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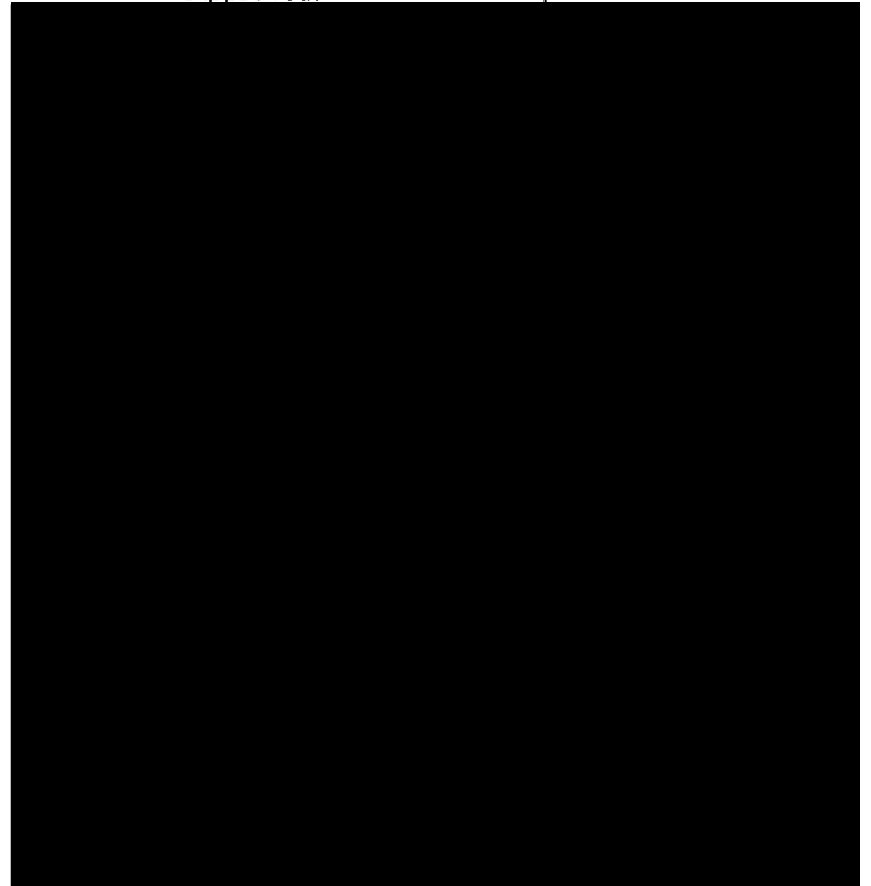
ANSWER ME THAT

by

Catherine Davis

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:



December 2009

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2009

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Abstract of a Dissertation
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December 2009

ABSTRACT

ANSWER ME THAT

by Catherine Davis

December 2009

This is a collection of five works of short fiction and one creative non-fiction essay.

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INTRODUCTION

“What are airplanes made out of?” There’s a circle in the sand around my chair, the one from which I’m monitoring the nursery school playground. It is a child’s chair I’m in – sitting low with my knees high, as a four-year-old quizzes me on the nature of the universe, from physics to aggression to the dynamics of divorce – all the while continuing his measured circuit around me.

“Aluminum,” I say, feeling unsure.

“Isn’t that metal?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Metal is heavy. Why would they use something *heavy* to make something that needs to be light enough to fly in the sky?” He spreads his hands, palms toward me, pushes his face forward, and gives me a look I would have thought a four-year-old incapable of: piercing, exasperated, and full of wonder.

“I don’t know, Merlin. I do know that there are lots of complicated reasons why it works, but the truth is, I can’t really explain to you what they are.” He’s still looking at me – I’m not sure whether he is really counting on me for the answer or not. I imagine holding my arm out like a wing, and demonstrating force vectors up and down, fore and aft, but I feel defeated before I begin: I don’t know enough to answer all the inevitable whys which will follow. I have the unpleasant sense of letting him down.

I’m nineteen; he’s just a child on a playground, chattering away. Little man, absurd. He’s fast out of the gate, though, this kid, he has it pegged right off – the world is a pretty strange place. For this particular question, it happens that there are solid

answers, though complicated. Nonetheless, his questions are alarmingly shrewd – they imply the infinity of those for which the answers are uncertain, ambiguous, or ultimately unattainable. Still we ask.

In his famous essay, Albert Camus examines notions of the absurd: of the human drive to find meaning and reason, of the futility of this drive; and of hope, despair, and happiness. That is to say – not merely examines these, but carefully establishes a relationship between them, each to the other, and moreover, to the endeavor of art – the art of fiction in particular. He considers the writer to be a creature particularly susceptible to the effect of these tensions, to be vulnerable to the fever created by them, and who is thus in a privileged position regarding such problems: “In this universe the work of art is then the sole chance of keeping his consciousness and of fixing its adventures. Creating is living doubly” (Myth, 94) He describes the process of creation as “not a matter of explaining and solving, but of experiencing and describing,” and says that , for the writer, the “whole effort is to examine, to enlarge and to enrich.”

“If the world were clear, art would not exist,” concludes the French novelist (Myth 98). Luckily for us writers, someone’s oversight here has given us a job, should we choose to accept. Not that it’s so easy: Donald Barthelme, in discussing the making of fiction, has pointed out: “Writing is a process of dealing with not-knowing, a forcing of what and how,” and while he stresses that this not-knowing is, in fact, essential to the endeavor, he goes on to admit that “the anxiety attached to this situation is not inconsiderable” (NK 12). In a vein similar to that of Camus, he observes: “In this century there's been much stress placed not upon what we know but on knowing that our methods are themselves questionable—our Song of Songs is the Uncertainty Principle” (Art LXVI

200). Like Camus, he assigns a special position regarding this uncertainty to the writer, (quoting Karl Kraus) as someone “who can make a riddle out of an answer” (NK 18).

This is one of my favorite ideas about writing. Not only are there millions of unanswered questions reeling about the cosmos, Barthelme proposes that a writer will inevitably make more. This has much to do with the condition in which we find ourselves, *vis à vis* the known universe, from the outset of the twentieth century.

The idea that there may be no sort of ordering force at the helm of our universe is part and parcel of this modern uncertainty to which D. Barthelme refers. Likewise, Camus describes the central dilemma of human life as the conflict between the urgent need for understanding and its lack of fulfillment – throughout “The Myth of Sisyphus,” he reiterates the inherent disjunction of the absurd confrontation between “this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (21). He explains the absurd as the thing “born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (28). From Camus’s point of view, “That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute, illustrates the *essential impulse of the human drama*” (17). Such drama is not what we most readily associate with excitement, with action, with plot – in the traditional sense of story telling. Not exactly what we tend to think of *high* drama. Yet, I couldn’t agree more; my own experience of the world is absolutely in accord with Camus’s conclusion – the urgent desire for understanding, to *know why*, is, well, urgent.

Merlin, the nursery school kid, has plenty more questions to ask me besides the one about airplanes and their materials. During the summer I know him, he asks things

like: “Why can’t kids just be nice to each other on the playground instead of fighting – wouldn’t everyone have a better time that way?” (This troubles him.) “Don’t you think a kid should live with his father in the summer and his mother in the fall?” (On this one he’s optimistic, seems to be seeking confirmation.) And “What would you think about a house that chops itself down?” (Here he illustrates chopping, delighted with his own absurdity.) His first question is bewildering, the second, subjective and complicated, the last is purely nonsensical – and I don’t have answers for any of them.

Back at college the year before, I had written a paper about Johannes Kepler, the seventeenth century mathematician, astronomer, and mystic. Kepler’s lifetime endeavor is *the* example – unparalleled in history – of Camus’s wild longing for clarity and understanding. Kepler sought mathematical proof of meaning, attempting: “simply, to bare the ultimate secret of the universe in an all-embracing synthesis of geometry, music, astrology, astronomy and epistemology. It was the first attempt of this kind since Plato, and it is the last to our day” (Koestler 389).

I could tell Merlin about Kepler, although this won’t answer any of his questions. On the other hand, perhaps Merlin himself should be the judge of this. I’m sure he’ll be interested. And I’m just gaga over Kepler, so I plunge in.

“The sun?” (I point and Merlin nods.) “And do you know about the planets?” (Nods again.) “Well, a couple of guys in long ago times figured out that the earth goes around the sun, though nobody believed them back then. And one of these guys, Kepler, also figured out exactly *how* the planets go around, and how far away they are means how slow or fast they go, so that’s how long it takes, and each one is a certain distance

from the one next to it, and what is really amazing is that it all happens so perfectly that it makes this music, only we can't hear it."

"Wow." He looks toward the sky. "The solar system makes music?"

"Exactly, Merlin, the solar system! Well, that's what this guy believed, like invisible music."

"How does it work?" I knew this would happen, but I want some kind of story to tell him. This is the best one I can think of.

"You know, it's very complicated, and he spent his whole life working on it. See, he said that it proved what life *means* because it's all in order, like organized, by God - you know about God?" (He nods.) "So, this is why human beings love songs and music so much, because they're a miniature version of the whole universe and they make us happy." But he's still asking, *how and why*, with his eyes. "And, well, I can't explain it, *exactly*, because I'm not a genius like that guy was."

"You mean like how you couldn't explain about airplanes and metal?"

"Yeah, like that. Only worse."

The truth is that Johannes Kepler suffered a great deal during his quest – when he discovered that his ideas were wrong (e.g. planetary orbits are not round but elliptical) or found even relatively minor mistakes in mathematical calculations, when answers eluded him: he felt this entire cosmic theory threatened by lack of proof. There were periods of deep despair, interlaced with the overriding hope that he would finally succeed. Camus, three centuries later, suggests that the impossibility of attaining definitive answers for the big questions in life may be a reasonable, and, at any rate, typical, cause for human

despair, and pursues his argument through to the extreme conclusion of despair in suicide. Although Camus draws a careful distinction between a lack of hope and despair, neither condition offers much appeal.

Not until a personal experience a couple of years ago did these issues really come into sharp focus for me. This happened during my search for a lost cat – mine – who disappeared in Mississippi during Hurricane Katrina while I was in New York. After a series of unlucky events and downright snafus, she escaped from a stranger’s apartment, and I flew down to find her. In the midst of great emotional (guilt, rage, blame), and situational (heat, no utilities, crime wave) turmoil, in a state of despair, I continually asked *why, why, why?* Plenty of logical answers to the pedestrian whys, but none at all to the big ones. I was only looking for a lost cat, but in that time period, finding her was the only thing that mattered to me at all: it was my complete obsession. I finally understood that I was not going to be able control the outcome – that I could only take every conceivable step to tilt the scales in my favor. During the week that I searched for the cat in an unknown area of town, it occurred to me that the whole event boiled down to a choice between hope and despair.

Hope against despair was a fight every moment of those days for me, and I thought a lot about the use of this struggle in fiction writing. While hope never made any definitive triumph, I realized that to succumb to the despair pulling so violently for control would be disastrous. It became clear that despair was easy, seductive – and that hope required a great deal of effort. And that any investment whatsoever in hope increased my chances of disappointment if things went wrong. I wish that story were among those I’ve included in this collection, but I haven’t written it yet. I think part of

the reason is that, from the outset, it runs the risk of trying to mean too much; considerable anxiety on the part of this writer. I need to write it soon.

Johannes Kepler sought to prove a precise geometrical foundation for the planetary orbits – which, based upon Pythagorean principles, assumed a harmonic relationship, and for Kepler, and ultimate connection between the physical and spiritual worlds. If successful, Kepler would have proven *a priori* design, order, and by extension, truth and finally, meaning. It is a breathtakingly beautiful, and highly *appealing* quest. At the polar extreme, Camus's notions of deep disorder and the absence of ultimate truths seem entirely logical and all too likely: I am convinced by the twentieth century conclusion espoused by this writer, along with Samuel Beckett and Donald Barthelme, among so many others. *And yet*. I can't completely shrug off the suspicion that there may be, lurking beneath it all, both order and truth. It's what Kepler staked his life on; and his ideas, if flawed, are nonetheless tremendously alluring. According to Camus, even in the twentieth century, such suspicions are among the most basic of human inclinations. In terms of the big questions and motivating principles, order is ever so much more comfortable a condition than disorder, Camus admits. Like the child Merlin, I want to know. The questions of human nature, perhaps smaller in scope and more particular, are no less important – in our day-to-day lives they present more immediate concerns. Why a person does or doesn't do or say this thing or that; why he loves or she doesn't; why one feels horrible, when feeling good seems as perfectly *viable* an option. Again, I want to know. Failing to find definitive answers, it seems more sensible to let go of the compulsion and pursuit — admit them to be an unreasonable waste of energy,

ultimately futile. In trying to accept that the deepest essence of things is ultimately unknowable, however, I always find myself being drawn back to Merlin's position of wanting an answer. It's a very uneasy tension if one grants both sides their arguments.

These are primary fascinations for me – meaning and order, meaninglessness and the absurd. Along with their potential consequences – hope and despair. I don't mean to suggest, however, that when I begin writing a story that I am setting out with such big ideas. Different stories are motivated by different kinds of things, but often there is simply something like a refrain, a phrase or an image or a character, that keeps repeating, something like a tune I can't put out of my head. Sometimes it feels like a clamor, kicking to get out. Whatever it is, it is a much smaller and more ordinary idea than the issues I have been talking about. Following the advice of my teacher Frederick Barthelme, I am trying not to “mean so much” (Steps 228). What an idea, I thought at first: to mean *less* – when so much, unfortunately, means too little? But the wisdom of this fundamental suggestion has become ever more apparent to me: so much better not to pin everything on making a point, waxing didactic is dull. I get it. And so here's another anxiety, when meaning is for me such a temptation. In my work, I am trying to let it lie low. If there is an *idea*, Frederick Barthelme advises, it must rest very solidly in the particular: “The parents don't sit around getting heartbroken over abortion; they get heartbroken because they killed the baby” (Steps 232). Albert Camus emphasizes the same notion: “The true work of art is always on the human scale. It is essentially the one that says ‘less’” (Myth 98).

When I start putting a story on the page, the clamor usually settles into something closer to a hum. Like it's happy to be getting out of its confinement and mixing it up with some other stuff. It wasn't until I began writing consistently, after I'd been working in a writing program for many months, that I realized all this stuff, this noise going on in my head (and often driving me crazy) might have a value. When I came across this idea from John Cheever, it had a special resonance for me in the particular way I've described above. He says, "The sense is that 'this is my usefulness, and I can do it all the way through.' It always leaves you feeling great. In short, you've made sense of your life" (Cheever 65). Cheever's sense-making applies to a small subset of enormous universe; I assume he's not arguing against Camus, but it's a very encouraging proposition to a writer.

And so if there is any backdrop of meaning, in the foreground – the particular here and now of the story telling – there's a lot of, as John Gardner says, jazzing around (Gardner 93). For me – something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue – this old marriage incantation occurred to me sometime in the process of writing the story "Reeling" a couple of years ago. This isn't a rule or a formula; it's something to play with, and a reminder to do that thing of "mixing it up," something that Steven and Frederick Barthelme constantly urge their writers to do, and which Frederick says in several different ways in his primer. In my game-system, "old" is likely that insistent voice or image in my head, or it could be an old idea that I'm finally excavating; the new might be some new, unconnected thing that somehow emerges and attaches, or maybe one or more unrelated jottings on index cards I've slipped into my file along the way. Something borrowed seems best if it's really a thing someone else has suggested to me,

like the skink in “*Inexpectatus*,” or the title of “Shanghai’d,” although it could be something that I’ve lifted from the news, from *Car Talk*, or a conversation I’ve overheard. Something blue might be literally that, as the aqua of the Sea-Dip Motel in “Reeling,” or the neon-blue tail of the skink – or it could be red or yellow – anything noticeable, vibrant, or strange. Or it could be a blue attitude. Again, it’s simply a game – any of it could be anything, and I get to make up the rules or change them if I like. Jazzing around is good; as Frederick Barthelme puts it: “leaven the piece with some merchandise... odd, intriguing, curious, baffling, quirky” (228).

