at one-thirty, anyway. And my biggest mistake? Turning down Vassar."

"Wasn't there a guy involved?"

"Isn't there always a guy involved?"

"But if you'd gone to Vassar, you might have started liking girls and you would have missed out on all this," I said, spreading my arms out around me magnanimously.

"Oh, right," she said, looking around the car. "*This!*"

We were both quiet for a while then. Two years. It was just now hitting me,

watching Jenny outline the flowers on the fabric of her skirt with her fingertip, a hypnotic, swirling motion. Two years of limbo. Two years suspended sentence. It would all be over in less than a week. The divorce that lasted longer than my marriage.

My marriage had not been bad. Monica was not a bad person. I was not a bad person. But just like the opposite of married was not divorced, the opposite of a happy marriage was not necessarily a bad marriage. If I had to boil it down to a one-sentence explanation (and I had a lot of practice at this), the bottom line was that we, or I, had just not been thinking long-term. When I gave this answer to the inevitable “What happened?” question, people almost always responded with a confused, bordering on appalled, look as if I should have known full well that marriage not only implied long term, but, in fact, was practically a working definition. Of course, intellectually, I knew this. But when you’re in your (very) late 20s and your girlfriend says it’s time to get married and you’re neither emotionally nor financially prepared to reenter the New York City rental market (and you love her, to a point—you do!), you go along. And you don’t have to do much. Take out a loan for a ring, show up at parties when she tells you to, and put on the tuxedo she has picked out. You don’t even have to say the word “married,” not once at anytime during the entire ceremony.

As we tunneled under the East River, Jenny stopped fidgeting and turned to look at me accusingly. “Here’s a question for you: Why didn’t you tell me this earlier tonight? Why did you wait until now?”

“That’s two questions.”



“Peter. Just stop.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” I said. And I meant it. The Korean man now held the bible tight on his chest like a shield. His head was leaned back against the window and his eyes were closed, but his lips, his whole jaw, was still moving. I noticed then he was missing a leg. Where his leg was missing, the checked polyester pants were still there, flat against the plastic seat and dangling, not pinned up like you usually saw with people who were missing a leg. I don’t know why I thought this odd, because when it came right down to it, I don’t know whether I had seen enough people with missing legs to create a profile or whether I had just made that up. I wrote short stories for a living, so I made stuff up all the time. Actually, I taught English at a private school on the Upper West Side for a living, but wrote short stories in the summers, which amused most of my friends. But not Jenny. She told me once that the writing was why she had fallen for me. She said it showed a side of me she never would have guessed existed. I think we had both spent the past year waiting for that side, the side Jenny liked, to materialize in real life. But since Monica, there had been no stories. I hadn’t even tried. I put my hand on Jenny’s knee again. Felt the one first and then the other to make sure they were both there. They were. Right there. They felt nice. I whispered, “Jen, that guy’s missing a leg.”

She pushed my hand off of hers. “Peter, can we for once have a regular conversation without random observations or your endless game of 20 questions?”

“I was just saying...” Jenny covered my mouth with her hand. I could smell the burritos we had had for dinner. I clasped my hands together in a pleading motion and said

“Okay,” which with her hand over my mouth came out, “hmm hmm.”

“Promise?”

“Hmmm hmmm.”

She took her hand off and slapped me on the face, harder than she probably realized she had. “So?”

“Well, I was going to tell you over dinner at Benny’s, but it was so noisy in there,” I said and rubbed my cheek with my free hand. It stung in a way that felt kind of good. I probably should have been slapped more often in my lifetime.

“But this was such a huge thing,” Jenny said, looking down. She pulled my fingertips up off her knee and then let them drop. Over and over again. “I mean, we’d been waiting for this, sort of, hadn’t we?” She still wouldn’t look at me.

“Yeah,” I said, not sure by the tone of her voice if she was being ironic or not. I squeezed her around the shoulders for added emphasis. “Of course.”

Down the car, I noticed a dark skinned woman in a thrift-store suit who had a thick white gauze patch over her left eye and another man on the far side of the train who had a cast on his left arm with the words “GONE FOR REFUGE” written on it in red magic marker. I looked back at the one-legged Korean man who was now snoring. Suddenly I felt surrounded by infirmity. I felt layers of pain and suffering start to blow through me, warm and heavy and unexpected.

I think all of this was so confusing because I never expected much to come of this thing with Jenny. I met Jenny on purpose, to a degree, and those types of relationships

typically are short-term, Roman candle affairs: You see someone. You think they're hot. You pursue. She ignores. You pursue some more. She ignores some more until you send some Neruda poems with a note you write in Spanish. Then you have sex and it's just not *that* amazing. And so you stop pursuing.

I met Jenny, on purpose like this, because I found that after Monica and I split up that Sundays were the hardest. The daytime could be spent in a fairly constructive way: a late brunch at Balthazar, the Sunday *Times*, a matinee at the Angelika. But even Manhattan quieted down on Sunday nights, a brief lull in energy that I used to relish. After Monica, I would find myself alone in an East Village studio sublet, and as Sunday day turned to Sunday night, I would sink. The room would darken, emphasizing, quite gloomily, the zombie glow of the tv while I flipped the channels. Ignoring the Ming's Chinese containers stacked next to the futon, I would wait for the clock to tell me it was late enough for a grown man to go to sleep. After about six months of this, of going from steamed vegetables to pork fried rice, of knowing the names and hometowns of all the players for both the Knicks and the Yankees, of going from 9:30 to 9:00 to 8:45, I had had enough.

It was Jim Sloan (8th grade biology) whose wife had left him for Roger Kramer (10th grade Lacrosse coach), who suggested the Learning Annex. Soon after his wife and their two kids moved out, Sloan had signed up for a class called "*How to Find Your Soulmate Through the Study of Hands*" and was now living in a Soho loft with a totally hot yoga instructor named Moonshadow. He left a flimsy newsprint catalog, those that

I'd passed up a million times walking down Eighth Avenue, in my mailbox in the teacher's lounge. On my lunch break, I went out to the pay phone on the corner of 76th and gave them my Mastercard number for a class called "*Break on Through: The Poetry of Jim Morrison,*" which was held on four consecutive Sunday nights in April. It wasn't that I thought Jim Morrison was a poet. But I thought I might like to meet a woman who thought Jim Morrison was a poet. I wanted a Moonshadow. I felt like a Moonshadow was all I could handle at that point in my life. What I hadn't counted on was Jenny. Jenny. Who knew all the words to *Love Her Madly* and great chunks of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. Who could make Ethiopian food and do advanced calculus. Who played cello in a girl rock band on Friday nights. Who had sold her heroin addict boyfriend's 1958 Les Paul Gold Top for \$3,000 just before she changed all four locks on their Park Slope one bedroom. Jenny had signed up for *The Poetry of Jim Morrison* for the same reason I had, but both of us had been blindsided by what we ended up getting. I got JENNY and the open slot in the Park Slope one bedroom. She got a not-quite-divorced, wanna-be writer with an obscenely overpriced sublet and a soft spot for school Christmas pageants.

The train lurched and then stopped short again, and Jenny grabbed my arm on instinct. I pictured the dirty river above us, wondered what might be floating by, what was dying up there that very moment from lack of oxygen and toxic waste. The dark walls of the subway shaft were just inches from the windows. Jenny cleared her throat and then sat up straight. She took her hand from my arm. She smoothed her skirt. "Well. I'll just say this is an interesting development."

I could tell she wanted me to prod her, find out what exactly she meant by “interesting.” It was a move from my own playbook. “*DIG DEEPER!*” I’d write on my students’ essays. “*You’ve got some awesome ideas here about how love really is like a red, red rose! I want to hear more!*” But Jenny and I never talked about “us.” We talked about my unmotivated students and her psychotic boss and who was going to take the videos back. We talked about when I was going to start writing again. We talked a lot about that. But my thoughts on “us” felt unhatched and frail. Anything I would have said on the topic could have been crushed with the slightest amount of pressure, like the bones of a baby bird.

“Jen, if you could kill someone and get away with it, who would it be?”

“Strom Thurmond. So is that what you’d call it, Peter?”

“Nice. Is that what I’d call what?”

“Would you call this a ‘development’?”

“Absolutely.” I said this with great confidence, like finally getting an easy question in Trivial Pursuit.

“In what way, do you think?” Jenny’s voice was soft now, barely above a whisper. She looked up at me. “What I mean, I suppose, is what now?”

She looked down as soon as she caught my eye and played with my fingers again. After a year, Jenny still surprised me. She was so kick-ass whirling dervish most of the time that when the little girl Jenny came out, I always had to study her to make sure it was the same person. The train started to inch forward as if being pulled by an old guy on

a Schwinn.

“I’m not sure, Jen,” I said. “It feels sudden, oddly enough. And not very real at all yet.”

“HmMMM.” Jenny usually had a lot more to say and this disturbed me—almost as much as the “what now” question—because she was eloquent under pressure. She never had hindsight conversations in bed after a party, the kind where you think of the perfect retort or witty comeback to the drunk guy who called Reagan “America’s greatest president” while sloshing Dewars on your shoe. Jenny always thought of the perfect retort or witty comeback (“America’s greatest embarrassment”) at exactly the right moment. It was a stunning thing to behold. At the Learning Annex class, I would sit on the back row and watch her explain in detail the forest symbolism of *An American Prayer* to the teacher while our eclectic group of men looked on in awe edged with lust. Paul, who wore a neck brace and the same red CBGB t-shirt to every class, made several feeble attempts to add to her commentary, to get on her good side, but he was always shushed by Steve, who was also going through a divorce and going to Learning Annex classes six nights a week.

We pulled into Boro Hall and the woman with the eye patch felt her way to the doors. I got up to help her, but she gained her bearings before I was fully on my feet and so I sat back down. The Korean guy nodded at me with two quick snaps of his head and smiled, revealing a mouthful of crooked, yellow teeth. Jenny put her head on my shoulder then and I wished, desperately, we could go back to when my divorce was very far away

and there was no “what now?” Go back to that classroom with *L.A. Woman* blaring and distorted on the teacher’s boom box. Go back to before I knew that Jenny was so *real*, that she wasn’t scared of anything. I wanted to hear her sing, “Come on baby light my fire” one more time without knowing that she hated being called or calling anyone else “baby.”

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Big flags with thick stripes billowed from wrought iron poles all along the avenues. Tomorrow was Bastille Day.

“Goddamn I’m sick of this,” Jenny said and hiked her skirt up to mid-thigh, holding it there with clenched fists. I watched the sweat inch down the center of her chest, disappearing into a white tank top. “You didn’t tell me it would be so hot over here in the summer.”

“Paris is still in the northern hemisphere, Jen, same latitude as New York, even, I think,” I said, fanning her with the map I had torn out of the guidebook before we left the hotel.

“Well thank you for the geography lesson, Dr. Science,” she said, cocking her head. Sweat glistened on her upper lip. I fought the urge to wipe it off because I knew if I did there was a good chance it would end the afternoon.