And in my work, I continue to question. Without, as Camus says, concluding.

The first piece in this collection, “The Mean Time,” presents a character in despair of lost love. It seems she’s fully invested in despair – pounding her head against the incomprehensible (absurd!) predicament she finds herself in. The possibility of another outcome presents itself through the random intervention of the New York city cab driver. He does, in fact, offer hope – in the form of much better sense than she has. He offers her a chance to snap out of it: sure, it’s awfully unfair and it makes no sense, so? Move on. But in this version of the story, she can’t hear him; at the end she’s still raging against the absurd machine.

This story began in fragments; it was a different method of composition than I’d used for any of my previous work. There wasn’t any idea – I didn’t know it was going to be a story at all. Wandering around New York, I was jotting down bits – all interior monologue sort of stuff – in a couple of small notebooks, and sometimes on bits of paper – as they occurred to me. It was all in short bursts, there was no scene, no character, no

action. I was reading Mary Robison's novel *Why Did I Ever* just then. Her novel was a revelation to me of a different kind of product, one that might perhaps fit more comfortably with the way my brain was working. The example was very liberating, and I continued to make the notes, with no sense of a story at the time. Several months later, I took up these pieces, my something old, and began to put them together. I added the cab driver (something new) and fashioned a narrator around the scraps I'd written.

It occurred to me then that perhaps a sense of obligation to linearity may have been causing a strain for me. (I thought of my childhood self being very strictly concerned with the correct way to eat corn from the cob – straight along, row after row, was considered the proper method. It came out like a line of printed type, in fact. One could otherwise eat *around* the cob, emphasizing its cylindrical nature, and still adhere to an organized pattern. The hodgepodge approach was perverse as well as unsightly.) Constructing this story in a hodgepodge fashion was exciting and less burdensome. Needless to say, there are pitfalls in such an approach: one runs the risk of losing coherence, disruptions in the flow are often a problem for the reader. What was originally a twenty-page story is now ten. Under the guidance of both Frederick and Steven Barthelme over successive drafts, as well as feedback from my peers, I have arranged the story into a more coherent one, and pared away much inessential material.

The kernel of "Reeling" was excavated from a few pages that I'd written several years earlier (originally imagined as a detective story) – an idea quickly disposed of once I began to write it. The precipitating event of the story was, however, inspired by an anecdote in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. Sam Spade relates his tale of a guy named Flitcraft who missed, by fractions of an inch, being smashed by a construction

beam falling from a height of eight stories, and consequently decides to walk out of his old life into a new one (62-4). This is what Sharon does in “Reeling” when she’s mugged in New York and suddenly steps onto a bus for Myrtle Beach. Spade’s point in the Flitcraft incident is that the guy changed his life at random because of a random event, but that “he settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of” without even realizing it.

Sharon’s event is really incidental to the story as a whole, and she does the opposite of settling into the same groove – she goes way out of her groove and then has to find a new one. This is what ended up happening in the story I wrote – not what I set out to write. One of Sam Spade’s methods for solving a case relates back to the Flitcraft syndrome, however, and intrigued me: “My way of learning is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkey wrench into the machinery” (86). A good tactic for fiction writing as well as detective work, it could be straight out of the “Thirty-Nine Steps,” (#1, #2, and maybe #9: Grace Slick, although I’m not sure about that one). My wrench, ultimately buried in the course of the story, is what set events into motion for the character Sharon. The process of writing was not fragmented the way it had been in “Mean Time,” but I did end up creating a story that was non-linear, with a great deal of disjunction in time. My original drafts needed much grooming, and I ended up imposing more linear order in the later drafts.

“Heart of the Heart of the Heart” is the earliest written piece in this group, part of a novel. The driving force here is about questions and search for order – a child trying to make sense of the confusing and painful domestic life of her family. The character is caught, really, in a sort of pre-hope or despair state– she’s in a limbo of denial and

inability to understand. When she does erupt into a series of questions at the end of the story, the ones that she asks are removed from the reality of her family situation. The other idea in the story, perhaps my “something new,” comes from my long standing fascination with Johannes Kepler – I envisioned casting the father as a sort of modern day version of the man: needless to say, it all goes wrong in the story that got written, that conception of the father. The story here is heavily cut, condensed and revised from my novel. The original 40-page version drew criticism from my teachers and in workshop for its tendencies of sentimentality toward the character and an insufficient attention to event. I worked hard to resolve these, especially in this particular story, the former. However, these tendencies represent recurring challenges in my work.

The original version of “Shanghai’d” was a relapse into both these problems. The story centered on a doddering old guy poking around the yard; nothing happened, and I’d treated the character with a great deal of sentimentality. The rewrite was frenzied – I was determined to undo the problems of the previous story in an extreme way. It was an experiment – in a way, of erring in the opposite direction. I attempted a quasi-meta-fictional, stylized piece unlike anything I’d written previously, and pushed the boundaries of what I might be able to get away with. In a sense, I decide to go for broke with *the absurd*, to really jazz around as Gardner days. The present version has little to do with the original, except for the external features of the characters and the setting: the action of the characters and tone are completely different. It was much better received by the workshop. I still don’t know what it means, this story, and I’m not sure that I like it – but it was a very good writing experience – less worried and more fun than usual.

The skink in “*Inexpectatus*” was a gift from my teacher, Steven Barthelme. The nascent version of the story was a non-fiction piece, a rant about being ranted at by my cousin. Steven told me to make the other character into a boyfriend, and gave me the skink, blue tail and all. This generous advice on his part is a humbling reminder of the importance of the strange and unexpected detail, more importantly, something that can be used to lift the pressure off the central situation, which involves a couple locked in opposition on their views of daily life, and hence, their relationship. Margaret remains in stubborn refusal – she doesn’t see the reason in David’s point of view: while he is, in essence, pleading *why why why*: why won’t you follow the natural order? With the addition of the skink and other details such as the pocketbook, steps #1, #2, #4, #9, and #24 are hopefully in play here.¹ (Steps 228, 28, 31).

The last piece, “Do You Know How to Pony,” is non-fiction. The impetus for this essay is an exploration of my relationship with a young a friend who has been struggling with heroin addiction for ten years. The essay deals much more directly with the tension between hope and despair than any of my other work – both for me as observer and writer, as well as (I have concluded) for my subject, Evan. The issue of meaning versus meaninglessness in life seems to be a crucial problem for him. Grappling with the questions that have arisen during the writing, I have been impelled back to the problems and conclusions set out by Camus: I’ve found myself more than once grasping at the straw of the notion that a good reading of “The Myth” might just solve Evan’s dilemma. I added to this the motif of a Patti Smith song, “Land,” which may or may not refer to heroin use. It turned out to be, as I say in the essay, a very uncomfortable and

¹ 1: “Mean Less;” 2: “Don’t let it make too much sense;” 4: “Leaven the piece;” 9: “Grace Slick;” 24: “Doing odd stuff is good.”

strange thing to be writing; the situation continues into my present, and there is clearly no resolution. I have written and written, and pared and pared: the twenty pages here are culled from sixty. So far, I've been able to fend off despair, for the most part.

Because, you know, I found the cat.

You can't drown a puppy who grins in the face of death... Or why did he keep her?
Answer me that. She made his life a burden to him. Put all the neighbors against him.
Chased their hens. Worried their sheep. A dozen times he was on the point of killing
her... he took her out into the yard, stood her against the wall, and was about to pull the
trigger. And again — she grinned; grinned right into the face of death, and he hadn't the
heart to do it... So by the skin of her teeth, Gipsie was saved again.... It is difficult for a
man to say why he fell in love with a woman, but it is still more difficult to say why he
fell in love with a mongrel terrier.”

“Gipsy, the Mongrel,” Virginia Woolf

THE MEAN TIME

You lurch at the top of the subway stairs – the flood passing on the sidewalk before you is teeming and gyrating. People getting ready to have, having just had. Sex, sex, sex. Practically right in front of your eyes. With someone, anyone, everyone – other than their one and only. *Sex*, the word, is unraveling. Turn your face away, don't try to catch it. Get off the avenue onto the safe, cool side street, and slow down. The Park is within spitting distance, you're nearly there.

What day is today?

The day after yesterday.

Yes, just as you thought. Exhausted, you keep hallucinating things out in the margins – like another life, the one you had only the day before. It's all confusion. If you could think, if you could form one clear thought, that old life might finally let you go.

Breathe and just keep moving. One foot, the other foot. But you're losing track already, and your knees are threatening to drop you. In fact, one half of your body is pulling you down, while the other is winding you up – your breath and heart are beginning to speed and you feel something pushing up from your chest through your throat...

Sunglasses, moron. Simple. You claw through your bag, scattering pencils and wads of tissue onto the sidewalk. You never had this problem remembering, say, an

umbrella. Even in New York, people sometimes stare. Well, shit, pull your hair in front, duck your head. For god's sake. Do something!

Put your arm up, hail a cab. A trip to the Park just isn't in the cards today; you're not ready to be out of the house. Maybe tomorrow – for now just admit it, and get home. But everyone else is doing it too, all of a sudden, and a blonde model type with half a dozen Henri Bender shopping bags bumping around her is screaming at an Upper East Side matron, holding a small bouquet of flowers. The model must be heading home for a hot date – it's Saturday afternoon. Lots of horns. A good time to rearrange your face, in fact. But here is a taxi, stopping for you. Dive into it, pull the door fast behind.

Before the end of the block, the driver informs you that he does not want to go to Chelsea. “Need to stay on the East Side, lady. I thought you were staying on the East Side,” he lilts at you, dreadlocks swinging.

“Why would you think that? What would give you that idea? Do I look like I'm *straying* on the East Side?” Your new-found trouble with words gives you something like hiccoughs. Staying, no 'r.' “Staying, I mean, staying, staying!”

“It doesn't matter, lady. I let you get another taxi. My shift ends in five minutes. I only pick you up as a favor.” He watches his rearview mirror to see if he can get over.

“You can't *do* that.” Patchouli–and–something wafts from the front, nice maybe, if you had the time to notice. You slap the vinyl seat. “What kind of favor is it if you make me get out?”

“I was just about to put the on-duty off when I pick you up.” He has a nice musical voice. Under other circumstances, that is – he seems to be a regular asshole.

“But you hadn't. It was on. You're *on duty*. You have to take me.” He flicks his

blinker on, urging the cab to the left. “You can’t make me get out.” Your voice is rising.

Hysteria is a rude word, rude. Made up by... twenty guesses. Not a woman.

“Lady, calm down.”

“It’s a law. You are required to, anywhere I need to go. Five boroughs, mister.”

You lay your hands on the back of the front seat.

“Look, I don’t charge you. See?” A graceful brown finger punches the meter off.

Your fingernails are digging into the filthy blue vinyl of the seat back. You can feel the cords standing out on your neck. You are, actually, screaming at him.

“You can’t reject me. I’ve missed all the other opportunities.”

“Do not yell at me,” the driver booms at you. “I get you another cab.” He looks around, annoyed now, at a sea of crawling automobiles, raises his hand to signal another driver.

You don’t watch, but push away from the seat you are clutching, thump against the one behind you. “There are no other cabs, can’t you see?” You fling your hand at the mass of cars, smash your knuckles against the window. “Why do you think those women were fighting in the street?” Your voice sounds shrill.

You sag into the seat, defeated, and after several minutes notice that the cab is moving faster and you’re still in it. Don’t question a good thing, you tell yourself, but you don’t like the thought of getting ejected at any moment. *Rejected*, you said. To the cab driver, a moment ago.

“Don’t confuse anxiety with love,” your sister told you last night.

“What? *What?* Who told you that?” you croaked back into the phone.

“Post-traumatic stress syndrome, it’s called,” she replied casually, as if everyone knew this from birth. “Forget him. This isn’t about him, it’s about you. Move on.”

“This kind of information could have saved me a lot of time, like a decade.” Why does your *sister* know this shit while you remain stupid as a cow?

“Just because you threw up on your sneakers doesn’t necessarily mean you love him. Anxiety, love. Not the same.” You listened to her taking a long drag over the phone. “Think about it.”

The way your body caves, and keeps on caving. On, on. Past possibility, so that you are turned inside out. As you collapse you fall, immediately, to sleep.

Your dreams have been disturbed lately, like this one. You live in a dingy tenement behind a many-times-locked door. Mostly on the floor, often under the bed. You carefully observe the habits of dust mice, but are too tired to record your findings. You try to wonder if you will be fired for this negligence, but you forget what you were thinking. Everything is grey. Such an easy color. Someone brings groceries, dumps them on the other side, leaves a trail of echoing footsteps. No human contact. Your ears ring, a gracious effort to give you something to listen to, once the footsteps are gone.

You are fascinated by the mirror in the bathroom, visiting it over and over again. When you look into it, no one is there.

You’re jolted awake. Woozily, you work out your coordinates: speeding taxi, pothole, Forty-ninth and Lex, schizo cab driver. You lift your head ever so slightly, like an invalid. “You’re not making me get out?”

“No, lady. No cabs available. I am taking you.”

You whisper, “Thanks.” Now you’ve got a good twenty-minute ride ahead of you, so you can rest, and forget about everything. Everything, alas, has not forgotten about you – as you slip further down into the seat, you can’t hold onto it any longer, and you pull your hair across your face like a curtain.

“Is the radio bothering you?” the driver asks, raising his voice and lowering the volume.

“No, no, it’s great, turn it back up. Please.” Why, why, why?

He says: “I think the radio must be bothering you.”

“No. I’m just resting.” The cab hits a sharp bump and you bounce.

“You are sitting back there with your hair all covering your face, and you are *crying*.” His melodious voice rises in pitch.

“It’s just because I’m tired.” You shuffle your hands on the seat to each side of you, much like treading water.

“You are crying because you are tired? You are *crying* because you are *tired*?” He’s incredulous, he is shrill. Wacko.

“Yes, I’m very, very tired. I just need to nest. Need to *rest*. Rest, rest! Please, can’t I just rest?”

“No, you are not crying because you are tired. You are lying. Do not tell me you are crying because you are tired. You are crying because of a man.”

Now you’re feeling dizzy. The cab is going too fast for you to jump out. You rip your attention from the beads swaying below the rearview mirror, and fix it on the wheels of the cab to your right. Grieving, healing, *ta da*. Don’t confuse anxiety with love. Say

it to yourself six million times a day. The spinning wheels are making you sick.

You turn and draw your hair away from your eyes, just enough to peek out at the maniac driver. “What makes you say that?” you ask against your will.

“Because I know.”

This cab, why, this cab? You flash past Bergdorf’s, back on Fifth again. People are waving frantically for cabs. You have one, but it is this one.

“What did this man do to you?” your tormentor continues.

Your breath hitches, your stomach rolls. This guy knows things.

“Come on lady, I haven’t got all day. Do you? How much time have you got to waste?”

Years, apparently. How many ten year segments of your life are disposable like this, you wonder. You comb the rest of your hair out of your eyes, and sit up.

“He lied.”

Lies, a whole category of word.

Mary Alice Black! Lynette Genet! Alexandra Booms-whatever! Only yesterday, you were standing in the apartment screaming these names at him. It was the one time you raised your voice to him during the ordeal. You weren’t doing anything so gauche as asking, you were merely observing responses. But a blank doesn’t say much one way or the other, does it?

“Lying. Bad business, I agree, but not so great a tragedy in itself. I think it must be another woman.”

“Several.” You catch his eye in the rearview mirror. “No – everything was fine. Fine!” You are arguing with your sister here as well, glaring back at your driver. “You were fine? You were fine?” she had said to you. Does everybody think you are hard of hearing? Hard of noticing is what you are. Hard of... living, being. Coupling.

“We were in the midst of planning a vacation to Cape Cod with some friends. To check on the dates, his schedule, I opened up his computer. Found this string of e-mails with Nissan, his old college girlfriend.”

The sensation is so close to the surface, returns to you so easily. As yesterday, your heart starts to hammer and trip.

“I knew something was wrong, and wishing so hard that it was just me – *my* misunderstanding – that soon I’d be laughing about it and telling him the big joke, confess my silly snooping.”

The driver nods.

You couldn’t find anything specific that spelled it out, and you kept aborting the attempt. You knew he could be on his way home from work right then. You’d closed his folders and windows, shut his laptop, before you’d been able to find out anything for sure. You were terrified that he’d walk in and you’d be the one caught.

You tried his cell, no answer. You reopened the laptop, windows, folders, started the search again. Over and over – at least five times, palms sweating more with each new foray. You couldn’t catch a whole breath, and your hands were shaking so you could hardly work the keys. You called his cell phone eleven times in all, he said – you’d just showed him how to use caller ID and he’d counted. There had been a horrible thrill about it. A sick fascination – like fearing your whole life that you are going to die of

cancer, then finally finding out you have it.

“I had to run through a couple dozen e-mails to piece it together. Affairs he’d been having, he was confiding to her. She was doing the same with him. God, wallowing in it – flirting, gloating – and easing each other’s guilt, of course.” The cab driver’s eyes watch you in the mirror. You wonder how he can see you there, since you can’t see yourself. A clear thought? Nev– just shake it off, go on. “On top of it all, he was trying to figure out how to tell me it was over, *we are over*. He was calling her his ‘*break-up counselor*’, talking to some stranger about me.”

Only for the past three years, not the whole ten. Only the past three. Shit – that is, if you believe him. Why? He has been established, proven, to be a liar, and the cheapest sort of cheat. But then, again, you do, because, *ma cheri*, you have been established, just as clearly, as a fool.

“So you kicked him out, and now you miss him?” The driver shrugs his shoulders.

You feel so – like a worm. You picture doing it over again, this time with a thirty-eight special pointed directly at the center of his brain, the obvious source of the problem, no matter what they say about that other head down there. Saying “I know! You have been fucking other women! Can you imagine how *disappointed* I am?” You revel in the understatement, knowing he knows you’re a crack shot, and the sudden smell of shit in the room comes unexpected, but gratifying. “Gaze deeply into the barrel of my Smith and Wesson,” you might have said, in an hypnotic voice.

One clear thought.

Why couldn't you have done it this way to begin with? Here is the story you wish you could tell this crazy African driver.

"No. I forgave him," you say. Such shame – such a lack of dignity. The point, exactly, in forgiving someone who couldn't care less? "But yes, he is gone. Despite that."

"And still you love this man?" Now he is very patient, his eyes are almost kind.

"Yes." *Anxiety? Love?*

"You want him even though he doesn't love you, and lied to you, and treated you with so much disrespect?" This driver sounds as if he's teaching the ABC's.

"That's the thing. I know he really does love me. He's just confused. I can see that he's very, very confused." Instead of at the driver, you look down at your damp palms, waiting for them to speak on your behalf.

"You are a beautiful woman. You could have a thousand men in this city who would love you well, treat you like a lady as you deserve. Why do you pick this one who doesn't?"

"He—"

"He does not love you, I am telling you." Intense black eyes glare through the rearview mirror.

"He makes me laugh." So here you start crying – huge sobs, ugly. You hate yourself viciously and absolutely.

"Why do you swim against the river?" The driver passes a box of Kleenex back, and rests it in the window, waiting for you to take it. "Lady, I tell you, walk away from

this man. Tomorrow there will be five guys knocking at your door, every one of them better than him.” As you are honking into the third tissue, he says, “Okay, okay. Please stop crying. You want him? You want this man? This man only?” He watches until you nod. “Okay, in that case. I tell you what to do. You get his tears, or when he blows his nose – this is better – on a handkerchief. You bring this to me. Next week I am going home, to Africa, and if you are so sure you want this man, I will fix it for you.”

Africa, then. Not the Caribbean. You stare at your own soaked tissue, fold it over. “Is that voodoo?”

He shrugs. “It is what I do. You can call it however you like. In Africa, it will be especially powerful. But I tell you lady, you should think about it.” He pulls to a stop, shifts into park, scribbles something on the back of a meter receipt. He passes it back to you. As you take it, he clutches your wrist. “Think about it as seriously as you have ever thought about anything in your life. You do that, understand, before you call me.”

You free your hand to fumble in your shoulder bag. “How much?” Your voice has nearly evaporated.

“I turned off the meter, I tell you. You owe me nothing.” He raises an open hand.

You step out, and the door closes, shutting you on the other side. Apartment buildings all around: four stories, window units dripping and humming. The taxi pulls slowly away from the curb, glides through the light as it changes to red. The paper in your hand bears a penciled scrawl, *Olaudah*, and a number in New Jersey. Beyond the scrap is the black-gum-spotted cement of the sidewalk. New Jersey, Africa, voodoo. When you lift your head, the avenue running south is empty, the cab is nowhere in sight.

You are startled to find yourself back on your own corner, but your feet turn duly west, trained to home. The meter receipt stretches between your thumbs; you study it as you walk.

How does one collect tears from the unrepentant?

Almost back to your building, and some idiot on the sidewalk nearly runs into you. You raise your eyes and snap “Excus—”

But it’s the voodoo guy. He’s much taller than you could have guessed. You see his taxi idling double-parked on the street. He looms, you shrink.

“How did you—” You’re wondering if he’s going to make you sign in blood right now.

“I saw you turn onto this block, it wasn’t hard.” His fingertips trace a river in the air. “I have something else to tell you.” Olaudah folds his hands and waits, as if for your permission.

“Yes?”

“I will do this thing for you, as I have said, but – to save you some time, maybe another ten years – I will tell you this.” His index finger aims toward the sky. More ABC’s. “This man who has no tears for the pain he has caused is like a stone which weighs nothing.”

Now, you get Zen koans? Messages from heaven?

“You can bind him to you, yes, but no one can ever give him a capacity for feeling he does not already have.” He watches intently to see if you are getting it, absorbing the lesson, and now he leans in. “More important, you can take back the power he has, because you are the one who has given it to him, in the first place.”

You summon the last shreds of your voice to answer, waving your own arms to stop the onslaught, shouting with a broken voice, “You’re right! You’re right! *So* what?”

Olaudah’s shrug ripples through you. He won’t look at your cracked face, but turns away, crossing the sidewalk, back to his cab.

THE SPACE BETWEEN

I don't know where Daddy is. Wednesday night after dinner, he picked his keys up off of the washstand. The certain kind of jangling they make, it still jangles now in my mind. "I'm going to run to the store," he said. Now I hear the sound of the front door closing, the car door closing, tires on gravel as he backed out. It's Saturday afternoon now, and the weekend is almost over.

We went to bed, got up. I went to school. Went to bed, got up, school. I guess Mama did her usual around the house things, and I don't know what Lucy did. I kind of think Mama kept her home from kindergarten, even though she wasn't sick. I could tell we were all waiting. Every time the phone rang me and Mama jumped. One time she stabbed the needle right into her finger. She talked to her friend Betty on the phone a lot, but she always closed the door, so I couldn't hear. I saw that there was a big hole right in the middle of our house, trying to pull us in, sort of like the undertow. Every second you were on the verge of falling, and the rule was that if you talked about it or maybe even *thought* – you'd go right over the edge. Nobody said anything.

All afternoon, night was falling at the speed of a snail. Friday after school – Lucy and I watched *Dark Shadows*. Barnabus the vampire is her favorite, no matter how scary he is. She fell asleep on the floor after it was over. I got up and put a pillow under her head, switched off the TV before the news, then went to sit on the sofa. Nothing to do. As

headlights began to pass up and down the hill, it seemed that time was moving slower and slower, 'til it almost wasn't moving at all. I listened to the *shush* of the tires on the wet pavement, and watched amber lights begin to fill the windows in houses across the way. I watched another car come up the hill, slow. Smoke rose out of the tailpipe, up into the air through the cold rain. The car passed our driveway, reached the top, turned the corner. It was Mr. Wheeler, my friend Eleanor's daddy. He was going home, right home in his green station wagon.

Later Mama told us we were going out for pizza, as a special treat. Lucy had just wobbled into the kitchen, and scowled at me. "I was sleeping on the floor!" Like it was my fault or something. Her hair was sticking out all over. But her eyes were big and black as ever.

She looked Mama right in the face and said, "Where's Daddy?"

The little air that was left in our house just went whoosh – right out, into the cold dark around us. I listened to the clock on the stove *tick tick tick* – before our breath came back. Mama took Lucy's hands, and pulled her own face into a point. Something like a smile, but not. "I don't know, sugar, I don't know," and jiggled Lucy's hands. Lucy just stared. Mama looked up at the ceiling, and breathed a long breath all the way to standing; she smoothed her slacks and sweater, "Oh, I'm all rumped – would you look at this," before she saw me leaning in the doorway to the living room.

Another breath.

"Lucy, run wash your hands." When she was gone Mama took my wrist, pulling me into her. "I love you, sugar, you know that, don't you? I love you girls with all my heart." Now her breath was warm and moist as she whispered into my ear – she was

warm all around me. But so quick she was up again, blowing all her air out, reaching for the phone. I figured she must have used up about all the air she had, so I didn't say a word.

• • •

When I came into the living room this morning, Lucy was already up, eating a cold Pop-Tart and watching *Top Cat*. It's my favorite cartoon, and I was annoyed that I'd missed the beginning. I climbed onto the sofa with her. After a while, I noticed that it wasn't the same. Not just *Top Cat*, but the next one, too. I tried to figure out how the cartoons could be so different than usual, when nothing really seemed different about them at all. I watched Lucy for a while, to see if she noticed anything, but she just squealed, and yelled at the Tasmanian Devil. Mama got up and made cinnamon toast, quiet in the kitchen. Everything has seemed so different since Wednesday night – like it is tilted and we are walking on a slant. I don't know what it is – it is a thing with no name.

I decided to quit watching, and called up Eleanor to see if I could go down to her house and play, but there was no answer. Mama said they were probably off to spend the day with her grandmother, and maybe she'd be back tomorrow. She asked about my homework, and I told her I didn't have much to do. That wasn't true. But I didn't want to stay inside: our house was squeezing my brains. I wanted to go out in the woods and work on my fort, and she said fine, but that I had to take Lucy, and not to get ourselves wet. I didn't want to take her, but when Mama says to, that is that.

The Olsen boys down the street have a really great tree house made out of logs, and I want to make something like that. Well, I think Mr. Olsen really built it mostly, even though the boys say they did. I had already collected six logs before, and I was trying to figure out how to get started. I knew I couldn't make it up in a tree all by myself, but if I made it like a log cabin on the ground, like Lincoln Logs, I wouldn't even need to hammer it.

It wasn't raining today, but it was very grey. I still loved being out in the woods, anyway. The sound of the leaves under your feet, twigs and acorns snapping as you walk. And the smell of the woods – rich and earthy. Mama says it is fertile soil: she grew up in the country, so she knows. Daddy grew up in the city, and he says it is the smell of decay, biologically speaking. Anyway, I like the way it smells and I always imagine being an Indian and hunting through the trails before there were any settlers and houses.

There are a few stray leaves still clinging to the branches of the trees. When the wind blows, every now and then one or two more will fall. It reminds me of a poem Mrs. Parker read us last year. *Margaret are you grieving, over Goldengrove unleaving...* Daddy said it sounded like a pretty damn dreary poem for children, but I love it. Mrs. Parker called it wistful, and it seems exactly like the way fall really is. I do feel sad when the leaves turn brown and start to drop. Something is so different about the world then, and again when the snow comes, until the buds start shooting out again, the birds come back, and everything springs back to life. I'd like to go see that Goldengrove one day, before the leaves come off.

Lucy turned out to be a pretty big help after all, I hate to admit. I used a branch to scrape out the spot I'd picked, while Lucy went on the lookout for logs like the ones I'd

showed her. She found two more right off the bat. Once I had the spot ready, it was much easier to get them into position with someone else there to carry the other end. Lucy is little but she's really strong. We'd finished three levels on all sides when Mama came out of the house. She was very impressed with how far we'd gotten, and Lucy was really pleased with herself.

"I think that's about it for today, though," Mama said. I looked out of the woods, back at our little house. It made me wonder what Mama had been doing there, all afternoon, alone.

"Just one more row, Mama?" I asked.

"Sadie, it's too damp out here to be staying so late into the afternoon. You all have been out here more than long enough for today." She didn't even have her coat on, and she stood with her arms crossed tight over her chest. Lucy was already skipping straight towards the house, not even using the pathway at all. "Come on, sugar, tomorrow's another day. How about taking a crack at that homework now, before dinner?" she said as we walked.

• • •

It's Saturday afternoon now, and the weekend is almost over. Here in my room, I look out the window towards the woods, wishing I were still out there, building my fort. From inside looking out, the trees look so dead standing against the grey sky. I put my hands on the glass; press my face against the cold. It's so strange, the day seems like a painted picture from here. From inside, you'd never imagine that there would be the rustle of leaves, the calling of a bird, a chilly breeze.

I don't know where Daddy is, and Mama doesn't know either.

I pull my books out of the satchel and plop them onto my desk. There's a tear in the brown cover of my arithmetic book. I head into the kitchen for the tape. Mama is standing at the stove, stirring gravy in the skillet. One leg straight, one leg bent, her head tilted at an angle. Stirring, staring, round and round. I've always loved how Mama stands like that, but it looks sad to me this evening.

"Mama?"

She starts, and the gravy spatters. "Goodness, Sadie. Sorry. I didn't know you were standing there. Oh, I hadn't realized it had gotten so dark. Would you please switch the light on while you're here?"

"Lucy's sitting too close to the TV," I say as I flip the switch. I don't know why I say things like this; it's just going to make Lucy mad at me. The kitchen light looks dim and ugly in the afternoon gloom.

Mama leans her head back and looks. "Lucy, back up, please, sugar. Do you need something, Sadie?" She keeps stirring – that's the key to good gravy.

"Oh, just the Scotch tape, my book is torn," I say. Mama hands it to me from the bookcase by the stove, and I go out.

Sitting at my desk, I straighten out the tear, unfold the wrinkled edges, and smooth it with my thumb. I carefully line up the tape over it, and then press it down. I smooth, and smooth, and smooth. When there is no more possibility of smoothing, I open the book, smell the aroma of school rise out of the pages. Finally I pick up my pencil and go through ten problems, writing the answers carefully in my workbook. So what, I think, and look back out the window. I close the Arithmetic book, open Geography, and look

out the window again. Painted picture. I flatten my palm against the pane, feeling its coldness, spread my fingers, and wish I could travel through it to the other side, like osmosis.