I set the map down on the bridge rail and dug around in my backpack. “How

about a Snickers?" I asked, as a hot breeze off the Seine caught the lip of the map. We both watched helplessly as it flipped and tumbled to the murky water. Part of the compromise on coming to Paris was that I had to be the one to make all the arrangements. This was tricky, because not only was Jenny usually the one who carried the map, she was practically a cartographer.

"Great," Jen said, watching the map float like a secret message down river. "Now what? Have you got the latitude of the Musée Picasso memorized, too?" She took the candy bar from me. The American wrapper looked garish in her hand, Notre Dame towering dark and solemn in the background. She crossed her arms and chewed. Pigeons bobbed around her ankles, angling for a crumb.

Eleven minutes.

That's how long it took for the sugar to reach her brain, soften the edges, and turn her back into regular Jenny. I'd timed it. I looked at my watch. "What's the last lie you told me?" I asked. I needed to distract her from the latitude comment and the map issues.

"That Paris was okay with me," she said, her mouth full of caramel and chocolate. She turned and walked away, sending the pigeons flapping madly toward the partly cloudy sky in all directions. Actually, she had thrown a pillow at me across our bedroom and said, "Ughhhh, okay, Paris! For god's sake let me sleep!" after I had kept her up all night discussing the summer vacation/"divorce celebration" trip. I had thought I would try and wear her down with the sound of my voice. It worked with my 7th graders. And at about 2:30 a.m. on a Wednesday, I finally convinced her that St. Maarten would be a



better trip for the winter, when I sold a story to the *New Yorker* or hit Lotto. I'm still not exactly sure what changed her mind. She almost never, ever gave in. It could have been when I mentioned that we could visit Jim's grave. But it could have been something else. Things had shifted lately in a way I wasn't quite able to quantify. She often had plans now with people with androgynous names I couldn't put faces to: Jesse, Alex, Erin. She would come home tired and smiling. She'd walk past me, smelling of smoke and tequila, and let her fingertips brush the back of my neck, but not rest there. I'd stare at my notebook where all I had written that night was FUCKFUCKFUCKFUCKFUCK across the top of a page, waiting for her and a story to come out that would help me get a grip on this thing.

Even with the shift, the truth was St. Maarten sounded better to me, too, but I wasn't sure I wanted to spend our first—and perhaps only—vacation together on an island where the goal was to do as little as possible. Our lives were calibrated to New York, to cities and noise. I thought the beach would leave us much too much time to watch each other, overanalyze what was or was not happening between us. The “What now?” question she had asked on the subway months before hadn't been answered yet and I still wasn't ready. She was born ready. I looked back down at the water and my map was gone.

I caught up with Jenny just as she was walking up the steps to the cathedral.

“Jen...” I grasped for her wrist. She turned to me. Her eyes were watery.

“I'm fine,” she said, handing me the crumpled Snickers wrapper. “Thanks for the

candy.”

“I’ll go get another map, a real map this time. In English.”

“I’m going inside to light a candle for us,” she said.

I crossed myself. I think I did it backwards.

“For you, I mean,” she said. “I will pray for you. I’ll meet you right here in twenty minutes.” She tapped the crystal of her Timex and looked over at a blond couple to her right, kissing deeply, oblivious to the crowds around them and the priests just inside. The boy’s hand rubbed the back of the girl’s thigh, disappearing under the cuff of her shorts. Her hand gripped the back of his head. They stopped kissing and started talking to each other in German, all clipped vowels and smacking consonants. Tourists from every part of Europe milled around us. When I suggested Paris, I hadn’t thought about all the languages. The signs we wouldn’t be able to read. The food we wouldn’t be able to order. It felt like we were stuck together in a car on the “It’s a Small World After All” ride and Jenny was the only person who might possibly be able to understand me. As she disappeared into the church, the darkness swallowing her whole, I considered the fact that I might have had made a huge error judgment in this regard.

At a stationary shop around the corner, I found a map I thought even Jenny would be impressed by. It was laminated and folded to a size that fit in a back pocket. At the patisserie next door, I bought us each a Coca Cola and I bought Jenny what I hoped was a chocolate croissant. Jenny came out of Notre Dame and smiled at me, shaking her head, when she saw that my hands were full. She kissed me on the cheek when I told her

how close the Picasso museum was. I felt like I had saved the day or at least the moment.

At the museum, we split up. I wanted to check out the cubist stuff, the lines and odd angles. Jenny was more interested in Picasso's classical portraits, especially the paintings of all his many women: the Russian dancer, the child who became the mother of his child, the intellectual, the painter. After a while, I came to stand next to her down in the deep catacombs of the ancient building. It was darker down there, cool and soothing. Jenny studied an oil of Jacqueline, Picasso's long-suffering widow.

"You can see it in her eyes," she said, waving her hand across the painting like a magic wand.

"Things were different back then."

"No they weren't."

"He was French," I said. "That's how the men are here. How they're expected to be."

"No. It's just how some people are in general. And he was Spanish."

"Well, it's not how I am. I can barely handle just the one of you." I said this to her back. We walked on in silence for a while, the slap of our Birkenstocks echoing off the stone floors. All around us people whispered to each other and stood close, touching and pointing, but it was like Jenny and I were in different hemispheres.

"They fought over him," Jenny announced as she turned to face a nude of Françoise Gilot, about whom Picasso had once said "a girl who looks like that can't be a painter." Jenny, beautiful Jenny, stood there, tall and rigid, looking straight ahead, not

looking at me. “Can you imagine?”

“I’m not asking you to fight for me,” I said. My mouth was suddenly dry.

“I’m not offering.” She looked me straight in the eye and walked out of the museum.

Dinner that night was awkward. We went to the restaurant across the street from our hotel. A small place with crimson stained walls and old chairs covered in cracked leather the color of caramel. A short wrinkled man with a white beard played classical guitar in the corner. The waiter poured warm red wine from a carafe into water glasses and left us with menus.

Jenny studied hers too closely.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, with my most upbeat “let’s forget everything and start over” voice.

“You don’t want to know.”

“I meant about dinner. I’m thinking of the mussels and a big plate of pommes frites. How about that. One week in France and I sound like a native.”

“But you love ketchup.”

“So?”

“They don’t serve them with ketchup here. Just salt.”

“I’ll make do.”

The waiter came back to the table then and stood there, unsmiling with a bad goatee. He held a miniature pencil over his pad.

“Have you decided?” he said in English. He knew we were American and that pissed me off.

“Go ahead,” Jenny said, not looking up.

“I’d like the mussels and the pommes frites.”

“Pommes frites,” he repeated, correcting my pronunciation. “And for you?”

Jenny smiled at the waiter. “Je voudrais la soupe aux carottes, les coquilles saint jacques, et une salade d’asperges, s’il vous plait,” she said in delightful and perfectly pitched French, like she had been practicing when I wasn’t paying attention.

“Tres bon, mademoiselle. Merci.” The waiter was smiling now, too. He didn’t repeat her order. He knew we weren’t married.

“When in the hell did you learn French, mademoiselle?” I asked, after the waiter had gotten to the kitchen and we heard him talking loudly with the cook, pots banging.

“I haven’t learned French,” Jenny said. “I pick stuff up quickly.” She leaned back in her chair and took a long swallow of the wine. “I’m a chameleon,” she said, looking at me over the edge of her glass, her eyes shining.

The next morning I woke to find the sky out the window a solid, dull gray. Jenny’s side of the bed was a twisted mess of sheets and chenille. Empty. The note on the bathroom mirror, taped with a Band-aid, said, “Gone running. Getting us breakfast. Be back before you read this.” This is how we communicated at the Park Slope one bedroom when our schedules started going haywire. We kept a basket on the back of the toilet with a pen, note cards and scotch tape. I saved Jenny’s notes, even ones that just

said, “Dinner. 8. Liz and Rob. Kin Khao.” in the second drawer under my socks. There’s one Jenny note in my drawer that says, “I’m sad.” I took this one down and put it in the zippered pocket on the side of my suitcase.

I got dressed, slowly, thinking that Jenny would come back any moment. But when I got to my shoes, she still wasn’t there. I started pacing. The room seemed suddenly much smaller and depressingly alien. I felt like I was a hostage. I lay on the bed, my feet crossed at the ankles and started flipping through the Gideon Bible I found in the drawer. I felt wrecked and irretreivable, like the bed was a small raft in a big foreign ocean. I napped.

Jenny finally came in, glazed in sweat. She had a big bunch of flowers. Purple and white and yellow, bursting out of her arms. She smelled like bread.

I stood up off the bed and threw down the Bible. “Where have you been? I’ve been up for what seems like forever.” I couldn’t believe I was saying these words. I sounded like a person I would never want to know.

“Christ Peter, lighten up. I found this amazing flower market and got sidetracked.”

“Didn’t you think *I* might like to see an amazing flower market?”

She looked confused. “No. It never crossed my mind. That isn’t your kind of thing at all.”

“How do you know?” I was trying to reinvent myself on the spot. Into a person who would want to explore an amazing flower market.

“Look,” she said, shoving the bag of croissants at my stomach. “Have some

breakfast. I'm taking a shower. I'll be ready in ten minutes. OK?" She slammed the bathroom door and it sounded hollow. A bit pathetic.

Besides the croissants, there was a little jar of blackberry jam in the bag. I could tell it hadn't come from the bakery, that she had searched it out because she knew it was my favorite. The jam. The flowers. Rilke. *Love Her Madly*. How was I going to do all this? How could I keep up?

In fifteen minutes we were on the street and walking to the metro station. The laminated map was in my back pocket. We were both full of butter and quiet. Her hair was wet and shiny and smelled so good I wanted to bury my face in it. It wasn't even noon yet.

"Jenny, sorry I freaked out. I feel all off kilter," I said, reaching for her hand and not finding it. A police car blasted by with a funny sounding siren. A big raindrop splashed on my nose. Then another. "Maybe the beach would have been better."

"Maybe," she said, as we walked down the stairs to the train.

Twenty minutes later, stunned into silence by the midday crowds and a sudden, deep sense that we did not belong here, anywhere, we got off at Pere-Lachaise. It was raining steadily, but lightly as we emerged from underground and faced the stone walls of the cemetery. The rain bounced and splattered from the tree leaves to the concrete and lush grass with a calm constancy.

Jenny walked toward one of the flower stores on the cemetery outskirts.

"You're buying flowers for this?" I asked.

“No, I’m buying a map.”

“But I think I remember reading we could get one for free at the guard’s office.”

“The book also said the guard’s office is often *out* of maps,” she said. “I’ll just be a second.”

She disappeared and left me standing by a newsstand. A man and a woman were arguing under the awning about whether to buy an umbrella. The woman held out her hand in front of the man’s face and talked, angrily and loudly, with her whole body. The man finally put some bills in it and she rolled her eyes and said something loud to the newsstand owner, jerking a thumb back at the man. When she turned back around, she smiled widely at him, hooked her arm through his, and they walked on.

Jenny tapped me on the shoulder.

“You ready?” she said and started walking before I could answer.

We wound our way around the cemetery, silently following the tangled paths, protected from the rain by the wide spread of tree branches. The cemetery was like a little city. Broad stretches of miniature boulevards. Holy cul-de-sacs. Neither of us said a word.