I am reading about the layers of the earth's crust when I hear the slow crawl of tires over gravel from the front of the house. This time I don't run out to see that it is Daddy, as I did the other night. That time it was only Betty. Now my body does the opposite: I tighten, tense and stick in my chair. This time I am wishing that it was Betty instead, but I know it isn't. It makes no sense, I don't understand why. I bend my head, sit with my hands knotted on either side of my book, stare at it. The car door closes – slap. Muffled footsteps cross gravel – can they go any slower? I am supposed to be happy that Daddy is home.

The footsteps pass by the front door, continue on around the house. I try to read Geography again, but the layers of the earth start swimming around the page. I look back at the window beside me, stare at my palm print in the middle of the pane. Ages later, I hear the kitchen door quiver open, and the screen door slam shut. Kitchen door close – slow, tight.

Then Daddy's voice, a slow drawl: "What's eating you?" As if I were right there watching, I see Mama's back, while she stirs, stirs. And nothing else.

Only... a loud, slow ticking in my brain, and a voice I don't know saying: "Who are we? *Who are we?*"

. . .

Daddy is back, and we are having dinner. Broccoli, creamed corn, country steak with gravy. I lift a forkful into my mouth. Chew, chew, *chew*. Swallow, swallow. Please go down, please. I don't know what it is that I am chewing. The fork is heavy in my hand; I have to rest between bites. Now, instead of a hole in the house, it is too crowded. Daddy takes up way too much room, he can hardly fit behind his TV tray. The rest of us seem to be shrinking, to balance things out. I flick my eyes up at Mama, and I see that I'm not imagining it – she is smaller in her chair. No one talks. I stare at my plate, at the TV. It's the *Wild Kingdom*, showing lions in Africa. It makes no sense, though – I can't follow it. We sit, the four of us, behind our TV trays, in front of the TV. Staring.

“Lucy, don't pick at your food.” Mama's soft voice rings out into the room.

“I'm not, Mama, it's no good,” Lucy says. Her lower lip turns inside out as she stares at her plate.

“Bring it here, let me see,” Mama says. She picks through Lucy's food with her knife, then covers her mouth with her hand, drops the knife onto her tray, and hurries into the kitchen with Lucy's plate. I hear scraping.

“What is it, Mama?” My voice sounds like I am talking into a tin can as I call out. The plate rattles onto the counter. I look at Lucy, and her huge black eyes glaring at Daddy. I remember what she asked Mama, and I become very afraid. Mama comes back, and I think it is just in time.

“Bad piece of meat. I believe it was just the one. Oh, Lucy, sugar, I am sorry.” She brings Lucy back a whole new plate, pats her hair, kisses her bangs. “You were right not to eat it. I am so sorry.” She comes over to look at my food next. I stare at it,

wondering what could be wrong. I didn't taste any of it at all. "It's all right," she says to me and turns towards Daddy's tray.

"It's *fine*, Helen. Do you think I'd be eating it if it weren't?" He speaks in a slow drawl, or I am hearing it from under water. "Don't get yourself into hysterics." What is wrong with Daddy's voice? I look at him for the first time, really. His face is puffy, his skin looks grey, and his hair is stuck together in greasy clumps.

Mama sits back in her rocker. She keeps looking at Lucy, more worried than ever. I go back to chewing. When I think I've gotten enough off of my plate, I ask to be excused, carry my plate into the kitchen. One foot, the other foot. Scrape the plate, put it in the sink. *Clatter, rattle*. I feel like I am running away from home, that I will be caught at any minute and dragged back, as I go straight into my room, and close my door as quiet as I can. I pull my chair over to the closet and reach up onto the shelf, grab Samson's toe, and tug. He falls on me, a soft furry golden bear. His eyes look very sad. I push the chair away, and we climb in. I feel guilty that I have forgotten him for so long, but he is brave and kind as we sit and rock until I fall asleep.

. . .

Sunday. There is no air in this house. We are all present and accounted for, but without air, we are floating, we are thin. We pass each other like slips of paper, insubstantial, wavering, translucent. Or like rocks falling into the murky depths of the lake: falling, past algae and other strange forms suspended in the gloom. Only enough

light filters through to show you how dreadful it is. The rocks sink, never moving faster or slower, never hitting bottom.

I wonder if we are all dead here, with no air.

For once, I am grateful when it is finally bedtime.

• • •

I am lying in bed, straight out on my back. Sunday night. Something woke me up. I turn my head and look at Lucy. For the third night in a row, she is sleeping with me. She is breathing quietly. I don't know where Daddy is. Oh, yes I do. He's here, he's back. Since yesterday. But it is nothing like when he is on a trip and comes home, when everybody is happy. Nothing like that. I stare out into the darkness for a while, then close my eyes again. Then I hear it. My eyes spring open again. That was the sound. I listen hard. Or not – I was awake before that. Now the sound of a chair scraping and stuttering across the linoleum floor. Muffled. There must be doors and doors and doors between those sounds and me. My ears start to ring, straining through the silence. Now a low murmuring, Mama, but no words. The sound rises on a wave before hitting a high note and breaking, then dying out into fizzling foam, dissolved.

“God dammit!” Daddy's voice strikes sharply, rattling the thin walls. I hear a crack – something thrown, maybe broken. I do not know what it was; I do not recognize the sound. Again the scraping and stuttering.

“Do you want me to twist it out of its socket and throw it into the next room?” I do not know what that means. I do not know what that means. I do not.

Then my ears take over. Pounding, thumping: my eardrums in a war cry. I turn my head slowly toward Lucy once more, praying that she is still asleep. Instead, I see two large eyes, glittering at me in the darkness. Now I know why she is in my bed. I turn my head back to the ceiling, and dread washes over me. *Have I heard this before?*

And I lie, like a bug, pinned to the mattress, and panicking; overwhelmed by the rising crescendo in my own ears. I hear the kitchen door bang shut, the sharp slam of the screen-door, and everything moves beyond silence again.

And then it is Monday morning, and we all drift apart into the day.

. . .

Our voices rise to the ceiling, reach out to the walls. *All things shall perish from under the sky. Music alone shall live, music alone shall live. Music alone shall live, never to die.* The sounds overlap, follow in a circle: our musical round goes round and round. Goes on forever, will go on forever. It's Glee Club, all the fifth and sixth grades are in the auditorium. The voices rise curling, spiraling out past the bricks, up through the roof. Even in the chilly winter, up, up, into the sky. The music is bigger than everything, it travels everywhere. It makes me think of the stars, and how Daddy was trying to figure out their music. Harmony of the spheres, he called it. We never go to the field any more, only one time since his telescope got fixed. Now I think lot of things have changed since his telescope got broken that summer when we went to the beach without Mama. I could ask him to go once it gets warmer again. Maybe it would be a really good idea if we went

back to the field. He was always happy when we were there. But I have to pay attention now; it is easy to get off track in a round, and that ruins it.

Mrs. Giles has put her hand out to finish group one, and they fall silent. Now she looks at us, puts her hand up, nods. I sit with my hands folded in my lap, listening to group three sing by themselves. The music diminishes. *Never to die*. They sing alone, small and sweet, and the song is over as Mrs. Giles trails her loop in the air.

“Thank you, children. That was marvelous,” she says. “I’ll see you next week.” The song has evaporated into the air, replaced by the busy noise of chairs scraping, and kids chattering. Mrs. Giles stacks her music and turns to Mrs. Humphrey, our accompanist, who stands up behind the piano. Some kids call her Mrs. Humpty behind her back, because she has large bosoms and slumping shoulders. I know it isn’t nice, but it makes us laugh, and it’s like a secret we all have together. John Henson made it up. It makes people like you when you can make up funny things.

The chilly air rushes through us as the first boys ahead push open the double doors. Soon, we’re flowing in a river of kids along the walkway, heading back to our building. The sky is a deep, cold blue, and the thinnest white clouds skim along in it. I remember our song as I look up, and imagine it drifting higher and further out into the atmosphere around us as we walk like ants on the earth below.

The air stings my cheeks, makes my bare knees cold. I clutch my music tightly to my chest, and all the sudden I think of Mama coming to get us in the woods, without her coat. I run the rest of the way.

The classroom is warm and bright as we put our coats away in the closet and shuffle towards our desks.

Mrs. Parker has written numbers all over the board, ready for us to start our arithmetic. As I slide into my seat, I suddenly remember that I never finished my homework.

• • •

I am thinking of the spaces between things, instead of the things themselves. Eight notes in the octave, seven spaces between. Thirteen marks on the ruler, twelve inches between them. My mouth, your ear, two ends; the word the one thing in-between. Five fingers, four gaps. Who decides whether it is the things or the spaces that count? With the ruler, it is the spaces; with music it is the notes that are the thing. Only in a circle are the numbers the same. The clock: twelve numbers and twelve spaces. The beginning is the end. Or there is no beginning or end, but it just goes round and round forever. I think of Mama and Daddy. I close one eye and see them: *one, two*. Now I switch eyes and look at the space in between. I don't know who decides which is real.

• • •

“Sadie, surely you can solve this problem?” Mrs. Parker asks. I look up at her, tapping the equation on the blackboard with her pointer. But I get caught up in a beautiful shade of blue spreading across the blackboard. Not the blue of the sky, but a darker blue – the bruise on Mama’s cheek this morning. I open my mouth, though I have no idea what the question is.

Mrs. Parker then tilts her head, and points the stick toward Nina, who knows the answer.

SHANGHAI'D

Old and threadbare, the carpet runs up the stair. No – that's not it...

She would prefer to sleep until noon, Prue would, it's in her DNA, but what else is she to do when she has two characters like Tess and old Norbert simply chomping at the bit to make trouble? She isn't having it, she's reining them in. And to this end, sissie Tess has been given the benefit of one pink, one white, and one blue pill in her welcome-home martini. On top of that there's the door locked-from-without between Tess and any disturbances, just for added insurance. *As Prue moves stealthily from the bathroom, however, what she has failed to notice are the vapors of gin swirling behind the closed plastic curtain, the y-shaped glass lying sidewise inside, and two olives stewing atop a closed drain.*

Swooping and serpentine, the street sparkles and shimmers through the silently slumbering neighborhood. Yes, that's it. In front of one house at the hollow of the hill, a car door claps closed. Beside it Norbert, lanky and long, eerily luminous in his pallor, unfolds himself to stretch in the dying moonlight. Inside The Family Home, the ancestral heritage of two sisters, Tess, who is sleeping the sleep of the dispassionate, allows her silken fingers to crash heavily onto the floor, and

Prue fumbles under pillow after pillow until her personally stubby fingers find the alarm clock to switch it off. *First one to invent a silencer for these ghastly appliances wins a cake!* Once in Paris, she'd tromped all over, popping into every out-of-the-way

shoppe she could find, in search of something better. “*Avez-vous un petit horologe qui sonne très douce, comme ça: duuuuu?*” Her French was pretty lousy, but seemed to get across the idea, forget the lack of results.

Snap out of it! Prue reminds herself – *this project isn't about clocks, for Pete's sake. Get a move on.*

And she pulls the clock from beneath a musty pillow, starting when she sees it's 5:30 already – half an hour late. Mollusk-fashion, she slips her toe out to test the ambient conditions. *Just dive in, missy. Dive already, dive, dive,* Prue remonstrates with herself, before slithering out onto the floor, and creeps on all fours across the hall to the other bedroom. Weight displacement over floorboards, a concept she'd picked up in high school physics, keeps the creaking to a minimum.

To the door of the seldom used room, where her little sister is sleeping the sleep of the spiked martini, although you can never be too careful. Spiked martini, compliments of herself, one Prudence Mires,

Who finds the skeleton key right in place where she left it, then checks the knob – securely fastened. All's well. Prue puts it in reverse and crawls to the bathroom, where she spends a full sixty seconds closing the door, just to make sure, before switching on the overhead. The mirror on the wall reflects eyes shot with red lines, predictable considering the severe sleep deprivation of the previous month of plotting, not to mention the cotton-wool feel of them. *Always a price,* she muses.

Speaking of Redeye, Tess had flown in on the same just last night. Her little Tessie, who could never condescend to the city bus, was big on jets. Prue had never actually flown on one – the one time she had tried, they'd had to remove her before

takeoff, as she had vomited on her neighbors left and right. *Great fat bus in the sky, you ask me*, Prue humphs. Ocean liners any day. Naturally, Prue had had to wait up last night, to make sure nothing untoward might transpire. Still, she was crazy about her sister, and was absolutely thrilled for her to be home at long last!

“Okay, we need to talk,” Tess had announced, as she strode over the front threshold, rolling case rumbling along in her wake.

Prue’s hand had shot out, stopping just short of Tess’s lips, as she screeched out an uncontrolled “No!”

Tess withdrew from this alarming stop-sign hand, but before she could protest, Prue interrupted more gently: “Put it in a letter. I know you’re horribly tired,” and shoved her sister’s favorite drink, the two olive martini, into her hand, skittered rabbit-like up the stairs, calling down “Sweet dreams!” from the top, then ducked into her room.

Prue would prefer it if people would keep their thoughts to themselves. Her own thoughts ran like this: “We’re not having this conversation now. Or ever,” because she knew exactly where Tess’s thoughts were heading:

Sell! Sell! Sell!

This is the kind of idea that Prue has to keep, at all costs, out of Tess’s mind. Tess like cash, she likes fast (that’s why she stays in her New York apartment all the time), and, she says, likes not to worry. About things like rotting baseboards, a leak here or there in the roof, old electrical wiring. And ghosts! Tess has such a vivid imagination. Tess *thinks* she hates the house, but Prue, being older, understands that she is mistaken. With Prue’s guidance, she will soon come to her senses. Moreover, (here Prue is truly perplexed), what is life without worry?

She splashes her face with the icy tap water. Now only thirty minutes to squeeze in a bike ride before Norbert shows up at six to do the yard. *Prue is time-challenged, fatally unaware that eleven minutes have elapsed since she shut off her alarm.*

Down at the front door, she unlatches the screen, and before her red Ked touches down, she gasps to glimpse the faded blue Pontiac glowing in the dawning twilight at her curb! There's Norbert already wielding his rake. *Mercredi!* She darts back inside, panting. No time, no time – it gallops apace! Prue strains for the ideal balance between speed and silence in shutting the door. Trapped now – she won't be able to leave for a good five or six hours while he finishes the work and she stands guard. Defeated, she creeps back up the stair to take up Position One, right front dormer, for observation.

Carefully observed and recorded data are the best way to disprove her sister's paranoid ideas about Norbert, among other misconceptions. Only in the event that Tess should, against all careful precaution, discover that he's been here. The thing is, Prue is violating A Condition of The Agreement in allowing Norbert on the property at all. Tess hates Norbert. This is a complication. But Prue has made a plan to fix it!