We could hear the gravesite before we could see it. Even with the weather, it looked like there were hundreds of people gathered. It had a distinct smell—pot, unwashed bodies, incense. As we got closer, I moved more slowly, wary of the large crowd, of the intensity of their shared obsession. Jenny however. Jenny marched right in, weaving her way to the front. I watched her from a distance. When she got to the



tombstone, she reached her hand out to touch it, as gently as I'd ever seen her do anything. She pulled a flower out of her back pocket, kissed it, and laid it on the granite. She started singing with the rest of the crowd as the rain picked up speed. Her abandon was mesmerizing. She wasn't afraid of anything. Not of this crowd. Not of holding hands with a girl in a "MORRISON LIVES" t-shirt. Not of taking a sip off a bottle of whiskey that was passed being around. I watched her until the rain was too cold, then turned to try to find my way out of the cemetery without the map.

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It was almost eight when I put the heavy key in the door. Jenny stood at the open window, leaning on the sill. The rain had stopped and the sky cleared to make room for the sunset. The light glowed pink, reflecting off the stone building across the street. It lit Jenny's face like a tray of candles. The sounds of the cleansed evening—the tinny beeps of car horns and shop keepers singing "bonsoir" to one another—floated up the five stories into our dark room. I closed the door quietly to watch her for one more moment. She looked like she could take flight. I thought of the map in the green water. Of cathedral prayers. Of the cemetery crowd singing *Strange Days*, their sweet, fractured voices soaked through with rainwater and tears. Of my clean white notebooks. I cleared my throat. I wanted to say something that wouldn't come out. To keep her from flying.

She heard me then. She heard me trying and failing in the silence.

Her eyes seemed to seize on something out the window, and I looked, too. A red street sign “NE PAS STATIONNER.” She stared at it and didn’t even turn her head. The wind caught her voice and carried it back to me, “What’s the biggest mistake you ever made?”

## A beautiful disaster

There were days when all she wanted was to hear somebody say her name. Shouted across a crowded room. Whispered hotly in her ear, a touch of tongue. Spit out mid-fight like a swallow of spoiled milk. It didn't matter. Something. Anything. All she heard all day were object noises. The sound of her brush on the paper. The paint slurping out of tubes. Her dog, maybe, knocking over his bowl, a plea for food or water.

Nothing human happened here, Maggie thought and squinted at her half-finished drawing labeled "*Oculus—Visual Organ*." The phone rang, and she looked up, startled by the cold digital sound against the Gorecki symphony in the background. She stared at the phone as it rang again. She didn't want to answer it because she knew it was just her mother and their conversations hardly ever merited the intrusion. But her knee-jerk guilt kicked in and she picked up the cordless.

"I'm not interrupting anything important, am I?" Maggie's mother said after the usual preliminaries. She did not believe that working at home was really working, but pretended otherwise.

"No, no. I should stop for lunch anyway." Maggie, clutched the phone to her ear with her shoulder and turned back to her desk to add some shading to the *tunica conjunctiva bulbaris*.

"Oh. That's so convenient. You can go right into your kitchen anytime you want."

“I could, but I don’t.”

“Of course not. If you don’t watch your weight no one will watch you!”

“Right,” Maggie said, tucking her dark straight hair behind her free ear. “What is it Mother?”

Maggie’s mother, whose name was Hillary, proceeded to rattle off a catalog of catastrophes. She had to put Sophie down last week because of some weird, small dog cancer. Her cholesterol was through the roof. Her paper boy couldn’t hit the porch. Maggie’s father taken up model making and had tiny B17 parts scattered all across the kitchen table. She said, “I find open bottles from one end of this house to the other. He is trying to kill me with that glue.”

Turned out Maggie’s brother had buried the dog, driven her mother to the cardiologist, called to make a complaint to *The Commercial Appeal*, and spoken to their dad about the glue situation. As Maggie often reminded Henry, the performance of annoying and dull familial duties was the price he paid for being the perfect son. The one who married his childhood sweetheart and kept producing child after child who could model for a Norwegian tourist magazine. The one who had diligently worked his way up through the ranks at a Fortune 500 company. The one who never had to be picked up at Memphis International on Thanksgiving or Christmas. Perfect Henry and his perfect family lived right next door to their parents.

Maggie stood up and opened both of the wobbly rollershades on the windows that faced the street. Muted light spilled into the cramped studio, and Revolver, her Jack

Russell stirred. Maggie could only draw in the dark, her paper illuminated by a single halogen lamp that was clamped to her desk. It was a habit leftover from dorm days when she would wake up at 3 a.m., wild images seared on the back of her eyelids. She would grab her box of pastels and whatever paper was close by and sketch until the sky got pink, using only a flashlight she kept in the drawer by her bed. She hid those nighttime drawings from herself and never looked at them after the fact, concentrating instead on her assignments, the precise, lifelike renderings of complex biological systems. She made her living now as a medical illustrator. She consulted a turn-of-the-century textbook, its cover cracked and stained, which she had open beside the drawing. She could practically hear the author, an eccentric mathematician reading the lectures gathered in the book: *It is more correct to say that we see with a certain part of our brains than to say that we see with our eyes.*

Maggie picked up a soft green Faber Castell pencil and started to fill in the edge of the perfect iris while her mother's familiar patter continued. Her attention was yanked from the paper when she heard her mother say, "Can you come home? Henry's started to travel a lot with the promotion and there are some things your dad and I need help with around the house before the holidays."

Maggie stared out the window of her apartment onto Tenth Street and noted the orange and yellow taking over the green on the leaves of the elm in front of her apartment. *It was her turn*, she thought. A man in black spandex shorts and a long ponytail ran past with a stroller, one of those with bike tires and a hand brake. A kindergartner walked by

in a bumpy brown and green papier mache alligator costume, holding her mother's hand. The bulging eye was made of an oversized marble and seemed to stare up at Maggie.

"I've got a better idea," Maggie said. "Come to New York."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly."

"Why in the world not?"

"Your father. Garden club. *I've* got responsibilities, you know," Hillary said. "I can't just flit off every time I get the notion." In college, Maggie had once borrowed Hillary's Mastercard number to buy herself and her boyfriend tickets to Amsterdam for spring break. They had \$100 cash between them, enough for four nights at the Flying Pig Palace hostel and as much Moroccan hash as they could smoke. When the statement came in, Hillary had made Maggie withdraw from Vanderbilt and transfer to Shelby State Community College for a semester. Ten years later, Hillary still managed to hint at the infamous event frequently.

"You haven't been anywhere in ages," Maggie said. "You can just come for a long weekend. I'll pay for everything."

Maggie looked around her apartment, trying to picture her mother in it, powdery and stiff, clutching her "pocketbook" as if there might be a mugger hiding in the closet. Maggie was already making a mental list of what she'd have to hide: the carton of Camels, the fur-covered handcuffs. She was regretting this already.

"I don't know," said her mother. "Those sweet babies. You go away for a few days and when you come back, they look different. You miss things."

“Come on mom. I’ll be the perfect host and you can spend all your money on Christmas presents for the kids. Really. Look, it’s just a long weekend; it’s what people do.”

“I’m not most people.”

“Then come during the week. I just won’t have as much time to entertain you.”

She pictured Hillary watching Maggie while she painted, her impatience casting the entire room in a mantle of ennui.

“No, I couldn’t do that. A long weekend would be better, really.”

“Good. Book the ticket, say for two weeks from now? Just let me know when to meet you at LaGuardia. I’ll take care of everything else. Deal?” Her mother protested feebly for a few more minutes, though Maggie could hear the excitement growing just under the surface. She started to give in and tell her mother to just forget she’d offered.

“OK, I’ll come,” her mother said suddenly. “This will be such fun!”

Maggie snapped her mouth shut and then opened it again. “Yeah, it will be great.”

“I would love to see Alex, by the way,” her mother said. Hillary’s voice changed mid-sentence into something flirtatious and a bit possessive. “He called a few weeks ago to check in on us you know.”

Maggie had been married to Alex until last year. He was her brother Henry’s best friend before he was her husband, and because of that, Alex had remained a fixture in the family.

“Oh really,” Maggie said. “His behavior is exemplary as per usual, I see.”

Bulletproof, Maggie used to call Alex. At first it had been a compliment. Then not. Then she was gone, taking nothing but a suitcase and a batch of margaritas from the freezer.

“He’s such a dear man. He deserves to be happy.”

Maggie closed her eyes and bit her lip. “Mom, got to run to a meeting with my client. Give the kids kisses for me. Henry and Allison, too.” Revolver, the only thing that Maggie and Alex had fought over, lifted his head and barked.

It was late September and the days were still long and warm. When the sun fell and got swallowed up by the skyline, however, a hint of crispness materialized, signaling the start of something. That night, Maggie decided to walk to the East Side to meet her friend Janet for dinner at Veselka. At Astor Place, she stopped to look at a table of counterfeit screenplays and bought a copy of *All The President’s Men*. Not long before, Janet had told Maggie the story of seeing the movie when she was 8-years-old and announcing to her mother in the car on the way home, “When I grow up, I’m going to make the bastards pay.”

Janet and Maggie had met at the *New York Times*, where Janet still worked on the City Desk. Maggie had worked as an illustrator for the science and technology sections. Janet had become Maggie’s closest friend, even though she had an annoying habit of recasting every conversation into the journalist’s inverted pyramid. She could be told a story full of tears and sorrow, colored in the most subtle shades of gray and she’d regurgitate it in a brisk, who-what-when-where-and-why statement of the issue at hand. If



she'd had a glass of wine or two, she'd also slap on a tidy ending that provided both a restatement of the problem and a snappy resolution. It was Janet who saw early on how things would turn out with Alex. A beautiful disaster, she used to call him. *It was thought a very long time ago that when you saw anything, a message went from your eye to the thing you saw, with no intermediary processing device.*

Maggie didn't see Janet when she got to Veselka. She sat at the counter to wait. The place was old and the waitresses, sullen and mechanical, but Maggie and Janet loved it there. Every piece of cracked vinyl was saturated with the scent of fried pierogies, stuffed cabbage, kasha varnishkas. Janet loved the short order cook, Uri, who grabbed and kissed both her hands when he saw her and always slipped her an extra blintz when no one was looking.

Maggie had just ordered a cup of coffee and was watching Uri flatten shredded potatoes on the grill when her phone rang.

"Hey, where are you?"

"Stuck on deadline," Janet said. "Listen." Maggie could hear hundreds of fingers tapping madly on computer keys. "Sorry. Wolffe's being totally anal about this UN thing. I'm on city, goddamn it, not the foreign desk."

"What's the story?"

"Fourth killing of a UN relief worker in less than two weeks. People are scared."

"Shit. When will you be done?"

"When Wolffe says I'm done. How are you? Your message sounded weird."

“My brother’s a fucking superhero. My mother’s coming to stay with me in a couple of weeks.”

“Christ.”

“What about you?”

“Fine. Liam’s being... you know, Liam. He made me go watch him play rugby last night. The game was way the hell out in Bay Ridge, of all places.”

“I think in rugby they’re called matches.”

“Whatever. I made him watch that documentary on El Salvador for the fourth time when we got home, so it all evened out.”

“You’re a regular human scale of justice.”

“Somebody’s got to keep score, it may as well be me.”

“So will you come to dinner with us? Keep me from stabbing Alex with a butter knife?”

“Absolutely, I’m there,” Janet said. “Got to run. E-mail me the details.”

“Thanks.”

“No worries. Blow Uri a kiss for me. Set your brother’s cape on fire. Ignore your mother.”

Two weeks later, Maggie sat at Northwest Gate 10 at LaGuardia, reading *Scientific American*. She stood up when a speaker announced the plane had arrived and paced around the speckled carpet. Passengers on the flight from Memphis started trickling out,

the tourists dazed, the natives looking rushed and irritated. Maggie searched for her mother's face.

"Mags!"

"Henry?" *It is not quite correct that we see with our eyes just as it does not accurately represent the facts to say we think with our brains.*

Henry didn't answer but gave her a hug, hitting her on the back with the sharp edge of his computer briefcase.

"Margaret!"

Maggie looked over Henry's left shoulder to where the gate agent was shutting the jetway door and saw her mother teetering toward them in her tight black pumps. Her tweed suit pinched and puckered at the waist.

"Mom. Wow! Mom," Maggie said again. "Henry. This is quite the surprise."

"Isn't it wonderful?" her mother gushed, grabbing onto Henry's arm with both of her own. "Henry ended up having a business meeting up here with some big company...what's the company Henry? Something Jewish-sounding."

"Goldman Sachs," Henry looked over their mother's head at Maggie and rolled his eyes.

"That's right, Goldman Sachs. Anyway, he got the ticket for me on his flight. Wasn't that the sweetest thing?"

"Frequent flyer miles," said Henry.

"Yeah, of course," said Maggie, curling up the magazine and shoving it in her bag.

She picked up her mother's overstuffed carryon.

At her building, Maggie and Hillary stood on the sidewalk while the driver of Henry's Town Car emptied the trunk of Hillary's luggage. Maggie fumbled in her bag for a tip.

"Mags, I've got it," Henry said. "I'll check in on you two tomorrow. When are we supposed to meet Alex?"

"Saturday night. Seven o'clock at Raoul's."

"We're not going to see you before then?" Hillary put her hand to her chest.

"I'm booked solid for the next two days," Henry said, patting his computer bag.

"Oh my," Hillary said, clucking her tongue. "Aren't I the selfish one? I'm on vacation and you have to work."

"If I get out of my meetings early, I'll meet y'all for a cocktail before dinner."

"You're drinking now?" Maggie asked Henry.

"I love that word, 'cocktail,'" Hillary said. "It sounds so cosmopolitan. So jaunty."

"It's Allison who's allergic," said Henry.

"Right."

"So..." Henry, said, running his fingers through his blond hair.

"Good luck, sweetheart," Hillary said, picking up the smallest of her bags. "We'll see you Saturday."

“If you’re not able to meet us for *cocktails*, we’ll just meet at the restaurant?”

Maggie asked. “It’s on Prince, between Sullivan and Thompson.”

“I’ll find it. Have fun, mom!” He rolled up the window before Hillary could respond and the driver pulled away from the curb.

Inside, Maggie set up her mother’s suitcase in the corner and made room for her hanging bag in the one closet. Maggie watched as Hillary paced around the small apartment in tight circles. She arranged all her cosmetics on the back of the toilet. She put the framed picture of Henry’s wife and children she carried with her on the table next to Maggie’s bed and polished the glass with her handkerchief. Revolver watched, too, silently from his cushion.

“This is a darling apartment,” Hillary said, finally sitting on the loveseat and plumping a throw pillow.

“It’s ok. I wish I could afford something bigger, especially for Revolver.” Maggie snapped her fingers and the dog landed in her lap in a single, graceful leap.

“Couldn’t you have named the dog something less...ruthless?”

“We named him after a Beatles album, mom, not a gun.”

“Do you get the chance to explain that to everyone you meet?”

“Do you want some tea?”

“That would be lovely dear,” Hillary said. Maggie got up from her chair and went to the kitchen. “So are you seeing anyone? Anyone special?”

“No one special.”

“You never were very good at dating.”

“That’s one way of putting it. They have a name for it now, serial monogamy.”

“It sounds like a disease.”

“It is, practically.”

“So, do you ever see Alex? Are you on speaking terms?”

“You should know the answer to that one,” Maggie said, standing at the stove, willing the kettle to whistle. “You seem to still have quite the cozy relationship with Alex.”

Alex and Henry had been roommates in college, and when Maggie moved to New York, he was the first person she called. He had taken her to her first Thai restaurant and she had practiced using chopsticks while he went to bathroom. When she called him the next day to apologize for flicking Tom Yum salad in his face, he already had a whole list of amusing and sophisticated things planned for them to do for the next two weeks. And it went on like that until they were standing in an office on Court Street signing a marriage license. She had never seen any of it coming. *Supposing you kept your eyes perfectly still and did not move them around. There would be only just one spot which you would be able to see clearly.*

“He’s your brother’s dearest friend, Margaret. I can’t discount that just because you divorced him.”

“It was a mutual decision, Mother.”

“I’m just saying...”

“Look, I understand,” Maggie said. “I’m glad you’re still close to Alex. I’m glad it didn’t ruin Henry’s friendship with him. But it’s more complicated than I ‘divorced him.’ I don’t even know if I can explain it.”

“Well, did he seem all right to you when you spoke to him?”

“Alex is always all right, mom. You know that. He’s beautiful and smart. He owns his own apartment. He garages his car. He volunteers.”

“I just worry. About the both of you.”

“He’s fine. I’m fine. We just weren’t fine together. Jesus I don’t want to discuss this. Can we change the subject?”

“Well excuse me for wanting to make sure my only daughter is OK in this godforsaken city.”

Maggie was suddenly overcome with the enormity of the long weekend that sprawled in front of them. She looked at the tight curls of her mother’s perm. Maggie moved her hand toward the toaster and thought of throwing it. Then in the next second wished she could crawl up next to Hillary on the sofa and put her head in her lap.

Hillary smoothed her skirt and turned to face Maggie. “So, your work. How is the newspaper?”

“I’m not at the *Times* anymore, mom. You knew that.” Maggie poured the boiling water in the mugs and dropped the tea in. She poked at one of the bags sending it bobbing up and down. She let her finger plunge deeper in the water and felt the burn spread.

It had been Maggie’s drawing of Dolly, the Scottish sheep, for a cover story in the

*Times* Sunday magazine on the ethics of cloning that had been her ticket to freelance. The editors had talked about the Dolly drawing for weeks. She saw people on the train discussing it. Though no one could quite explain it, Maggie had captured something in Dolly's gaze that was at once triumphant and also almost humanly aware of the genetic fraud she symbolized. One thing led to another and soon she had more freelance work than she could handle. Right now, Maggie was doing a series of drawings on the eye for Ciba-Geigy that would take the better part of the next two years. As she explained this, Maggie watched her mother's attention wander. She inspected the hem of her dress and fingered the fringe on the lampshade. Maggie considered throwing in that she was also doing some moonlighting, getting paid to watch people have sex, but it was late.

On Friday night after her mother went to bed, Maggie called Ticketmaster and bought Hillary a ticket to the next day's matinee of *Aida*. She was exhausted. She had no idea Hillary would possess such manic energy, pushing Maggie around the city—into cabs, into Bergdorf's, into the Plaza for tea. They came home each night, their dirty fingernails grasping bags of every color and dimension. Hillary would trot into the bathroom for her evening bath, for which she required complete silence, while Maggie sat on her bed and flipped through old magazines. Maggie had already forgotten what it was like to have a life of her own, to not have to hide in the closet to make a private phone call or sleep with no clothes on.

Maggie had planned to go back home after she dropped her mother off at the



theater the next day. She wanted to turn up the music loud, drink a beer, and figure out what outfit she wanted to wear to dinner that night. But as the cab headed back downtown, she got fidgety and told the driver to head east. For weeks before her mother arrived, Maggie had been spending her afternoons wandering around NYU medical library. She stood on little wooden ladders and searched through stack after stack of dusty antique anatomy books looking for something that might be hidden in one of them, some key that would help her breathe life into the first set of drawings that were due in a couple of weeks. So far, her illustrations were merely good and since her mother arrived she wasn't even sure of that.

Maggie went to the fourth floor and started combing through computer files of optical case histories. The medical terminology felt comforting in its remoteness, its elaborate structure.

“Do you need some help?”

A guy wearing a STAFF nametag was looking straight at her. He had shaggy brown hair and his shirt was untucked just a bit on the side.

Maggie blinked up at him and said, “*Help?*”

“Well, assistance, then.”

“No, I'm fine here.”

“It's just when I re-shelve books, it gets boring and so I look around a lot. You know, make up stories about people's lives.”

“You're in medical school? You have time for that?”

“No, I’m working on my PhD. Lit. The medical library was the first work-study spot that opened up.”

“Oh.”

“So I just was watching you and your face, it’s been, like, scrunched for the past couple of hours.” He scrunched his own face to show her what he meant. The lines around his eyes deepened. Maggie noticed his teeth, small and white and straight.

“Wait...did you say hours, as in plural, as in more than one?” Maggie felt her wrist. She had left her watch on the bathroom sink. “Shit! What time is it?”

He unscrunched his face and nodded at the clock on the back wall. “Quarter after seven. We close at eight.”

“Christ,” Maggie said, shoveling the scraps of paper she had made sketches on and tossing them in her backpack.

“You okay?”

“I’m desperately late. I was supposed to pick my mother up after her show. She’s probably laid out on 43rd Street with a concussion and a missing purse.” Maggie ran past him toward the elevator.

In the cab downtown, she checked her cell phone to see if her mother had left a message, but there was nothing. She called her apartment but got no answer. Her chest got tight and she started to sweat. She checked her messages at home. Nothing. She pictured her mother crying at the precinct. She finally called Henry’s cell phone. He answered, laughing, on the second ring.

“Henry, where are you? Have you heard from mom?”

“We’re at Raoul’s. Where are you?”

“In a cab. ‘We?’” Maggie heard a soft clamor of voices in the background. The clink of silver on porcelain.

“Mom, Janet, Alex and I. We’re all here.”

Maggie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Alex’s smooth, deep voice floated in her ear, followed by her mother’s girlish giggle.

“Oh good! See, I got stuck at the...”

“Everything’s fine,” Henry said, interrupting her. “We’ve poured you a glass of wine. It’s waiting on you.”

“I’ll be there in ten.”

She got the cab to let her out on the corner, and she put on lipstick in the side mirror of a delivery truck. She fixed her hair in the reflection of the door before she walked into the restaurant.

“There she is.” Alex stood up and held out his arms to Maggie.

She had forgotten just how stunning Alex was. His face was completely relaxed and he was smiling at her as if there had never been papers served, lawyers paid, a CD collection split.