She watches the yard man *scratch, scratch, scratch* - the steel claws of his rake scraping through pine straw across the hard soil. All is well. He clears his throat and bends to spit under the azaleas. Well Tess will hardly like that, so Prue can just leave it out of The Record. Norbert lays his large gloved hands on the end of the rake to lean for a little rest, cocking his head, rolling his tired blue eyes to see the pale shimmer beyond the dense pine branches. The mist is still hanging in the air and two huge piles of straw already. Prue pencils his progress in Notepad One. See, Tess: old but hard working! Ha

- *two piles in twenty minutes*. He peels a slice of pine bark off one of the pines, probably checking its health. The neighbors had pine disease and had to chop down all their trees. *Norbert is observant and meticulous*, Prue scrawls. He sticks the bark into his mouth – that’s an unusual technique. – and now chewing, his left index finger – but hold on, how can she be sure at this distance? Father’s binoculars stand at the ready, however, and Prue confirms it – his left index finger slides into his nostril and goes to work. Oh, this isn’t good – Tess will say it proves he’s barking mad! So unyielding and literal, poor sister. In a fluster, Prue drops the spyglass to make note, but glancing out again as she turns her comma, she sees Norbert now petting a bunny, pinkish in hue. *Kind old guy, good with small creatures*: see Tess, see! A baby bunny in his huge hands – Prue would love a picture, but in lieu of that she checks back with the binocs... and Holy Mother of Frankenstein, that is no bunny, it’s his—

Norbert is whacking off! Right in her front yard. With daylight suddenly rolling in like gangbusters. Prue adjusts the focus: so *that’s* little-old-man-dick-pink. This is what it means to be a voyeur, Prue manages to think through the flame of her burning cheeks. Everyone has a right to their privacy. She reaches to pull down the roller shade, checking once more to be sure this isn’t a mirage. Alas. But Poof! Before the crocheted ring kisses the sill, he’s a sweet old fellow again. “I have had a sadness in my family,” he had told Prue two months ago. So utterly lonely, now that his wife has died. Norbert is just crazy with grief. But it will only add fuel to her sister’s fire.

Prue gets to work on the notebook with her eraser – black curls of sooty rubber are flying everywhere. The eraser tip pops off in the midst of her furious repairs, she grabs another. Out with the bad! What was she thinking recording the bark eating –

carried away with her mission. Prue slows down, working until the record is spotless, reporting only the good. All is well. Otherwise, Tess turns everything single little thing against her: barking mad she'd say! Tess is so dramatic.

Prue has pledged to herself that *nothing* would happen on her watch – this crucial watch while Tess is home – come hell or high water. Her head rotates on its pivot like a radar antenna for the national defense - it's suddenly seven-thirty. Norbert will be knocking in exactly thirty minutes, in his unbreakable ritual of drawing her outside into some sort of discussion about ivy and shrubs. He likes to chop things down. Tess thinks this is a key to his indisputably psychopathic nature. "I'm telling you, Prue, that old guy is a fucking freak. One day you'll see, and I just hope it's not you that's sorry." Poor little sister, unblessed with compassion, always thinking the worst. Doesn't Tess understand that all is well, just as it is?

Speak of the devil.

A clamor kicks up across the hall. "Prue! The damn stupid door is stuck! Nothing in this decrepit house works. Come push!" Banging and yelling.

Prue nearly gives herself whiplash as she wrenches her head toward the ruckus. It is impossible that Tess could arouse before nightfall, given the pink, white and blue pills.

A more violent rattling ensues. Shaken out of her stupor, Prue plucks a virgin page from the notebook and scribbles madly as she scurries: *Don't yell! Clam down*, and shoves it under the door a split second before she realizes her typo. Too late.

Prue is afraid the door is actually going to come off its hinges; moreover, Tess does not appear to have noticed her note. Prue prances in place like a wee child in need

of the toilet. Biting at least six or eight nails all at once, she lights upon a solution, then snatches up the notebook to scrawl once more. Just then, the skeleton key slips from the lock and clangs to the floor by Prue's red Ked.

"Goddam Prue! What the fuck! Is this door fucking locked?" Tess is thunder and hail and bolts of lightning – kicking the door.

Prue completes her message, *Go back to sleep please. Please! It will all be fine later on*, and shoves the whole notebook under, praying for good effect. The notebook sticks halfway, so Prue gives it a last violent shove and it dislodges into Tess's room.

"Ow! Shit! Fuck!"

Now that the door pounding has ceased, Prue hears hopping on the other side.

"My goddam toe! My toe! Shit! What? What is this? *What!*"

A second of silence while Tess reads, Prue prays, and she just barely perceives the plop of the notebook as it hits the floor, because Tess is now shrieking.

"Have you gone off your meds????!! What is with these fucking notes! You'd better start talking fast, Prue! But first get this door unlocked."

The rattling of the door is more terrible than before, and Tess's raving has become a solid wall of sound, almost loud enough – a disastrous thought flickers across Prue's mind – what if *he* hears, out there?

"Prue, unlock this fucking door! Now! Now! Now!" The din is extreme; Prue is in extremis. "I'm going to bust it down and then strangle you."

No more notes, and anyway it's clear that the quiet approach has failed. Tess is kicking the door, with her boots on now, it sounds like.

Time for desperate measures – Prue manages, attempting a hail-fellow-well-met

bravado, to squeak out, “Tess, sweetie, stay in bed today, why don’t you? Take it easy, get back in.” But the unlikelihood that Tess has heard anything at all— in the midst of her demolition efforts — hits home. Prue clears her rusty throat, and, distasteful as it is, continues, “Have some dreams. I love dreams, dreams are good. Dreams are great! Don’t you like dreams?”

The onslaught suddenly abates, and Prue flushes hopeful: all is well? Anyway, it’s an opportunity to check up: “Ah, Tess, how did you like the welcome-home martini I made for you? Did I get the olives right?”

“I quit drinking, you idiot!”

Now there are sounds of rummaging — away from the door — has to be in the vast disarray of the bedroom’s storage closet. Articles being tossed, and crashing. An image of two olives sitting in the bathtub drain begins to form in Prue’s dim memory. Until:

“You are going to be *so* sorry if Daddy’s blowtorch is buried in here, you psycho bitch.”

Prue searches frantically in her brain to discover if this could be the case. It’s Tess that’s unhinged, not the door. “All right, all right. I get you, Tess. Tess, listen.” Prue raps briskly on the door to catch her younger sister’s attention before she continues, “I see that this is not working for you. I see that you’re wanting something more... active... than a nice quiet day in bed. Don’t worry, really, my feelings aren’t hurt just because my idea is not what you had in mind. How about... read a book! Tons of books in there, just take a look. Reading is an excellent—”

“Prue!” All the glass in The Family Home tremors in the wake of her formidable high C. And now Tess’s voice drops low and deadly — Prue can just see her speaking

through those pearly white teeth: “It’s not funny! It’s not a joke!! I *am* going to kill you, and then burn down this fucking Home.”

Tears collect in the corners of Prue’s eyes. She racks her brain, grasping for any conceivable solution. “Coloring book, crayons? They’ll fit under the door, I’m sure, Tess.”

“Open the door, Prue. Amnesty if you open it. I’m going to count to three. ONE.”

“No! Not counting! Tess, don’t. Please, please!”

“TWO.”

Prue covers her ears and raises her voice. “Tess, listen. Here’s something fun *and* relaxing: Self-hypnosis!! You know? I think you really need to relax, Tess, you sound disturbed. I can teach you how right now.”

“Prue, that one-time offer is expiring... Oh! The shotguns! What am I thinking? That would be even better. Better start praying, Prudence.” The rummaging has resumed.

Desperate, simply desperate. “*Ma petite soeur*,” Prue wheedles.

“Cut it! I fucking hate that fucking French routine of yours. Oh. My. God.” Tess’s voice is now coming from a different spot inside the room – up by the front dormer, Position Three. “That old pervert’s car is parked out there,” she hisses at her sister: “You planned it didn’t you, Prue? That he would show up the minute I arrived. You know exactly how much he creeps the bejesus out of me. That does it!”

Awry! It’s awry! Prue thinks, as she slumps in despair to the floor of her hallway. *All gone awry.* The best-laid plans, the work of an entire month. Now there’s something new going on in there. She can smell it.

“Um, are you smoking in there, Tess?”

“Oh, heaven forbid, no,” she hollers. “Why, I wouldn’t dream of it. Nooooo, I’m not smoking, that’s against The Family Home Rules. Well, maybe I am smoking just a teeny bit, but only – by the way – because what I’m really doing is setting the drapes on fire, Prue, and then I’m going to punt this burning butt down into that lovely pile of straw your nut job has made, so conveniently, I must say, right below my back dormer here, then I’m going to crawl out the front dormer — Well, would you look at that? The Fisher King is out there chasing rabbits. I can’t actually see all that well, but I think it’s a rabbit.”

Prue leaps to her feet and pounds unabashedly on the door. “No! No! Don’t look, Tess, it’s *not* a rabbit!”

“Have you got Daddy’s old binoculars?”

“No! Why would I have those? I mean, Tess! Okay, okay, I’ll let you out. Anything, anything, just do not look! Get away from the window, Tess. Tess?”

And then Prue sees a flat ribbon of smoke winding from under the door. “Oh! Oh! Oh!” She reaches for the key on the floor, but— it’s nowhere to be seen. She must have kicked it by accident, and now she fumbles frantically for it. Swiftly the hallway is filling with smoke. Above the sound of her own choking, she hears Tess’s voice muffled and further away. Clearly her sister has crawled out the front dormer onto the roof, and meanwhile she cannot locate the key!

All is not well.

“Save, save me, you old coot!” Tess is yelling now out on the roof, and, as Prue imagines correctly, waving her arms.

“Huh?” Norbert replies. “Tess, is that you? You’re back from New York City?” He whistles, and, “Whew, doggy! You sure do look pretty! But, what are you doing out on the roof?”

“The tango, wanna dance? What do you think?! My demented sister has me locked in a burning tower. Get a move on, slick, the smoke is stinging my eyes.”

“People at church been warning me, told me Prudence’s cupboard might be a little misarranged. Maybe they were right.”

“Too late for analysis now! Hurry up, you old pervert!”

“Aw, now don’t call me that, Tess, I have had a sadness in my family. But hold on, I’m coming.”

And Prue can hear the front doorknob turning below. Then rattling, and then the tines of a rake clawing over the old oaken panels, before finally the sound of an axe chopping right through her front door.

Then from the roof, Tess calling: “I can’t see you Norbert, I’m blind! Are you ready? I’m going to jump now. You better be ready! *One...*”

“Don’t worry, Tess, I’m already...” With a final thrust of his axe, the door splinters, “through the door! Don’t you jump, now.”

Prue knew this would happen. Knew it! It’s her worst nightmare – what happens when you don’t maintain complete control over the characters. At all costs: do *not* let them mingle.

“*Two...* Insurance money, Prue! No more Family Home! You hear that, Prue? I win, I win!”

In the midst of a dense black cloud of smoke, Prue, most weary, whispers, “Yes,

Tess, yes,” before her head drops from the crook of her arm onto the floor.

Norbert trips over Prue’s inert body, axe aloft, and, as the church bells chime eight, he crashes through the bedroom door at last.

Tess’s voice trails as she plummets:

“*Three!* The Shanghai, dear Prudence, is mine!”

INEXPECTATUS

Under the table I am holding a Southeastern Five-Lined Skink, brown with a blue tail, *Eumeces inexpectatus*. Very delicate. You have to know how to hold them or the extraordinary blue tail will break off.

“People get done what they want to get done,” my boyfriend repeats, as if I didn’t hear him the first time. David has silky auburn hair, falling in unruly waves. While not as startling as the blue tail of a skink, the hair is hard to ignore.

“Like sleeping with the checkout-chicklet at the Smoothie King?” I say. “That hot blonde, with the pimples? Is that why you get double punches on your customer card?”

The skink is an adolescent – small enough to conceal in my left hand, except for the tail. If I don’t get him out of this sushi joint, he will dehydrate and die. But I had to, just had to, snatch him off the railing on the way in. People get done what they want to get done.

“C’mon, Margaret, that was two years ago. Jesus!” He takes a bite. “And” his mouth full of rice, a small clump tumbles out, “her skin is perfect.”

“Right,” I say. “Maybe you took your contacts out that night David. Big one - right on her nose.” Tapping my own with the wrong end of my chopstick.

“You were away for two months Margaret. In *Arkansas* of all places. On your—” he makes air quotes here, “time-out. Not my idea.” He shakes his head, his hair flops around. His voice is rising. Too many whiskey sours. At a sushi restaurant, all wrong.

“I’m not jealous.” It’s Diet Coke. I realize he’s been drinking Diet Coke. Not whiskey. “Maybe I’m just not sure what it is I want to get done, okay?”

“What?” A tiny bit of shumai noodle is stuck to his lip.

“Nothing.”

The skink squirms.

I’m not sure this is really an honest piece of philosophy or even pop psychology, this getting-it-done business. I mean, does David first of all really believe this? Or is it perhaps a handy cudgel to use on people (me!) whose behaviors he doesn’t approve, and well may be, quite frankly, in serious need of repair?

He’s sipping his drink so slowly. He really does have nice lips. Very soft and agile. He used to play the saxophone. Still, Diet Coke is as wrong in a Sushi restaurant as whiskey. I sip my green tea and give him my own look — lowering my lids, lizard-like — to see if I can impress this idea without words. If only I had the clear scale bottom-lids of the lizard, instead of my own fleshy ones.

Every day, so many things I don’t get done. Like: sometimes I find myself skipping lunch by accident, then in a state of advanced hypoglycemia at the end of the day. In this low blood-sugar state, I’m jittery, unfocused, dizzy. I once hurled myself onto the sofa and wept at the news that I was going to have to eat pasta with corn for supper. (Two starches! At once!) According to my boyfriend’s theory of THE WAY THINGS WORK, I would have hunted down that lunch and eaten it. According to his philosophy: hey, I *really* wanted to feel like a junkie with the DTs— so that is what I got done!

I find myself squeezing the skink. It’s fragile — get a grip! A looser one, that is.

“*Everyone* is busy, Margaret.” David snaps me back into our chartreuse vinyl booth. Clearly he has misinterpreted my skink-eyed squint. “You’re not any busier than anyone else, wake up. You know, you have made me so— (here he clamps his jaw vise-tight) just so— (again) with that. Like you’re out there, all over the place, doing all these (chops his hand violently) THINGS. Busy busy busy.” Finally he slows down. “Like by, the way, sleeping with that German guy in Arkansas.”

All I have to do is relax my fingers and this cold-blooded lizard will crawl off into a crevice and leave me alone. There he dries up, doesn’t grow old, never gets to have sex — so what? This color on his tail will fade, will never be any bluer than it is right now. I’m aching to pull him out and examine that neon blue.

“I have never said that I was any busier than anyone else. Cut me some slack, would you? Look, I know that, David, the whole freakin’ world is getting busier all the time. Hey, do you really want to be drinking Diet Coke with sushi?” God, I’m hoping he’ll finish this lecture before the waitress comes back.

On the other hand, what if this is one of those endangered species? The more beautiful something is, the higher probability of its being endangered. I dip a couple fingers of my free hand into my water glass and pretend I’m just stirring.

“I’m really sick of it as an excuse. *What did you just say?* Could you for once, just for five minutes, stay on the fucking subject, Margaret? I’m trying to tell you that I’m not having it any more.” He looks at me over his eel roll, this guy who eats sushi and such with his fingers. I grab up my chopsticks and click along in front of him, making like three alligator chomps, but he doesn’t get that either. Instead he wipes his mouth roughly with his napkin and thrusts it down on the bench beside him. His nice lips aren’t looking

so nice right now, pressed together like that. Not so cherry, more like white. My left hand is once again tightening on the skink. I have to maintain some perspective here. This is how the innocent become casualties. Sorry, little creature. I dip my hand into the glass again and pull it underneath the table, letting the water seep through my fingers to hydrate my *inexpectatus*.