Henry stood, too, and pulled out her chair. Maggie hardly recognized him. He looked so...New York. His regular Fed Ex golf polo was replaced by a black dress shirt. He had on boots she had seen in the latest Kenneth Cole catalog. *It is not quite correct*

*that we see with our eyes just as it does not accurately represent the facts to say we think with our brains.*

Maggie looked around the table. She felt like she had walked onto the set of “This Is Your Life.” She took a long gulp of wine. The waiter came over and silently filled their water glasses.

“We thought you were lost,” Hillary said, settling back in her chair.

“No, of course not,” Maggie said. “I’m sorry Mom. I went to the library to do some research and I lost track of time.”

“We’re just glad you’re here now,” Alex said.

“Yes, we are,” Janet said. “Ten more minutes and I was going to send some of the guys from the news desk out to look for you.”

“I’m fine,” Maggie said.

“Me too,” said Hillary. “I decided to walk over to Times Square when I didn’t find you outside the theater. Have you seen it? It’s lit up like a hundred Christmas trees. It wasn’t seedy at all. I think New York gets a bad rap. I love it here.” She was tipsy already.

“It’s the greatest city in the world,” Alex said. *You’re from Tulsa*, Maggie thought, *don’t even*.

“With the highest murder rate and cost per square foot for real estate,” said Janet.

“Isn’t the wine delicious?” Hillary asked, to no one in particular while she swirled her glass.

“It’s wonderful,” Henry said. He looked at Alex. Alex looked at Henry.

And it was then that Maggie saw it. Something she could only call *alive* passed between Henry and Alex. She could practically feel it from across the table. It saturated the white tablecloth. Made the candles seem useless. It was as close to an actual picture of love as anything she had ever witnessed. Maggie’s heart pounded. The current between them went on and on. Everything around her got bright and loud. *What good is it having two eyes? Because we get two pictures of the same object from our two eyes, giving us the impression of solidity.*

Hillary raised her glass. “Let’s toast!”

Maggie didn’t move. Janet reached over and picked up Maggie’s glass of wine and handed it to her.

“To life and love!” Hillary said.

“To Henry’s expense account!” said Janet.

Maggie and Hillary sat in the food court sipping on coffee, not speaking. They both had too much wine—before, with, after dinner. Maggie wondered now whether she had imagined the whole thing.

“I thought Henry was going to be on your flight back.”

“He decided to stay another day.”

“Oh.”

“It’s going to be OK, Maggie.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Henry has made his own choices,” Hillary said. “He understands what his limitations are now. So does Alex, I imagine.”

“So, are you really saying you this. That Henry and Alex have, like, a thing?” *In order to identify a thing, you must be told as many facts about it as it has variations.*

“It’s not a ‘thing.’ Henry and Alex are best friends and, yes, there was *something* there when they were younger. You could see it, even then, probably before they could. But they weren’t lovers, if that’s what you’re saying.”

“Oh dear god.” Maggie put her hands over her ears.

“Henry wanted a normal life. Allison is wonderful and he lives for those children. He is not unhappy.”

“He certainly wasn’t last night.”

“Margaret.”

“Sorry. I just wish someone would have told me. Perhaps before I married Alex.”

“There was nothing to tell. The two of you had known each other for ages and Alex was—is—a lovely man. I truly thought it would work out.”

“I have no idea what to think about this.”

“Well, it’s none of your business, really. Nor mine. We’re all grownups here.” Hillary folded her napkin and put it under the saucer. “We should get to the gate.”

When they called her row, Hillary got up and pulled out the handle on her bag.

“I had a wonderful trip,” Hillary said, wrapping Maggie in a hug and letting go.

“I’m glad to see you doing so well.”

Maggie thought of her tiny studio. The microwave on the floor. How she had to cut vegetables on her coffee table. Her Friday nights alone with Revolver. She felt exhausted.

“I’ll be home soon,” Maggie said. “For Christmas, maybe Thanksgiving.”

“Good,” Hillary said. “Now go home and get back to work. Who’s going to take care of your father and me in our old age?”

Maggie stood at the window and watched the plane as it sat lifeless on the runway. She couldn’t hear anything. And she saw no fire, no spark. But she could almost feel the power of the engines as they ignited, the gas creating a heavy mirage around the metal cylinders on the wings. The plane backed up then, quietly and easily, and slid from her view.

## Transplant

The ashes had to be claimed in thirty days or they would be disposed of according to state guidelines; the funeral home was being sold. So Eve and Parker left San Francisco on a Monday and headed east: twelve hour hauls of interstate, pound bags of sunflower seeds and pistachios, a nasty flat outside of Albuquerque.

Six days later, they were in Arkansas. Eve roused herself to pop what she hoped was the last Dramamine of the trip, washing it back with some warm Pepsi, and then planted her head on the back of the seat again. She closed her eyes and listened to the seamed highway clicking underneath their tires and Parker's off-key humming.

Parker stopped mid-song. "Can you check the map? Or do remember which exit off the bridge we're supposed to take?" Parker had been the one to return the call to Irene Gillespie at Bultmore Funeral Home. He had been the one to change the oil and make reservations at the Peabody Hotel. He had taken the dog to the kennel.

"We're still in Arkansas for god's sake," Eve said. "Do you need to know right this minute?"

"What if I said yes?"

Eve didn't answer. She fidgeted with the door handle.

"So did I tell you what the woman said right before we got off the phone?" Parker was trying.

"I don't know."



“It was weird, she said, ‘When you get here, don’t park on the street.’”

“Have you gotten me wrapped up in some kind of covert operation?” Eve was trying, too.

“I only wish my life were that exciting.”

“You excite me,” Eve said. “You drive me so crazy I can hardly see straight.”

“Your eyes are closed,” Parker said.

“You’ve got a point.” Eve had been substituting innuendo for actual sex since spring.

“This trip *is* kind of exciting,” said Parker. “In a morbid, David Lynchian way. What if we open the urn and it’s filled with baby teeth or roach carcasses or something?”

“It would be like Lafayette to have had the people at Bultmore do something bizarre like that,” Eve said, raising her head to watch the flat, hot poverty that streamed by: brown fields, grease-slick truck stops, rusted out Ford trucks. Welcome home.

Eve’s sister Mary thought she had picked the ashes up right after the memorial service. Eve was sure one of her brothers Matt or Mark had done it. Their father assumed that one of the four kids had done what Lafayette had requested and scattered them from Algiers Point on the other side of the river from New Orleans, which was where Lafayette had lived until Eve’s father dragged her north to Memphis. But none of the kids lived anywhere near Louisiana and no one wanted to use their savings or frequent flyer miles for a woman who had left one afternoon to “get her hair done” and not resurfaced until

eight years later. Lafayette LeBlanc had shown up in their driveway one day in 1986, smoking a Virginia Slims, her head wrapped dramatically in a pink chiffon scarf. Sunglasses. A biopsy showed positive. She needed an exact match. And over the next five years, all four kids ended up giving Lafayette a kidney. In the end none of them worked, and Eve's had been the last of the failed transplants.

“I need a Yoo-hoo.”

Parker swerved at the last second to catch the off ramp at Exit 2. Eve heard gravel sputter under their tires and hit the wheel wells. She grabbed his thigh with one hand and the armrest with the other. “Jesus Parker!”

“Look,” he said, pointing at the billboards. “We’re in West Memphis! How can you not get a Yoo-hoo in West Memphis? It wouldn’t be right.” He shot into a parking space and bumped the curb.

Eve watched Parker as he unfolded his lanky frame out of the Accord and walked with his hands shoved deep in his pockets. He had been wearing the same thing since they left, changing only his boxers at the Motel 6 each morning. His khakis were permanently wrinkled and potato chip crumbs hung from the pilled fabric of his polo shirt. He was getting a pimple on his chin. The pretty, perpetually tanned face of Anthony, a dancer she had dated in L. A., flashed in her mind and a slight, involuntary moan bubbled in her throat.

She watched Parker through the plate glass. He practically skipped around the

store, smiling at a toddler who had ripped open a Pixie-Stick and was pouring it out on the floor. Since his dot-com had started the layoffs, there had been a shift in him that Eve couldn't quite define. His demeanor was different, lighter. Someone who hadn't known him before might even say effervescent.

Eve watched Parker scan the coolers methodically from top to bottom, left to right, searching for the Yoo-Hoo. He held the yellow bottle high when he found it and waved his arms to get Eve's attention. He flexed his bicep in mock heroism. Unlike the dancer—unlike *all* the others—Parker had not been a challenge and was, in fact, the most normal man Eve had ever dated. She smiled tiredly.

It was against the better judgment of Eve's therapist that she had moved to San Francisco to live with Parker just a two months after they met: he had warned her early on that she had abandonment issues that were virtually insurmountable. And Eve wondered sometimes, especially lately, if she hadn't married Parker the year before just to prove the infinitely wise Dr. Zorn wrong.

Eve had been competitive since kindergarten. When one of her classmates bragged on the playground that she could read the Family Circus cartoons, Eve started staying up late with a flashlight under the covers studying alphabet flash cards while she listened for her mother's key in the door. And then the yelling. She studied until one night the disjointed, foreign letters started falling into place and making words. Of course, c-a-r was car and r-o-a-d was road where you could go f-a-r-a-w-a-y. She practiced all week. The

following Monday for show and tell, she took a *Time Magazine* with a painting of Carlos Castaneda on the cover and read an entire “My Turn” column out loud. Eve had never forgotten the rush the applause had given her, the tears caught and glistening in Family Circle girl’s eyelashes. She liked a challenge even now. As long as motion sickness wasn’t involved.

Eve turned the key in the ignition and punched the buttons on the radio. She only got static and switched it to AM and found a swap meet out of Marked Tree. A guy wanted to trade a 350 Chevy diesel engine for a Greyhound ticket to El Paso. A woman was looking to exchange a non-working sewing machine for a working waffle iron. Eve thought for a moment about what it would be like to live here, with checked curtains and four-wheelers in the front yard. The smell of Desitin and fried chicken hanging permanently in the air. Eve rolled down the window and the hot Arkansas wind fell down hard, making her heavy and lethargic. It burned her lungs.

An old car pulled in just inches away from theirs and it sat idling, loudly, drowning out the voices of the swappers. When the engine didn’t shut off after a minute, Eve looked over and saw a boy and girl, neither of whom looked quite old enough to drive. Both of them had dyed hair: his was dark at the roots and spiked with orangey-red; hers was blond and highlighted in messy stripes of fuschia. They sat pawing each other with the bass speakers in the back pounding out some form of ghetto rap. The boy tried to get out, but the girl clutched his arm and made him kiss her again. He finally wriggled free,

defiant. When he opened his door, it banged hard into the Accord and gave Eve a jolt.

“Didn’t do nothin,” the boy said, rubbing vaguely at the spot on their car with his thumb.

“Lucky you,” Eve said and he gave her a look that made her stomach flip. He started to say something else but she pushed the button and the window eased up steadily. He hit the car hood with his fist, just hard enough to make Eve flinch, and then turned and walked away. He pulled his tank top down tight to cover the top of his boxer shorts. The crotch of his fatigues hovered at his knees.

Once she caught her breath again, Eve turned to look at the girl left in the car. She wore too much eye makeup and had a roll of baby fat edging out over the band of her low cut jeans. She pulled down the visor and examined herself in the mirror, rubbing harshly at the smudged mascara that had gathered under her eyes. Eve thought back to when she was in high school. She had felt impenetrable. Like her bones couldn’t be broken, skin couldn’t be pierced.

Eve wanted to yell out to the girl, “Be careful.”

Or maybe Eve wanted to trade places with her.

Parker had begged Eve to marry him not long after she moved from L.A. into his crumbling Mission apartment that, like everyone, they now paid too much for. He promised her that she would be able to relax with him. And it had been true. Parker was an accountant. And even though he had landed a job with the Internet start-up, his days

were still steady as a metronome and she grew to count on him to be the predictable, even tempered one. Six months ago, this spur-of-the-moment road trip would have been her idea and he would have been the one cautioning her to take a breath. Slow down. Make a *plan*.

But this, too, had changed. All summer, until they came on this trip, he had been leaving work early. He said he went to the library to do research on recession-proof companies in the Bay area. But when he came home, it was obvious to Eve that he had spent the dead hours of the afternoon on other matters. He talked of shaving his head. Training for a triathlon. Going non-profit and working for an organization devoted to reintroducing Tule elk in the Sierras.

He even talked of them having a baby, “an Eve-ette,” he would say, scattering kisses about Eve’s neck and rubbing her belly. All of a sudden, it seemed like Parker saw the possibilities of his life as endless, and now she was the one taken to staying late at work downtown to watch the sun go down over the Bay, washing the hills of Sausalito in amber light, thinking of what it would be like to live the kind of life she imagined that the hill people led. Discreet speakers that piped classical music throughout the house. Jewel toned oriental rugs and good lighting. Private schools and Volvos. There was some small part of her that had begun to find that kind of settled life appealing and this frightened her to no end. It wasn’t real. She knew that. Eve put her fingers to the place where her kidney used to be.

As Parker came out of the store, he bumped into the baggy pants boy.

“Yo,” the boy said.

“Yo yo,” Parker said, laughing, wriggling his shoulders and doing a goofy hip-hop shuffle with his feet.

“You whack,” the boy said and pushed Parker on the shoulder. Eve squeezed her eyes shut and slid down in her seat. She pushed her palms hard against her ears. She imagined the boy pounding Parker’s head against the concrete in some kind of random, crank-high dementia. She saw the blood. Saw the casseroles people would bring her. Saw herself redecorating the apartment in shades of butter yellow and sage. Or moving north to Seattle. Or further. Vancouver. She opened her eyes and Parker was holding her drink in front of her face.

“Our nation’s future,” he said. “Did you hear that kid? The whole ‘yo’ thing—as if ‘yo’ doesn’t lose its context in a southern accent. What the hell are pork rinds?” He studied the bag before throwing it in the back seat.

“He hit the car.”

“What?”

“They parked too close.” Eve looked over at the girl who snapped her head away when their eyes met and started fussing in her purse. “Then he hit the car with his fist.” The girl lit a cigarette and balanced it between her fingers. She crossed her other arm over her pudgy belly, and turned away, blowing smoke out the window.

Parker started to get to inspect the damage, but Eve grabbed his arm.

“It’s OK. It was nothing. Let’s just go.”

“But...”

Eve reached over and turned the engine on. “I said. Let’s go.”

It had been like this lately. Parker would do or say something that made Eve fade into herself. It could be the way a certain word sounded falling out of his mouth. Or his seventh reference of the day to something he heard on NPR. Or the belly rubs and talk of the baby. Eve’s heart would close tight and she’d retreat. To her computer. Or further. Spend the afternoon at the Palace of Fine Arts, watching the young Chinese brides with bright eyes whisper behind their pale hands, pose in pristine silk for the cameras.

At the funeral home, Parker pulled up to the gate and pushed the white plastic button. The speaker cackled and a woman’s voice said, “Yeah?”

“We’re the Barretts, well, I’m Parker Barrett and my wife Eve Lofton is here too,” Parker put his hand on Eve’s shoulder as if he were introducing them at a cocktail party. The speaker was silent. “Eve’s why were here.”

Eve leaned across the stick shift. She pushed on Parker’s chest and pinned him against his seat. “We’re here for Lafayette LeBlanc.”

The speaker stayed silent, but the striped arm of the gate stuttered and then rose up slowly.



Eve looked around while they drove in to the parking lot. She had remembered the still, bright heat of her old neighborhood, but she didn't remember the houses being so cramped and similar. The lawns looked rough, equal parts stringy Augusta grass and dandelion. Pieces of paper and crushed aluminum cans lay slumped together, leftover from a hasty sanitation crew. Eve could hear the noise of the Saturday, going-to-the-mall traffic off in the distance, but these streets she once knew so intimately, like she knew her best friend's favorite color was purple, seemed harshly silent. It felt like families didn't live there anymore. Eve thought of the Martinez girls who lived next door to them in San Francisco, the daisies and hearts they drew in bright pastel chalk on the sidewalk in front of their apartment. Eve would lie in bed on Saturday mornings and listen to them sing jump rope songs and argue in their lilting accents about the rules of dodge ball or who Carlos liked more.

Eve walked with Parker to the front door where they had to ring another bell. Burgundy indoor-outdoor carpet covered the steps. It was stained and buckled and frayed along the edges. She felt numb. Eve yanked a brittle leaf off a dead holly bush and folded it between her fingers while they waited.

"Damn it." She sucked on her index finger where the thorn had drawn blood just as the door was thrown open.

"Hey, hey," the woman said, munching on a corned beef sandwich. Eve could smell the mustard. "I'm Irene, come on in now." She propped the door open with her

ample hip and reached down, stretching out her arm like she needed to pull them in. Eve tucked both hands behind her back and scooted inside around her.

Irene Gillespie wrapped her sandwich back up. The thick white butcher paper popped like little firecrackers in the dense quiet. She wiped her mouth with a kleenex covered in bright red lipstick blots. While Irene tucked it into the belt of her dress, Eve wandered away down the hall.

Eve had not remembered anything about Bultmore, even after the call from Irene. It had been ten years, and now that she was there, she realized how completely she had eliminated the memory of the actual place from her mind. As she snaked her way through the different rooms, all glowing dimly in the subdued light, tiny details began to emerge and prick her, like acupuncture needles. The ornate floral brocade on the loveseat in the Repose Room. The flamboyant fake brass chandeliers that hung too low. The pervasive smell of embalming fluid and lemon Pledge. The Children's Room had bright purple carpeting and a miniature swing set and board games stacked along the wall. Two child-sized plastic rocking chairs sat angled next to each other, positioned in the front window as if the children would know they needed to contemplate the great mysteries they were going through.

Eve wondered why no one else was there. Why were there no grieving families trying to decide between the Excalibur and Continental packages? No children suppressing nervous giggles while they squeezed the puffy silk linings of the open

caskets? Running her fingers over the bronze cast of Jesus hanging on the cross, touching lightly on the rivulets of blood seeping from the holes in his hands and side, Eve remembered when the doctor came into the waiting room to tell them Lafayette had died. His face, etched with concern, was too perfect, like he had walked off of a movie set. She imagined him praying silently that the club would hold his tee time while he stayed late to tell them the news. She had laughed hysterically, an inappropriate reaction on her part, to be sure. She had realized it then, but had been unable to control it. It was the sight of her brothers and sister gathered, each of them hiding an ugly scar underneath their sweaters, each of them missing a vital organ because of the now dead woman who had not really wanted any of them.

As she walked, Eve's heart pounded, making blood pulse violently in her ears. Why had she let Parker talk her into this? The more she thought about it—his jocular of the a road trip to the South, the fun they would have!—the madder she got. His still-married parents lived happily and prosperously in Grosse Pointe. They had monogrammed towels and ate off his great-grandmother's china. His childhood room remained in tact. He had no goddamn idea.

“So, where is she?” Eve asked, coming back into the parlor. Her voice was louder than she meant it to be. Parker and Irene quit laughing and looked up at her, eyes wide, as if Eve had interrupted a very important conversation.

The three of them made their way down to the basement, and Irene pulled a string

to turn on a bare bulb to light the way. Once downstairs, she flipped the switch and the fluorescent lights hummed and flickered on, revealing rows and rows of unfinished wood shelves. Several closest to the basement door held candelabras and hymnals and bibles jacketed in rich maroon cloth. But further in, Eve saw hundreds of vessels of every shape. Simple cardboard cylinders, marble urns, handsome, silver-plated cups that could have been trophies from the Mid-South Rodeo.

“This was one of my husband’s greatest sorrows,” Irene said, nodding to the collection. “Before he got sick, he came down here once a week and dusted every single one. Some of these things date back 50 years or more.”

“That’s dedication,” Parker said.

“That’s a lot of dusting is all,” Irene said. “It was crazy. I tried a million times to get him to get rid of them, but I think he would have dumped me before he dumped these ashes.”

Dusty green vines and weeds sprouted up through the moist cement floor. Eve kicked at them with the toe of her sandal and kept her mouth shut while they walked.

“I’ve got to get those dehumidifiers fixed,” Irene said. “Joe would have my head if he knew I was trying to sell this place with something big like that left undone. OK, let’s see.” She scooted her glasses down a bit on her nose and pulled the clipboard from underneath her arm. “They’re supposed to be matched by lot number and date. When was it your momma died?”

Eve stopped to look at a copper urn that was molded in a perfect replica of the Eiffel Tower. A copper flag flew from the top that read, "Vive la Herbert! 1944-1995."

"Eve?" Parker asked, squeezing her elbow. "The date?"

"Which?"

"That Lafayette died?"

"1991."

"You got a month? A day?" Irene asked. "We've got to have the date to do this. You see how many of these things there are?"

Eve stayed silent.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Irene said, throwing her arms up in the air. "I never wanted to take over this place. It was my husband's thing, his family business. I sold bras and lingerie down in foundations at the Goldsmith's for 40 years. She's a 34A, mark my words."

"Can't you work backwards? You know, by name first, then find the date?"

Parker asked.

"That list is on another computer printout," Irene said, shaking her clipboard at him. "Upstairs."

"Sorry if it's inconvenient," Parker said, not sounding sorry at all, "but you did call *us* about this. Can you get the other list?"

"Oh, OK. I tell you the sooner that realtor closes on this deal, the better. This

neighborhood's gone to seed—we're the only whites for miles. I'm putting Joe in a nice facility out in Bartlett and heading down to a condo I've already picked out at Sanibel Island. It's got a jacuzzi tub and an icemaker." Irene looked dreamily into the distance. As if she were gone already, Eve thought.

Parker cleared his throat. "The list?"

Irene sighed and made a great show of climbing the stairs. She slammed the door behind her.

Parker walked over to Eve and tugged on her sleeve. "So what's going on?"

She jerked her arm away. She thought of all the people gathered there in the basement, burned into tiny fragments, obliterated and forgotten. Herbert and his copper flag. Forgotten. "Why did you make me come here?"

"Whoa, whoa. What the hell? *I* didn't make you do anything. I was trying to help."

Irene's pumps clicked sharply on the parquet floor above them.