David licks the bit of noodle off his lip, finally. When it is gone, he keeps flicking over his lower lip. I can nearly hear his mind clicking, switching gears. “Okay. Let me put this another way—”

Miracle of miracles, my cell rings. THANK GOD. It’s my sister, I mouth to David and widen my eyes to let him know I have to take the call. It works – he shuts up, starts on another roll. And now the waitress comes up, double protection: he has to change tracks and deal with her now because I’m *busy*. I relax a tiny bit and imagine the skink absorbing the water I’ve provided.

My sister chatters on about her camper weekend coming up with Bob, her husband, and I am free not to listen.

Instead, I am absorbing the rhythm of the skink’s breath. What I haven’t said to my boyfriend is that I am too busy for *me*. Too busy to go to the bathroom for say, an hour or more, time after time after time, because I’m trying to finish just one more thing. It’s not that I don’t want, very much, that blissful release of peeing. But I’ve been holding it, you know, until I’m about to pop, so I can get a couple or seven more things done first. I’m holding it because I can; I’m aces at holding. Sometimes I just don’t — just don’t get it done.

The waitress has flip-flopped away again, I've clapped my phone shut. No idea what my sister said, but I'm so grateful for the interruption. David is watching me very intently. He leans forward. Yep, something is different but I'm not sure what.

Suddenly I wonder if the skink needs to pee. It's one thing to deprive yourself, but entirely another to torture an innocent creature. I'm trusting that the skink isn't terrified. Maybe he's in touch with himself enough that if he needs to pee, he'll just do it. That would be a skink's way, I think: getting it done.

"You know I'm madly in love with you," David says.

"What?" I'm still not listening, thinking about skink pee.

He smiles. This cocking of his head is an entirely different look now. "*I said, you know I'm madly in love with you, don't you?*"

In out, in out, skink breathing.

"Even though I get nothing done? Or rather, whatever it is I *really want* to do?" I really think the skink needs to pee; I need to get the skink into the bathroom now. I probably over-hydrated him with the water drips. But the idea of skink control in a space as large as a ladies' room is scary.

Maybe I'm way less functional than the test group he's based his "get it done" rule on. Hey, guess what David, it's a victory for me just to reach the end of the day standing UP, in one PIECE. To conceive that I might be able to get up and do it again tomorrow. Well, I'm certainly not telling him any of *this* because he will just use it in evidence against me. At a later date, at a time when he needs to pull it out of his sleeve. *Oh* yes he will.

He leans farther forward, his hands flat on the table. He glances out into the restaurant quickly. *Now* he remembers we're in a public place, he gets quiet. "I need more time from you. I want more time from you. You have to stop being too busy, too much of the time, Margaret," he says. "I want you to *do* you and me. I want you to want to *do* us."

The skink is lashing his tail – it's flicking back and forth across my wrist. It might feel nice except for the fact that it's probably going to pop off at any second. Despite my best efforts. It's a safety release mechanism - maybe it doesn't get it that I'm holding it the other way round. Maybe it doesn't matter. But the waitress walks up with the check, blocking my exit, so we're stuck. David pulls out his wallet, shakes his head when I reach for my own. He's generous that way. So I leave my purse closed and slip the strap over my shoulder.

The last thing I haven't told David is that I'm just not sure about anything. This anything, that anything, us anything. Okay, okay, I can't imagine being without him. So maybe I'm too busy a lot of the time, but also. I think I want to keep the skink and let the man go. David has succeeded, at least, in making me wonder what it is I want to get done.

As we stand up to leave, he lays his large hand in the small of my back and trails in time with my step winding our way through the tables. I caress the skink close to my waist, shielding him now from David's view with my body. We bow our heads under the door banners and step out. Here just outside the entrance is the wrought iron fence where I picked the skink up on the way in. Poor creature, what an ordeal. But I can let him off,

hopefully not too much the worse, right where he started. The problem is, I can't let go. I want this skink.

David's grey jeep is at the back corner of the lot. He walks toward it kicking the larger chunks of gravel and hunching toward his tightly folded arms, having dropped his hand from my back. When we reach the car, he leans back against his door, arms still folded, tracing my face with his eyes. Under the canopy of water oaks, we stand in a jigsaw pattern of last light and rising gloom.

"So what are you going to do?" he asks me.

"I've got a lot to do, I should get—" David's face is very... blank. "Um, I guess I could come over tonight."

"That's not what I mean and you know it," he replies. Here we stand, staring at each other.

He twists his mouth. "Are you going to let go of it, or are you just going to let it suffocate in your hand?" David is breathing funny, like he's winded from running sprints or somebody just punched him in the gut. I pull my left hand behind me like the cookie jar kid. "I'm not as much of a dolt as you think, Margaret."

Suddenly he's shuddering. I cannot believe he's laughing at me. I start to say so, when I see that he's not: he's crying. Silently, but hard. He lowers his head, as if trying to disappear into his own folded arms. Like he can't bear for me to see him doing this. Good thinking! Nothing remotely like this has ever happened before, it can't be real. So ugly, and I don't believe it for a second.

“You... are such... an asshole! An asshole, an asshole!” Save the skink, I tell myself, careful with the creature. I have slung my purse off my right shoulder and am swinging it up and down through the air. Each time it lands on my head.

“You think you can control everything I do!” I scream at him, and furious with my purse, sling it away from me. I’ve hurled it over the crumbling brick wall beside us. “Look what you’ve done now!” I shove him with my forearms, still mindful of only one skink.

“You’re such a snot, from your perfect snot family! So when your perfect and reasonable and even-keeled system doesn’t work is this – this crying thing – what your family resorts to? See, David? See! Stop it! Stop crying right now! I’m so imperfect that you’ll never be able to fix me. Never! Never! Never!” My arms are exhausted, I’m butting him with my head. “You might as well stop!”

His arms wrap around me, like a strait-jacket.

“Let me go! You’re insane! Your shirt is all wet!” My arms are stuck to my sides, all I can do is buck. “Get it off me!

I have lost track of the skink.

David’s voice is hoarse in my ear. “No. Not until you calm down.” Somehow we’re turned around, he’s got me pinned between him and the jeep.

“How *dare* you. I will *not* calm down unless I want to!”

The skink is gone. I’m worn out. David’s shirt is wet. I sense that nothing like this will ever happen again.

“I hope it’s okay,” I say.

“What?” he asks.

“Maybe I didn’t kill it.” He is combing my hair with his fingers.

“You didn’t kill anything Margaret.”

“You don’t know. How do you know? You don’t know anything about it at all.”

“I do,” he says, “because I see it.” He puts his big hands on my shoulders, turns me around. Pulls me back to rest against his chest. “There.” He points.

In the lowering light, I see it crawling up the wisteria vine and onto the crumbling brick wall beside us. Tail intact – it’s a miracle. As it passes through a last sliver of sunlight, one last flick of that blazing blue tail, and it’s gone.

I crane my head to see David’s face. He saw it, too.

Skink. Man.

I turn, falling into him, bury my face in his wet shirt. Here I am, with both hands open, holding the man. Massive and damp and warm-blooded.

REELING

Myrtle Beach, the Grand Strand, hot fun in the summer time. *Welcome Canadians!* in the fall. The International Parade of Corvettes in the spring. Nine golf courses, six water slides and three go-cart tracks. Five radio stations all dedicated to oldies. Go ride the Swamp Fox, the somethingest roller coaster in the country! Run over some animals on the way.

At some point, I realized that my personality was disintegrating. Is that what they call it? It happens on *Law & Order* a lot.

Whatever it is, the consequences are not good.

A few drinks wiped that little epiphany right out of my mind.

• • •

“Hello? Earth to Sharon.” He actually said that, Frank, the certified shrink. To whom the county was paying good tax dollars, on my behalf. DUI bought you six months of AA, or two of this, plus community service. Good thing I’d gotten that shiny new license, and that old junker, the one now crusting over in space number two. The deal was a no brainer, the math was easy, even to my soused brain. “If you don’t talk about it, you’re not going to make any progress. You do want your license back, don’t you?” In my brave new world, if you didn’t talk about it, it didn’t exist. Frank made a tent of his fingers and rested them under his nose. Uh-huh, he did.

“I don’t want to. I don’t find it to be a particularly fascinating line of inquiry.”

Always a curve on what I said around this guy, trying to sound smart. God knows why; but fit in fine with all the rest of the inexplicables.

“I get the sense that there is a snake’s nest of unresolved issues here.” Dan called him Dr. Hollyweird. The guy *said* he was from LA. I had my doubts, but what was the difference? I just sat, looking out at the guys going into the surf shop next door. “So you left a lucrative career in the advertising business in New York, oh, and,” he swiveled around to his desk to check the notes. He ran his index finger down the yellow pad, tapped when he found the item. “And, a fiancé, and moved down here to Myrtle Beach to work at, uh, Molly’s Flapjacks, from where you were fired, um, last month? Have I got all that right?” Deadpan didn’t suit him. He had a squeaky voice.

“I was on my way to Miami.”

“Yes?” I turned my attention back from the surfers to Frank, his eyes, and realized only then that he didn’t believe me. I was inclined to let him just stay with his *sense*, there. Nobody here knew anything about where I came from, my choice. Robbie said I floated in on a half-shell. Acne scars and all, was my standard response. But even though I didn’t want to think or tell about it, it was a strain at times. I bit.

“Sick of it.” I shrugged. Enough said, far as I was concerned.

“It?” He had a little egg head and baby-cheeks.

“The fabulousness.”

“Fabulousness?” He wrote it down. It looked like it would crack more easily than most. Heads, it turned out, were surprisingly tough to crack.

“Yeah. Everything, everybody, every place was... so fucking *fabulous*. Never-ending game of one-upmanship. Never get away from it, not at the bodega, the laundry, the post office, the toilet.”

“So—”

“Hey, if you want me to tell it, Frank, just listen and let me, okay.”

“I am chastised.” He raised his soft pink palms at me. Fucker.

“I was lugging five or so shopping bags – I’d been Christmas shopping all afternoon. I had made this discovery that lots of shops actually will cut the price if you lay out cash. I used to do big Christmases, and I had five thousand dollars on me that day. There were no cabs up by Barneys, yeah, I’m sure you do know it, yeah, isn’t it just.” I wanted to set Frank’s perky red hair on fire.

“Anyway, I took the E train, and there was a delay on the tracks. I was at my limit with people jostling and bumping, so I got off at Port Authority. The Salvation Army Santa outside was ringing his bell. Fabulous Santa, naturally.” I stole a glance at Frank. Blank. “So I gave SA Santa seventy-five cents and a token. However, no cabs down here either. Why the drivers change shifts during rush hour in New York City is one of the great mysteries of the ages.

“I started down Ninth, walking. Kept my eyes open for a cab – but nada. It was beginning to snow – wonderful Christmastime treat. Some carolers down Thirty-eighth street singing ‘Tidings of comfort and joy.’ Midway down the block, I was passing those empty parking lots when this Puerto Rican guy starts bouncing and skipping all around me, asking for spare change. That always made me nervous, and I always felt guilty about stereotyping at the same time. He seemed a little brain-damaged or something, and

he was horribly skinny. And it was Christmas, so I opened my purse and pulled out a twenty. He blessed me, and went on and on about the miracles that were going to happen to me for a minute or so. I felt so happy about it, and pleased with myself, I blessed him back, and told him to stay warm. He heads across towards a diner on the far corner, ecstatic. I was thinking about getting home and telling my fiancé what I'd done, and enjoying how appalled he'd be. I was really impressed with myself.

“Frank, I need a cigarette here. Really I do.” For once he nodded, and I lit up. “So, after the homeless guy bounces away, only a couple of seconds and a nice looking guy, well-dressed, swinging his briefcase and all, is passing me on the left. Turns his head and says, in this British accent, ‘You gotta love New York.’ Lips like Jude Law, so I smile at him, and then I’m suddenly down on the sidewalk, and he’s on top of me, yanking at my purse. ‘Just let go,’ he says. ‘Give it up, stupid cow.’ I was fighting him, of course—”

“Why—”

“Shush, Frank. You want to hear it or not? One time offer, no questions. Okay then. After that, the businessman’s dragging me, and it’s dark, and he cracks my head on the pavement, and that’s it.” It was fun to watch Frank fidget. I waited just until it looked like he was getting ready to pipe up again, and flicked ash on the carpet.

“Oops. Then this kid, a little boy, is shaking my shoulder and saying, ‘Lady, lady are you dead?’ Scared the shit out of me, I thought I was being mugged again, and, now, with impeccable sense of timing, I finally scream for the first time. And I don’t shut up. Kid freaks and runs away.” Frank started to say something here, but I held up my hand.

“My dime, Frank. And only three minutes according to your trusty clock. Yeah, the nice homeless guy was Puerto Rican, the mugger was white, ‘kay? So after I find that I can move, I sit up and check my head. Bloody and dirty, but not broken, I don’t think. I get to my feet, though I’m wobbly. Still no cabs. Our apartment is only fifteen blocks south, and I try to figure if I can make it. But I turn around and keep staring at the lights up at Port Authority instead. Honey will freak if bunny comes home like this. So, I’m just gonna go up and wash in a restroom there. Do as much damage control as I can. The weird thing is, I feel embarrassed, humiliated.” I looked up to see Hollyweird nodding sagely, with his eyes closed, like he was in deep inner pain. Then his lip budged.

“Can it, Frank, I know all about it. Forty-five seconds, and I’m outta here. Good. I’m unencumbered now, so moving around is much easier than it might have been. People are staring at me in the station, and three even ask if I’m all right or need help. Gotta love it, New York. But I’m in a zone, and I wave them off. I go into the Ladies’, not feeling like much of one. Fact is, haven’t felt like much of one since. Down, boy. God’s sake, Frank.

“I’m a horror show in the restroom mirror. A couple of my teeth are loose, but still attached. I wash out my hair – blood and parking lot shit, as best I can in a sink there, then look down at my clothes, and notice that I still have my fanny-pack. It was under my coat. I unzip and my cash is still there – looks like all of it. A miracle, I got an incompetent mugger. I feel light-headed, giddy. So much money, it seems to me now. So much more than it was an hour ago.

“I look at myself again, check to see if I’m fit to go home. Presentable. Watch myself staring at myself. See something in those mirror-eyes. Something is wrong with this picture, I think, and it’s not my fucked-up face.

“I suddenly have a raging compulsion for a cigarette – no I don’t smoke, *didn’t*, yes now, not then, Christ almighty! While I’m buying a pack at the newsstand, I hear an announcement for the Greyhound bus line. That moment I know I’m not going back to the apartment on Twenty-second Street. Back to the fiancé, back to the firm. Clear as a bell.

“I light up, cough a lot, but keep my cool, while I cross over and buy a ticket to Miami. I remember someone saying that it’s the closest you can come to being an ex-patriot without leaving the country, and I’m there. I also decide to start drinking heavily as soon as possible. I have a family destiny out there calling on me, I tell myself. Miami would be the perfect place to fulfill it. Why fight? By the time the bus hits South Carolina, though, I’m getting really tired, and sick of the smell. We’re trolling through Myrtle Beach, and I see the giant rollercoaster, and Ripley’s Believe-It-or-Not, lots of neon, and swarms of tourists. Unreal, almost as good as Miami. Good enough. What the hell, I get off.” I stop-sign him with my hand again, and glance at the wall clock.