"This isn't helping." Eve turned and walked toward the velvet ropes like toy soldiers stored near the stairs. She pushed one with her hand and it swung heavily back and forth. "And I'm a 34B."

"You certainly didn't make this clear before," Parker said. "You acted like you were all for it."

"No, it was what *you* wanted. She could have UPS'd the ashes to us in San

Francisco.”

“But this is your *home*, Evie. This is your *mother*.” Parker pointed to a row of ashes.

“This is *not* my home. I haven’t lived here since high school. It means nothing to me.” Eve was yelling now, her voice going husky and sarcastic. “And Lafayette is someone we tell stories about at Christmas when we’ve had too much to drink.”

Eve’s words bounced off the cinder block walls and then evaporated, leaving the basement more silent than before. She looked straight at Parker and then she turned to face the wall again.

Parker walked up behind her and wrapped his arms awkwardly, lightly around her waist. Eve pitched forward on her toes, trying not to lean back into him.

“I’m taking you home. *Our* home, back to California,” he said. “Irene has to get rid of all of these anyway. One more won’t matter. We can pick up our stuff at the hotel and be in Texas by midnight.” A c-a-r to go faraway.

“Got it,” Irene called, out of breath, as she tramped down the stairs.

Parker let go of Eve’s waist, but kept hold of her hand. “Irene, I’m sorry we’ve put you to all this trouble, but I think we...”

Eve interrupted him. “What have you got Irene?”

They followed her to a row of shelves on the far south wall. Irene ran her fingers down the paper and then along the edges of the shelf. She counted back five containers,

touching each one lightly on the top as she whispered the numbers under her breath.

“Here we go,” she said and picked up a small light blue box with the crematory’s logo emblazoned in gold on the top. Irene handed it over to Eve and then crossed Lafayette LeBlanc’s name off the list on her clipboard.

“I’ll leave you two with it,” Irene said. “Just check in before you go if you don’t mind. I’ll be in the chapel putting out the program for tomorrow’s service. It’s our last one, thank God.”

Eve held the box with both hands. LEBLANC, LAFAYETTE was written on the side of the box in black magic marker, with the date, 11/21/91. Eve took off the top and looked in, thinking it might hold some evidence of her mother’s past, maybe her jade rosary or the black and white picture of she and Eve at the Memphis Zoo, the only photo Eve could remember of them together. But there was nothing inside. Nothing but a clear plastic bag filled with what looked like hundreds of crushed seashells. Eve stared at the ashes, looking. She wasn’t there. The pilot for the water heater ignited. The gas flame roared behind her and brought Eve back. She carefully replaced the top to the box and held it out to Parker. It felt breathless and light.

It was the graffiti she saw first: *Elvis Forever. Bush and Presley in 2004.*

“Stop,” Eve said, putting her hand on Parker’s arm. “Would you?”

Parker pulled over by the fieldstone wall. The sky was still pink and the air still



hot and motionless. Cars blazed by on the boulevard where they had driven past a few things Eve remembered: the strip mall cinema where she had seen *The Sting* and the Howard Johnson's where their father would take them for ice cream after Lafayette disappeared.

*I love you tender.* G.R. + E.P. Parker put on his hazard lights and they got out of the car.

Through the iron gates decorated with quarter and half notes, they peered into the grounds. It seemed cooler in there. The lawn was manicured and small lights dotted the sloping driveway in perfect symmetry. Eve thought of the tour she took the week before she left for college. She had been surprised by how formal most of the rooms were, how chilly. Only the Jungle Room, with its fur lampshades and couches carved with chain saws, felt like a life had been there, a wildness. From the outside, it looked like such a regular place, not a mansion at all and you would never know a room like that existed.

They stood there, neither of them saying anything. Eve could feel the warmth of Parker's body close to hers. It felt familiar and good.

"You ready?" Parker asked.

"In a minute."

Eve turned and asked a woman wearing a sari and holding a little boy to take their picture. She nodded her head and then handed the baby and her purse to her husband. He stood beside her, smiling widely.

The woman struggled to frame the shot, the draft from the traffic behind her rippling the silk of her dress. While she peered into the camera, she waved her hand at Eve to scoot in closer. The woman called out, “One...”

Parker whispered, “Eve...”

“Two...three...”

“Graceland!” The husband shouted, bouncing the baby.

The flash exploded as Eve turned to Parker to see what he wanted. He held out his hand. She uncrossed her arms and reached down.

**epilogue : essay**

## **How to not fall in love**

I found out in kindergarten that I was one of those people who formed scar tissue. I was five years old and it was spring when the small red bump appeared at the top of my left arm and didn't go away. No one but me remembered the vaccination I had been given at school, so my mother took me to see Dr. Threlkeld. His office was in East Memphis, far from our house in Whitehaven, and it always felt something like an adventure to go there, which helped to distract from whatever medical situation might be at hand—strep throat, ear infection, a sprained ankle. Post-appointment doughnuts at Howard's Donut Shop, which was right next door, was an added benefit. My mom or dad would even wait in the parking lot, filling up the car's interior with Winston smoke, while I watched from the passenger seat for the red light on top of the shop start to twirl and flash, meaning a batch of hot doughnuts had just come out of the fryer. When they were hot, I could eat five in one sitting. They melted on your tongue like cotton candy.

Dr. Threlkeld was a tall, quiet man and he smiled at me when he came into the paneled exam room. I smiled back and then looked down, embarrassed, but also trying to flirt with him a little bit, see if I could negotiate some lesser punishment than what the stethoscope around his neck and tongue depressor in his pocket looked ready to inflict. He pulled up my t-shirt sleeve and examined my arm through a little magnifying glass and promptly diagnosed the bump as completely harmless: raised scar tissue left over from

the multiple needle pricks of the vaccine. That sounded OK to me and I had already moved on, trying to decide between plain or chocolate iced. Should I be so bold as to lobby for a Coke instead of milk?

But the news seemed to take my mother aback, I guess because she knew she had the same genetic tendency. She was careful to cover it up, but I had seen it: a nasty slash of mangled flesh that ran from hip to hip right under her belly button, remnants of a gallbladder surgery from a few years before. She had visions then, I suppose, of every scrape I encountered from there on out leaving an ugly, permanent reminder. A map, in bas-relief, of my awkwardness, of the assaults I would endure. I got extra doughnuts *and* the Coke that day.

And my mother watched me close for a while after that, stepping in to take over when I was opening a can of soup or tuna fish. Removing a butter knife from my hand as I ran out the back door to go help my brother with some sort of project that involved unscrewing things. Six months after my doctor's visit, my mother was in the psych ward of Baptist Hospital and I could have performed a radical appendectomy on myself atop the hood of my dad's Impala for all anyone cared.

**Scholes, Mary Lynn: Diagnosis—September, 1969:**

DSM II, code 296.33: Major Depressive Disorder, Recurrent, Severe Without Psychotic Features due to sudden onset of Multiple Sclerosis after 10 year remission.

**Scholes, M. L.: Diagnosis—May, 1960:**

Multiple Sclerosis: Also, MS. Disease of the central nervous system resulting in the destruction of myelin causing scarring of the brain and spinal cord nerve fibers. Average age of onset: 25. Symptoms include: double vision, fatigue, clumsiness in the arms and legs, tingling sensations, poor coordination, tremors, incontinence, constipation, sexual dysfunction, hearing loss, vertigo, facial pain, memory loss, and difficulty in concentrating and problem solving. Type unknown at this time.

***HOW TO NOT FALL IN LOVE, STEP 1:***

***Seek out unavailable and/or inappropriate boys and/or men. Start very young.***

*Figure 1:*

He's 17. Blond. Wears tight white shorts and a white polo shirt, tucked in, his uniform as a counselor for the Memphis Park Commission. I sit next to him at the picnic table every day for lunch. The Park Commission provides this lunch: a bologna sandwich, a carton of Jungle Juice and a cookie. I sometimes ask if he wants my cookie. Not everyday. Just sometimes. I want to keep him guessing. I am six years old.

At the picnic table, I look up at him and watch his profile while he chews, the jaw muscle bulging with each bite; his Adam's apple sliding up and down his tan throat. I talk to him at length. I try to sound grown up, with grown up concerns. In bed at night, I picture me at a college with old stone buildings and tolling bells and fall leaves swirling. He comes to visit on weekends in a convertible MG and a corduroy sports coat.

There is this thing he thing he does to my insides. I can't name it. But being

around him feels like I am real; I am not invisible. Being around him makes me want to *be* him, too. I am caught between wanting him and wanting to be him. Toward the end of the summer, I ask if he will walk me home. I want him to know where I live. I want him to meet my mother, who is home from the hospital, presentable. I want him to think me presentable. He agrees. He walks down Graceland Avenue; I skip alongside him to keep up. On the doorstep, neither he nor my mom know quite what to say to each other, why they are there, sweating in the August heat. My mother is smoking and her hair is gathered in a messy knot on the nape of her neck. She wears long khaki shorts and her legs are tan. I stand between them, looking up, trying to think of something to say that will make this go like I imagined it would. “Laurie’s a cool kid,” he says to her, finally. His voice sounds adult and unfamiliar, like he’s speaking a different language and I feel like I have disappeared. I swallow hard. I am caught between wanting to cry and wanting to kung fu kick him in the stomach. My mother says something back, I can’t remember what, and he turns and walks back to the park by himself without saying another word to me. I don’t sit at his picnic table at lunch after that. I eat my own cookies every day.

**Scholes, M. L.: Diagnosis—June, 1974:**

Multiple Sclerosis: Type determined to be relapsing-remitting. Symptoms flare up for several days and then go into remission over the next four to eight weeks. Remissions are almost always followed by symptom flare-ups or periods of deteriorating ability, and in some patients these periods of deterioration worsen over time.

It was on Williamsburg Lane that the parallel universe began: My mother and I became detached from the world. Her withdrawal can be tracked, step-by-step almost, by the stacks of hospital and doctor bills during those years. By the things she carried or that carried her: from cane to walker to wheelchair to bed. Curtains drawn. Door closed. Silence.

My detachment was more difficult to pin down. I went to school and diagrammed sentences and, all by myself, made a papier maché model of an ancient irrigation system along the Nile. My fifth grade English teacher, Miss O’Flanagan, took a special interest in me. She gave me a present at Christmas, a Roget’s Thesaurus that she signed: “You are such a delightful student!” That same day the most popular girl in the class invited me to a party that would have boys at it. I took the thesaurus home and waited for someone to show it to. I was a delightful student. I needed to get permission to go to the party. I listened to Peter Frampton, “Baby I Love Your Way,” on my record player and watched out my bedroom window for my father’s headlights. I did this for hours and hours. My mother: Curtains drawn. Doors closed. Silence.

I fell asleep before my father got home, but left him a note on his dresser: “Miss O’Flanagan says I’m a good student. Can I go to a party at Suzanne’s house on Saturday? There will be boys but her parents will be there. It’s from 6 to 8.” He was gone before I got up the next morning. I tiptoed into their bedroom where his twin bed was already



made and my mother lay sleeping in the king size by herself, medicine bottles crowding the bedside table. He had written me a note on my note: “No.”

This went on for years. Straight home from school. Watching for father’s headlights from bedroom window. Notes. Alone. “No.” Silence.

*Figure 1.1:*

I’m in fifth grade. His name is Bill Vopel. He has the longest hair in the class and is always just a bit dirty. He has eyes that say, “Help.” The whole middle school class is in on it for weeks: He and I will French kiss in the Central Church parking lot at 6 o’clock after the Wednesday night supper. That night, my spaghetti goes cold while I am frozen in a haze of anticipation. Part of me wants to pin Bill Vopel down on the table in the middle of the church dining room and do it in front of everyone. Look. Look at me. Part of me knows this tongue kissing thing is very, very wrong. Behind a dumpster out in the parking lot where it is not even dark yet, Bill Vopel takes my face in his hands like a movie star. His eyes are closed. His mouth is so soft that I’m worried the hard, scared weight of my own will crush it. I close my eyes. I relax. Go soft. Kiss him back. Decide that in the course of the 20 seconds that I have or will become the best French kisser in the history of French kissing. Bill Vopel never speaks to me again.

***HOW TO NOT FALL IN LOVE, STEP 2:***

***Repeat Step 1. Repeatedly.***

*Figures 2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4:*

The boy I lose my virginity to who might not have known my name. The senior who already has a girlfriend. The freshman who already has a girlfriend. The man who is, just barely, bisexual. The guitar player who smokes way too much pot.

**Scholes, M. L.: Diagnosis—October, 1977:**

Multiple Sclerosis: Type noted now as Chronic-progressive MS. Patient's symptoms continue to worsen slowly without remission. May lead to serious speech problems, memory loss, and paralysis, and generally it follows a downhill course.

**Scholes, M. L.: Admission Notes, Oakville Memorial Hospital and Nursing Home—February, 1980:**

Patient presents with complete paralysis below waist. Severe spasticity in upper body. Eye-hand coordination reduced 70% of baseline. Long- and short-term memory reduced 90% of baseline. Cognitive and speech abilities reduced 80% of baseline. Expected term of admission: Through end of life.

My mother went into the nursing home a week before my 16th birthday. She was 44 years old. I watched the ambulance pulled out of the parking lot in front of our apartment and could not tell if I was more excited about the 1974 Chevy Nova 8-cylinder that waited for me to take my driver's license exam there than I was sad about my mother's departure. The next day, I came straight home from school even though there was no reason to. I wandered around the empty apartment. I made some cheese toast and

ate it looking out at the Nova.

I got the keys. I pulled out of the complex parking lot, feeling like I was going to explode from nervousness and freedom and the things I couldn't even begin to imagine about how my life was changing. I kept looking in my review mirror, thinking I would see my father's headlights, trying to flag me down to stop me. "No."

But nothing appeared, and I got on the I-40 and rolled down the windows and drove 90 m.p.h. I headed east to Cordova and back. It was still light out when I parked the Nova in the spot that I had taken it from and went inside. My dad came home and I cooked us breakfast for dinner and we ate it not saying much, not quite sure what to do next.

***HOW TO NOT FALL IN LOVE, STEP 3:***

***Decide you are "so over" the unavailable/inappropriate guy, usually upon meeting another guy who is unavailable/inappropriate in a slightly different, and therefore intriguing, way.***

See *Figures 2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4.*

*Figure 3*

I never form any other scar tissue after the vaccination. I keep waiting, thinking it might happen at any time. Like the time I slice up my fingertips testing the blades on a Lady Bic razor trying to teach myself how to shave my legs. Or the time I burn big holes in both my calves on the solid chrome exhaust pipe running under the passenger door of a

boy's truck. Or the time I bash my head on the dashboard of my drunk date's Grand Prix when he rear-ends a Chevy van on Lamar Avenue. But there's nothing to show for any of this. Not a scratch.

*Figure 3.1*

When I meet Kenny, he's drinking a beer. Sapporo, I think. I fall for him on the spot, in Convention Hall 1 of the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. When I find out he's just quit heroin, cleaned up his act, starting over, etc., my heart tumbles. I am already imagining how I will be a part of his starting over. It will be like a movie. Handsome, troubled man saved by young, sweet girl. Happily ever after. Credits roll.

By the time I move to New York to live with him in a 300 square foot studio, he is using again. I learn how to watch for the signs: Eyes go liquid. Body goes soft. Speech goes slow. I learn when he'll remember what we talked about and when he won't. I learn how to count the leftover wax paper bags. Four bags a day. Five. Six.

There was something appealing about being in a relationship with an unavailable man: There was absolutely nothing to lose. No sense of failure could be experienced. It was risk free. They never asked questions, like "Are you in love with me?" for example. Kenny could be blowing warm air into his cupped hands on a January night while he waited to cop on Avenue D and 2nd and it didn't matter in the least where I was or what I was doing. I could be sitting in the van with the doors locked waiting for Kenny to come out of the graffitied brownstone—liquid, soft, slow—and it didn't matter where I was or

what I was doing. I was invisible. There was a strange satisfaction in that. For a long time.

***HOW TO NOT FALL IN LOVE, STEP 4:***

***Pursue relationships with men who you are not in love with. Convince yourself and him otherwise.***

It was 1991 and I was 27-years-old. I had a ticket to go home for Easter. I wanted to see my mother at Oakville, even though the visits never lasted for more than 30 minutes at a time. I would sit there, trying to think of something to say that she would understand. Some memory from my childhood that would click in her brain, register on her face. But there was nothing.

I also had plans to tell my father I wasn't living with Kenny anymore, that I had met someone else who was normal in every outwardly observable way. Although my father never knew about the heroin (the three stints in rehab, the vomit I cleaned from the sheets, the riding my bike around Brooklyn at 3 a.m. looking for his Saab), he knew intuitively, emphatically that Kenny wasn't appropriate. And I knew that when I told him I had moved out, he'd be happy, or would at least stop thinking I had lost my mind. I'd settle for the latter. But three days before I was to get on a plane at LaGuardia, my brother called to tell me my father had died of a massive heart attack. I sat on the edge of my bed and couldn't move. My best friend Bonnie came over and took me to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden where we scuffed our feet through the fallen cherry blossoms and rubbed the velvety petals of roses with names like "Golden Wings" and "Autumn

Damask” between our fingers. She held my hand sometimes. I didn’t cry.

*Figure 4*

Three years later, I marry Eric, the man who was normal in every outwardly observable way, a weird penance of sorts I offer up to my father. I am not in love with Eric, but I have convinced myself otherwise. I need to prove to myself that being “motherless” does not mean I can’t do things the way they are supposed to be done.

I need to prove to a dead man that I hadn’t lost my mind.

A year into it, I realize my mistake and I end it, as kindly as you can do something like that. I go to therapists and sit in comfortable chairs and shred Kleenex while they scrape away, bit by bit, at whatever it is that kept me from getting this right. It is slow going.

**Scholes, M. L., Admission Report, St. Francis Hospital—  
July 6, 1996:**

Patient presents with severe bacterial infection, secondary complication of chronic urinary tract infection. Advise Oakville Memorial Hospital officials to notify next of kin.

**Scholes, M. L. Autopsy Report—July 6, 1996:**

Cause of death: Acute bacterial pneumonia.

***HOW TO NOT FALL IN LOVE, STEP 5:***

***Decide not falling in love is not what you want to do anymore.***

It wasn't until my mother died that things started to change for real. It was like I was released from something. I could finally feel what it was like to live without watching and waiting for the scar tissue to appear. Like my mother must have watched and waited for the disease to come back when she was in remission or to see what sign of normalcy was going to disappear next once it did. Once the scar tissue started spreading, cauterizing her brain and spinal cord, bit by bit.

But for me, it also had to do with love.

Unavailable became uninteresting. Inappropriate became offensive. Detachment became unacceptable.

And so I ended a relationship with a man whom I liked very much (but whom I did not love), as kindly as you can do something like that. I instituted "Laura's At Least A Year Without A Boyfriend Program." People laughed at it and I did, too. But I didn't want to do the thing again where I woke up a month, a year, five years later and said, "This is not it. This is not what love is. This is not enough for me." So I went on dates. I didn't have sex. Well, for the most part I didn't have sex. It worked. I was happy. Somehow abstaining from love helped me define it and made me believe in it. A year turned into a year and a half. I was still happy. Then I went to Prague.

*Figure 5:*

Two pork chops lie on a plate covered with flour and salt and pepper. Red beans cook slowly over low heat on the stove. A salad dressed with homemade balsamic vinaigrette waits in the refrigerator. All this is for a man I met in Prague four months ago who is sitting at my kitchen table, drinking a glass of red wine. Nick Drake is singing *Pink Moon*. My dog lies at the man's feet in a tight black ball. Everybody is happy. The man is talking to his mother on the phone trying to get definitive directions from her on how to cook the pork chops because I don't eat meat and so don't really know how to cook the pork chops. I have so much to learn. I find out later that his mother asked him if he was bringing me home to meet her and his father for the holidays. Was I sweet? Was I pretty? Did I want to have children?

I suck in breath through my teeth when I slide the knife alongside of my thumb while I'm coring a red pepper, but turn my back to him quickly and run water in the sink. After he hangs up the phone, the man comes up behind me and presses into me, kisses my neck. He sees the blood-soaked paper towel wrapped around my thumb and kisses it too. He is smart and beautiful and good and kind. He knows about me and doesn't seem afraid. He looks at me all the time. With him, I am not invisible. With him, there is this thing that makes me feel like everything is going to be all right. I relax. Go soft. Kiss him back.

He reaches beyond me to pick up the bottle and pour himself another glass of wine and my stomach clenches, an involuntary action leftover from the days of 2nd and



Avenue D. At the table, I silently will him not to dissolve on me. I distract myself from counting the glasses by focusing on the pork chops, the sauce. Kisses between bites with candles on the table. The dog at our feet. There are a lot of distractions.

I watch the cut for the next few days; it's an old habit I'm still trying to break. I watch him, too. Is he inappropriate? No. Is he unavailable? Maybe. Is that why I like him? No. Finally, the "maybe unavailable" is what makes it hard to decide to go forward instead of the other way around. I have come that far. There's that.

The cut gets swollen and red for a couple of days and then forms a scab. By the day he leaves to go back home, we have plans to see each other before Thanksgiving and there is talk of a trip to his parents' house in Oklahoma at Christmas. By the day he leaves to go back home, the skin around the cut has started to knit itself back together. It looks practically normal. But still, I study it while we wait for his plane. Would this be the time a line of tissue rises up, reminding me of the pork chops, the man at the table, the counting, how much I have to learn? When I get home from the airport, I wrap the cut in a fresh Band-Aid. I don't quite believe it won't happen yet. It's an old habit I'm still trying to break.

*Figure 5.1:*

My vaccination scar is still there. It's small now, in relation to my body, and smooth. It's migrated to my back. I run my hand over it sometimes in the bathtub. My fingers have to search it out blindly. I need it to be there. I need something to warn people: Look. Look at

me. Look where I've been. But it's hard to find. Almost nothing, really.