“Oh, would you look at that Frank, it’s five o’clock, we’re ten minutes over! I forgot all about the *full fifty*. Damn. So sorry. But, got to dash! No, really. There is all kinds of alcohol waiting for me around this carnival town.”

Frank moved to hold the door open for me, then gave me this sickly smile and asked if I’d like to go have martinis at his condo-by-the-sea. I pushed my face right up into his and said, “You’re not really real, are you?” He was fired. I didn’t go back.

Never happened to me in New York, this guys-hitting-on-me left and right. Not when I was making the big dollars. When I was sober and my hair was always clean, except, of course, for those last couple of hours. Now I was a regular magnet, for flies.

• • •

The Sea Dip Motel, turquoise fifties dream. Room number two. I walked right in, flung off my shoes, dubbed it home and walked back out, barefoot, over to the QuikStop for a six-pack. I took it out onto the beach, twisted my ass into the sand, and watched the life guards pack up, last strollers of the day with their long dim shadows, a couple of kamikaze kids shrieking to split their mothers' brains. Three beers down, I walked through the clammy sand up to the Pavilion and watched the colored lights spin in the amusement park across the way as I forked over two bucks for a corndog with mustard.

• • •

What I couldn't get used to were the flattened squirrels, stray or not-stray cats and dogs, birds, frogs or possums littering the back roads. I racked my brain for a New York equivalent of road kill – but there just weren't too many dead dogs lying in the middle of Broadway – the city's own horrors notwithstanding. I couldn't stop wondering why so many people mowed down living creatures for the sake of thirty seconds off their trip to Wal-Mart or the QuikStop, or, more likely, just to the next red light. My pervading concern.

• • •

“Cast it out, reel it in. Cast it out, reel it in.”

This long-legged guy was rocking back and forth on a barstool, miming the action while he and his sidekick laughed their asses off at whatever the story was. The fisher guy’s long curls shook when he laughed. Beautiful. The Blue Marlin was my first true find, about ten blocks from the Sea Dip. I’d been here two weeks, hadn’t gotten a car yet, so it was convenient. The music was great, too: blues-jazz stuff mostly. Tonight J.J. Cale was the main menu. And I hadn’t really struck up any acquaintances yet, either, so I thought I’d take my chances here. More promising than a lonely corndog on the boardwalk up at the pavilion every night.

“Hey, fellas, that’s not the way I learned to do it. I’d stick to cane poles any day, in that case.”

“Well, hello lady, what’s your name?” Said the lanky one with curls.

“Depends on who’s asking,” I answered, per script.

“I’m Dan,” Dan said.

“Sharon, I’m sure,” I said, extending my arm. He brought it towards his face, then stopped short and looked at me. I glanced at my wrist and the angle of my hand, and realized I hadn’t offered it so as to shake. My neck and ears flushed hot.

“This here’s Rob. He’s a cop, now, so you better watch out.” Yeah, and how. The sidekick was shorter, stouter, with a blond crew. I turned my attention back to Dan.

“Note taken. And, you’re what, let me guess, a fisherman!” My hand was moist, I wiped it on the back of my jeans.

“Well, yeah, in between gigs,” Dan shrugged and laughed.

“Shit man, you lie to the woman! The only gig you had in the last ten years is hanging paper,” Rob said.

“Shut up, bud, you’re blowing the impression all to hell. You know I’m the ‘Guitar Man.’ Which was playing on the sound system just then. I pursed my lips in acknowledgement of his hokum. “Gotta excuse my friend, here, that ol’ jealousy thang running back to high school days,” he shouted in Robbie’s face. This cracked them both up. “You know how drummers are. So. What’re you drinking there, Shar-one?”

“Vodka tonic.” I rattled the twist of lime at the bottom of my glass.

“Got that, Chop? Chop here is my brother.” He dropped his head back and looked at the massive bartender sideways. The guy must’ve been six-three and no less than three hundred pounds. Like a white Sumo, but with foot long dreadlocks, graying, for an extra ethnic spin. Not a literal brother. “Make mine the same.” Dan’s fingers lingered in the ‘two’ formation like a wilted peace sign.

While I was introducing myself to Chop, Dan elbowed Robbie in the chest. “Reel it in,” he said one more time, and they cracked up again.

“Well, I don’t think I’ve seen you around, Sharon. You down here beachin’ it this week? She doesn’t look like she’s from around here, does she, Rob?” Dan said, and mock-looked me over. He passed me one of the vodka tonics. “So what do you think it is, the way she walks?” A sultry number, slow undercurrent, had just come on, and I couldn’t help swinging my hips: Cale’s “Same Old Blues.” Dan sipped and nodded, pointing. “Yup, I think... maybe so.” He cocked his head, squinting at me, then handed

his drink off to Robbie. “What say I take her out on the dance floor and you check, huh?”

“Hey man, watch your mouth. Don’t be rude to the lady, now—” But Robbie’s voice was fading as Dan pulled me by both hands. This was between me and him.

He had great arms to go with the legs, was a terrific dancer. I hadn’t been out dancing in forever, and it was a blast. We stayed out on the floor for the next several songs, and eventually people started hanging at the edge of the floor, drinking and watching us. Nothing like it as an aphrodisiac. Robbie left sometime around “Boilin’ Pot,” and we kept on dancing ‘til I can’t remember.

One two three, hooked. The lowest common denominator, but I’d been getting stupid and stupider since I got off the bus.

• • •

He took me out to the Gulf Stream in his father’s twenty-five-foot Bertram over the first couple of months. Out in the salt wind with the shimmer coming off the waves, way out beyond the sight of land, I thought I was in heaven. Getting brown, color in my skin was a novelty. And making a haul with the mackerel along with a few amberjack.

Robbie went two or three times. Nice enough guy, quieter than Dan, but who wasn’t? He was a gung-ho fisherman, though. By the last, back to just me and Dan by then, I was doing most of the fishing by myself. Dropping a line into the water and the rod into the holder had gotten to be a waste of effort in Dan’s view – he liked to just cruise around out there. He was into mellowing out on his days off – Percodan did it for

him real well. And I liked to drink. Beer was the ticket for catching fish— Budweiser, “the King of beers,” my father ‘s recipe for success. The family code. What a beautiful body, though, my god. A slightly slender Michaelangelo-perfect. Those calves and thighs. The image of one of those deltoids sloping down to meet its bicep almost made me lose my good sense.

• • •

On the other hand, we didn’t have much sex, me and Dan, mostly for the same reason he stopped fishing. Love of the drug, his. Or not what I would personally like to think of as sex. Turn over, what? Oh, okay, *arf, arf*. All in all: not much. After four months, I was drinking enough that I didn’t much care one way or the other. I did notice that I didn’t particularly care for the smell of Percodan seeping through his pores, however. The smell of wallpaper paste had been much nicer.

He lived in his parents’ beach house at Surfside. Said I couldn’t move in because they could show up at any time.

I hadn’t asked.

• • •

A typical date with Dan. Today’s variation went like this.

Bracing my arms against the dash of his old MG, screaming “Shit!” and “Watch out!” Then I felt the slight, sick bump.

“What the fuck!” he yelled back at me. He slammed on the brakes, jolting us both.

“A squirrel, Dan, a squirrel. Right in the middle of the road. Are you blind or what? Plain as day – right in the middle. The middle! What is wrong with you?”

“Goddamn. Don’t *ever* do that again. Hear me! The squirrel was dead, Sharon! Already deader’n shit.”

“It could have been alive!”

“Well, it fucking wasn’t!”

“It doesn’t matter! Don’t you have any respect?” The screaming was shredding my vocal cords. “You are a monster. Why did you have to run over it like that, like it’s a piece of garbage? You, just like any of the rest of them.” I burst into tears, scalding hot, and fumbled with the door handle. “I hate you, I just fucking hate you.”

“So you gonna take your weekly stomp to the Marlin from all the way out here, this afternoon? It’s further than you think, Sharon.” He revved the engine. It sounded tinny. I don’t know if he would have let me back in the car even if I’d been willing. “See you around midnight, if you walk fast.” I kicked the door closed and then his fender, before he squealed off, leaving me with a cloud of exhaust and plenty of weeping Spanish moss.

• • •

“Cast it out, reel it in. Irregardless of the weather.” Three guesses who, at Chop’s house over on Sandy Island. The line almost made me sad, remembering back, but not quite.

“Now hear, this! There is no such word. As *irregardless*. Hello!” I stepped in from the dock, meeting the doorframe for a quick *pas de deux* on the way. “Just so you

all are all clear on that fine point of the language.” I took a bow to the crowd. Francine, with the big tits, from Conway, was sitting on the floor near Dan – barca-lounging in Chop’s beat-up recliner. How generous of her.

“Well, Miss She-she, what do you know? Roused from the deep.” Dan drawled at me. Me, She-she. “Hand me another one of them Millers there, Rob.”

“Get your own damn Miller for a change, Dan-dan.” I pulled one out of the ice bucket for myself, fuck him. “In case you hadn’t noticed Rob’s not in here, he’s out on the dock, fishing. Fishing, Dan. That’s *Francine* there beside you. Franci, meet Dan. Hello, Franci. Why, hello, Dan-dan.” Chop handed me my beer back, top off, and patted me softly on the back. Huh? Oh, good boy bartender, Chop. Beer on, beer, on... whiskey! Beer on whiskey. What was the rest? I swayed against the screen door.

“Oh, fishing! Well, speaking of fishing, oh shit!” I spilled beer all over my best orange tee shirt swiped from I don’t know who. “Well, never mind. But fishing! Awful lot of advice about fishing, for someone who hasn’t had a rod in months, don’t you think, Dan? Why don’t you try it? Why don’t you take Franci there,” I indicated Francine with the mouth of my half-empty bottle, “Francine there, FISHING and show her your daddy’s big BOAT?” I cracked myself up, then fell backwards through the screen door.

“Don’t worry about ol’ She-she, she’s in a headspace,” Dan might have said then.

“Yeah, well with a master, past master-master of the King’s English language for a boyfriend, what’re ya gonna do?” I told Robbie, who was picking me up. “Go fishing?” I wagged my head. “Wrong.” Stage whisper: “Hey! Robbie! Do you think Franci knows, yet. YET!” giggling and hiccoughing now, “that he has nothing to cast?”

• • •

My dream, however, wasn't. Either turquoise, or pretty.

Face stuck to the plastic mattress cover when I woke. Sweat pooling at the corners of my eyes, around my mouth; dry as sand inside. Hot salt air through the window, where the wedge of light was too bright. The ocean was too loud, waves crashing with the volume turned up to max. The pink awning flag-flapping in the wind next door. Jeans cutting into my hips, twisted up damp behind the knees. Bile at the back of my throat, and though I felt like puking, I was pretty sure there was nothing left. Wasn't going to be a beach day today. I fell back under.

Next time I woke up, it was only worse, so I dragged my way towards the open window, feeling a bruise where the brass zipper had pressed into my pubic bone all night. Or something. The pulse throbbed in my ears.

After I'd shut out the noxious heat, I strained to switch on the AC. Nothing. I slammed it with the flat of my hand until my palm rang and tried the switch again. Dead. Shoved the window sash back up, and jerked the roller-shade the rest of the way down. It fell out of its brackets and crashed down on my wrist before I could move.

"Fuck!" I punched the air conditioner with my foot, a few times I guess, before the vent cracked, as my heel went through the plastic, and then I kept on kicking, finally with both feet, until the pounding on the door got through to me.

"Hello! Hello! What's going on in there! Hello! Ms. Shealy, are you all right? Hey! Answer the door!" The manager guy. Pretty great voice, deep and smooth. He

was a substitute DJ at one of the local oldies stations. Who would have thought he looked like he did, listening to him?

“Yeah, yeah.” Clearing my throat, aiming now toward the door. “Yes. Yes! Yes!” I rolled off the bed and groped my way over.

The door caught on its chain, luckily, before I realized that I had on no shirt, no bra. Why jeans? And that dinky chain was all that had been between me and the whole circus out there – the door was unlocked. A weak pull to remember how I wound up in this condition flickered and disappeared.

“Hold on, hold on.” I snatched an orange tee shirt that I didn’t recognize off the back of the chair – and swam my way into it, about five sizes too big. Now off with the chain.

The guy’s face was strained. John, Bill, Andy? Never could remember. “I heard all this noise back here, and I was worried whether you were all right.” He glanced into the room behind me but I inched into the doorway and narrowed the gap.

“Oh, that’s so sweet. I was watching, um, you know, a comedy show, and got a little carried away.” I rubbed my forehead. “Those guys kill me, you know?” He didn’t bother to acknowledge my bullshit. I desperately wanted him to fix the air conditioner, but it would be sure eviction to let him in the room now. The place was trashed.

“Well, good thing you got it off now.” He tried to see into the room again. “I was just about to come up here anyway. Your car is the only one left in the parking lot. You ready to leave now, I’m hoping? You do know there’s a hurricane coming?” I raised my forearm to block out the light but ended up pressing it across my brow. Something. Anything. It was awfully bright out considering how overcast it was. The

sky looked odd. “Um, are you sick or something?” Good guess, fish-lips. And my car had been in that spot for two months.

He reached towards my face and I jerked backwards.

“I was only— um, you have a hair in your mouth, Sharon.”

“Sharon, now. What’s that Ms. Shealy shit anyway? New company policy of the Sea Dip?” He kept moving his hands in and out of his pockets. Back front, right left. “Hey, have you got a cigarette?” Beyond his beefy shoulder, on Ocean Boulevard, I vaguely registered something like a traffic jam, bumper to bumper.

“They’re back in the office.” He hitched his thumb behind him. “I’ll go get you one while you get your stuff together, and then I’ll give you a hand putting it in your car. You are just about ready to take off, aren’t you?” His eyes hung on the orange tee shirt. Well, no bra.

“Uh, yeah, sure. In a jiffy, skipper.” My mouth had a life of its own. Much less effort for me that way. Fish-lips gave me a stubby thumbs-up and turned away. One ugly set of thumbs. I collapsed against the door, closing it. No clue. Maybe I was getting evicted for the trashed room anyway, or maybe it was non-payment. Cut-off and kicked-out had gotten familiar. I couldn’t exactly remember where I was on the room charges, but my crafty jungle instinct advised me just to nod, or better yet, stone-face ‘em, but never let on that you don’t know what’s what, which you rarely do anymore.

I picked up the phone and punched in Dan’s number. So what if I had no pride.

• • •

No, not the way it was. A little back-tracking in order. New details drifting up from the muck.

Stinging sand blowing in through the screen – a fine layer collecting on every surface, my face included. These things I noticed after the sticky plastic sheet, with a trail of vomit beside the sweat. Then the angry ocean, really really pissed.

When I finally stumbled my way to it, the door wasn't merely unlocked on the chain – it wasn't fastened at all. I'd lunged for the orange tee and yanked it on. So what, a little flash. The glare from the streetlight hurt my eyes. Yeah, night, I guess. Too much trouble to stand up at the door, so I slumped into the chair to talk to fish-lips, winding damp, greasy strands of hair around my index finger, picking bits of vomit out. He said the electricity was down, predictably, and shoved a warm can of Coke my way. He laid his fat hand on my shoulder and told me to wake up and get a move on.

When he trundled off, I picked up the phone to call Dan, but there was no dial tone. Somebody had yanked the cord out of the wall. Me, most likely. I couldn't figure out how to go plug it back in. Somewhere outside a woman was screeching at Jason to hurry up, and a kid started to bawl.

The wind was terrific, shit was banging all around. Lot of car horns from the Boulevard. It seemed like there was something really important that I needed to do, but I couldn't quite get a handle on it. Then I passed out again.

My father's mother always said, "Accidents will happen to those who are not paying attention."

First time I remember her telling me that it was when I tripped and fell on the front steps, reaching for a butterfly. Tough love, Grandmother. She should have said it a

few thousand more times to her son. His biggest accident was a fatal stroke, alcohol-induced, at the age of fifty-three. To be fair, my accidents had taken on an unsavory pattern of their own.

• • •

“Hey! You can keep the tee shirt. Orange looks real fine on you,” *Gary*, the fish-lipped motel manager said as I flip-flopped my way from the ice machine back to my room, some morning or other. Too much to contemplate.

“Real fine,” he DJ-crooned. Lucky for me, that time I did throw up. I barely had time to make it to the toilet, so there was none left over for thinking.

In semi-conscious states, I mused on the kinds of things that happen, ones that you couldn't see. Ants strolling into electric outlets and frying themselves. Germs on handrails and counters, lurking for an unsuspecting hand. Sharks prowling in the ocean merely three yards from a juicy swimmer.

Motel managers crawling into unlocked rooms and fucking women who were temporarily disconnected from their bodies. Women who had forgotten to mind the store.

Things that might be happening, or might not.

• • •

New data.

I didn't get up to answer the pounding door at all, because I couldn't get off the mattress. I'd been floating in and out, hearing all kinds of bizarre shit outside. Hammers pounding. Waves crashing. Tires squealing. Wind whipping and whistling. People shouting. Running steps on the concrete. Car horns. I didn't know what was real and what wasn't.

After the door pounding waked me, I passed out again. Besides the puke sand and sweat, there was blood on the plastic sheet. My kicking foot. I'd kicked in the air conditioner all right, but sometime earlier, during the night.

Also, sometime during the night, another night, I'd had an unexpected visitor. Time had begun to run together. *That* was the night with the unlocked door. Or was it?

I was way too fucked up to manage something as tricky as a phone.

The immediate clamor moved from the door to the window.

"What's a pillow doing jammed up in your window?" (Good way to close it when you can't handle the normal mechanics.) "C'mon Sharon, let me in! We've got to get moving." Dan. No, Robbie. Dan's sidekick, the cop. Robbie?

I managed to catch hold of the pillow's corner, just enough to tumble it down. I saw blurry Robbie leaning into the screen, shading his eyes to see inside. So far away. But looking lots better than I'd ever noticed.

"Hey, I was worried about you after Chop's yesterday afternoon. You were, uh, well, you nearly fell off the ferry into the river coming back over. And I couldn't track down Dan either, so I thought I should swing by. Sharon? Get up. This storm is some serious shit. The waves are up to the dunes already."

Hurricane.

Deep inside, that sounded familiar. Meant something, dimly. Dozens of hurricane stories, with evacuations, from my father. My own first hurricane, and I was going to miss it. Other people would have to have it without me.

“Go away, Robbie, I can’t.” I couldn’t manage more than a weak whiny moan.

“Sharon, what the hell are you doing, babe? We got to get your ass out of here.”

“Hm?” I tried to raise my head.

“They’re saying it’s going to be a category five.”

My ears were ringing, and everything was grey around the edges. Speeding heart rate, uneven. I tried to breathe evenly, pleading with my heart to slow down. But there was not much air in the cabin.

Chest pain. Chest pain. Chest pain. Numbness in the extremities.

“I think... I think...” Too hard to say. Whisper, then: “Robbie, I’m really sorry, but I think I’m having a heart attack.” I couldn’t feel my face. “Could you come hold me, please?”

It occurred to me that maybe I should make promises – to somebody – that I would be good, very, very good, if only I could make it through, not die here in my puke.

. . .

What Robbie did was slap me hard, on the face. I remember that. And then we were moving, or something was moving me. Him, after he slit the window screen and climbed through. Very inconvenient, but the unlocked door was a different dream.

In the end, it turned out to be only was an anxiety attack, or something like that,

but I spent days in the county hospital anyway. For good measure. And for some reason they kept alcohol off my diet. I was very sick.

It rained and stormed ferociously for three days straight, I hear, but the hurricane didn't hit us head-on. Thank God it moved on up the coast to rip up some North Carolina town, where the people were strangers.

When I walked out of Ocean General, Robbie was there at the front doors in his patrol car. I tumbled in, biting and tearing at the white plastic hospital bracelet, and he lifted my wrist and cut it off without a word. In the back seat sat a box and a couple of milk-crates. My stuff.

It seems I had finally gotten thrown out of the Sea Dip. I might have countered, but, like Daddy always said, you get what you pay for. Later on, I burned the orange tee. I wasn't calling it even, but I was calling it a day.

. . .

Robbie said I could crash at his place for the time being. Seems that Francine had moved in with Dan over the weekend, not that my feelings were hurt.

So it was that we headed out to Robbie's trailer park. Bumping down the dirt road in his patrol car, we passed all manner of yard art, notably a concrete alligator, day-glo plastic pinwheel flowers, appliances both in use and out, a miniature white picket fence with coral roses, a confederate flag painted and peeling on plywood. My hopes lifted when we rounded a bend in the dirt drive and headed toward an Airstream, with bright yellow awnings, shining in the sunlight. Robbie drove on past. He stopped at a

standard issue beige-with-woodgrain corrugated job. I had just about made up my mind that I wasn't going to give it up if I didn't get to do it in an Airstream. Of course there'd be a price, why not? This guy, though -- I had to hand it to him -- had made some spectacular improvements on his piece of turf: a stone-wall foundation, flower boxes with gardenias, no less, and hummingbird feeders. Plus a paper man-target hanging inside the screen door. When I got up close, I saw a ring of bullet holes circling the center, where the heart was supposed to be. NRA, here I come. The new levels of low I could plumb impressed even me.

“Like that, huh? That’s my burglar alarm.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh, when the burglar sees that, he gets very alarmed.” He grinned at me, heedless. Nice teeth, though. Hazel eyes, too. Wondered why I never noticed.

“I’ll just bet. Only Dan could have thought up something that bad.” Guy’s face fell six inches. As houseguest who hadn’t even made through the front door, I was off to a roaring start.

The trailer wasn’t so bad inside. Beat the hell out of my room for housekeeping. Furniture was pretty decent – some of it I even liked. And it had a spare bedroom.

Robbie made dinner: he pulled a couple of bass out of the freezer and threw them on the grill out back, from our fishing expedition out at Chop’s. Pretty fuzzy, and almost impossible to fathom that it’d been less than a week ago.

After dinner, we watched *Law and Order* and ate popcorn.

“*You just don’t get it, do you?*” Briscoe was bracing a suspect.

“Do you guys ever say that? Nuh-uh. No, does *anybody* ever say that?”

“And here, at least once an episode.”

“Exactly.”

“I was going to write them a letter and tell them to get some new dialogue. You, know, advice from a real life cop and all.”

“You should. Get it out of mothballs, jeez. Next he’s going to say–”

“*Take it downtown,*” we said together. It was amazing simply to laugh an honest laugh, stupid as it was.

“Still, I admit I watch the show every week. Most of the guys do,” Robbie said.

“Gotta love *Law & Order.*”

“Gotta.” Filmed all over my neighborhood in Chelsea, not that I was mentioning it. “You know, I’ll take another beer.”

“You know, I’m all out.” The nice teeth again.

They showed Briscoe and Green walking past The Port Authority Terminal. I threw a handful of popcorn at the building on the screen. I was, for a change, really having a good time.

Robbie pointed to the screen. “You ever been there?”

“What, Port Authority,” I snapped. I watched him for a second, then settled down. “Okay, I guess a vodka will be fine.” No thunderclouds on my mood that night.

“That too.” He made the international cupboard–is–bare sign with his hands.

“No, I mean New York City. Ever been?”

“Hasn’t everybody?” I lit a cigarette, shook the match out, and then some.

Looked around towards the kitchen. “So what *do* you–” Just a finger, across my lips.

Then a kiss.

. . .

At the QuikStop, Robbie bought rubbers and I checked out all the different flavors of Life-Savers. We hadn't done it yet. He thought I should have my "own space" for a while. Different, for sure. I'd been at the trailer for two weeks. But we'd decided on it now.

I nicked a roll of cherry flavored, slipped it in my pocket, because I was in that kind of a mood. On the way out, I stopped to pick up a *BargainFinder* and asked how much. "Free dollars," the guy said. I slapped the paper back onto the rack. "What! That's insane!" "FReeee dollars," he said, pressing his belly against the counter. What's with the guys around here – they all look pregnant. Not Robbie, but I was beginning to get cold feet and I wasn't at all sure those rubbers were going to come into play, after all, that afternoon.

"It's free, Sharon," Robbie said. "No charge, a gift from the nice folks. Take it, and come on." I looked back at Paunch-o the Magical QuikStop Cashier, who beamed, or leered, back at me. Comedian, hilarious. Robbie wrapped his hand around my elbow to steer me out of the store, and it was all I could do not to jab him in the stomach with my other one. Such a rush to get laid. I was getting a little cranky.

In the end, though, I let myself be persuaded. Love in a trailer park by the salt marsh. God knows, it took pitiful little to persuade me of anything. But if I'd had any clue how good it was going to be, I wouldn't have wasted precious seconds in the QuikStop, stalling around with the stupid *BargainFinder*.

Good, good, good.

I liked the texture of his skin; it made my hands feel alive. Nice, after so much numbness. And look, ma, no chemical smells. I'd forgotten. Perhaps when you're drunk ninety-nine percent of the time, not to mention, with a guy who can't – but then, why bother with that line of thought?

Here and now, amigos.

• • •

I finally got my license back. It was – it is – my first day driving again, on the back road to Robbie's. It has just started to drizzle; but I am feeling fine. Christmas in just two days, and I'm looking forward to it. I've cut way down on the booze, too, with no ill effects, aside from a periodic hankering. So far.

The cat comes out of the roadside scrub, moves into the road toward the center yellow line. I see it from five or so houses away, plenty far. I brake, but my car doesn't slow like it should. I press harder, and swerve. Oil has risen to the top of the barely wet road – it's slick as hell. I am close enough to the cat now to see that something is wrong with the cat, in its movement, but it isn't stopping either. It is a calico, I see.

I pound on the horn, short bursts, and this time press firm and steady on the brake – but both cat and car are maintaining their courses.

Me. My course. I am the one driving. Veering directly towards this lame calico cat. Contrary to the rules of the road, because I simply cannot bear it, I close my eyes. And for the first time in God knows how long, and regardless of the improbability, I make promises.

DO YOU KNOW HOW TO PONY
(The Junkie in the Parking Lot is My Friend)

There's a little place. (di di DI di-di)

Place called space. (di-di-DI di di di di di)

It's a pretty little place, (didiDI didi)

It's across the track, across the track.

And the name of that place is

I like it like that I like it like that I like it like that I like it like that.

I like it. Like the clear simple piano keys ringing in between each of these phrases. The riff repeats over and over in my head. It's an entirely different mood – a thirteen second respite, melodic, sweet and soft, by comparison – to most of the song, which is driving, frenetic, abrasive. The song explodes again, right after that last phrase, with a cacophonous chord-pounding piano melée, followed by the growling shout of the singer, Patti Smith: *AND THE NAME OF THE BAND IS!*

The real reason I've been listening to this song, "Land," so frequently over the past few weeks is not because of this little riff, however, but because it's my favorite dance song. I do know how to Pony. I can Pony my ass off. I know how to Twist – though not quite as exciting – fine enough. And these are only two in the litany of fifties and sixties dances – a minute, fifteen, in – which comprise the song's eruption into

melody following a deadpan spoken intro. It's an irresistible invitation to rock-out dancing: a cranked-up cover of "Land of a Thousand Dances," Chris Kenner's popular 1962 tune. The section is only a minute long, but it is so revved I wonder if it is in double time. The whole song is nearly ten minutes long. When the song ends, I'm chest-heaving, heart-pounding, my leggings and tee shirt are damp, my face is burning hot, and I want to do it some more.

Why run when you can dance? This revelation came along with the iPod I got a few months ago. I sometimes play the song three times over – once I played it five. I pony double-quick in certain sections. I feel good. The complex of factors leading to this good-feeling result is scientifically verifiable (it's not my imagination). This has to do with the release of endorphins, whose effect ranges from pain-suppression to euphoria – endorphins are opioids, the body's own natural opiates. *Do the Watusi*. I love that, well the sound of the word – *Watusi* – but it's embarrassing to admit I don't really know what it is. I finally went onto the Internet to find out. After that I started reading articles and blogs about the song.

A lot of the discussion centers on the idea that this song, "Land," is about heroin. Something that never occurred to me though I've been listening to it off and on since Patti Smith recorded it in 1975. I thought it was "about" a high school knifing or boy-on-boy rape, and then some other stuff, including a lot of rock-out dancing, and then a suicide. Cool, existential. The heroin interpretation, hmmm, I don't know. The title of the album is *Horses*, however, and horse, heroin, H: common knowledge. It is true that there are plenty of horses in the song: *coming in all directions*. Mares, studs, stallions, seahorses. Horses, the word, repeated eight times in a row. Is it a heroin bliss-out, this

space, this *pretty little place*, that Patti Smith sings sweetly about? It's *across the track*, she says, rendering her own twist on Chris Kenner's bigger R&B hit, 1961, "I like it Like That." Is this an encoded song about heroin, à la Beatles's "Lucy in the Sky?" If so – so what? It might or not might not be "about" heroin. A possible interpretation, I'm no expert on the subject. But I'm not decoding this song, I'm dancing to it.

Do you know how to Pony? Like Boney Maroney?

Do you know how to Twist? Well, it goes like this, it goes like this.

Baby, Mashed Potato, do the Alligator.

I dance to it, fiercely. With joy.

So, so what – about this drug interpretation? Still, I consider calling Evan to ask him what he thinks. He knows all about heroin. I was going to call him anyway, just to chat. To this question, I imagine he'll say either: yes, duh, everyone knows that; or, it's whatever you think it is; or, who cares? But I think this might not be a good idea, asking him. He's in recovery, again, and although my relationship with him is hardly kid gloves, I do worry about making missteps. I don't want to be stupid. I want him to live.

I met Evan and his sister, Lara, when he was ten and she was five; their mother Elizabeth and I had been scene partners in an acting class in New York, and subsequently had become close friends. Evan and Lara weren't merely Elizabeth's and her husband John's offspring. They were my friends too, like family. I went to Fire Island with all of them many summers. Lara and I made sandcastles and played mermaids in the shallows. I crashed around in the big waves with Evan, who always managed, by accident, to bump

up against me, grinning like crazy. Their mom and I made blueberry pies with berries Lara and I picked, during which times Elizabeth, older and more experienced than myself, counseled me tirelessly on my boyfriend issues. Evan competed admirably in games of charades with our actor pals; Lara braided my hair and made “kid” artwork for the sets I was decorating for movies – my day job. We went hiking together in Harriman State Park, Lara and Evan fighting over who got to lead. We all laughed a lot.

So long ago. This year Evan is twenty-eight, and he’s been yo-yoing between addiction and sobriety for ten years. The math is in my face for the first time as I write it – over a third of his life. As of this past Christmas, he was living in a group house in Costa Mesa, California, and working as a mechanic in a Porsche repair shop. But, true to pattern, there’ve been ins and outs. Last spring he was working at an animal hospital, which we all thought was terrific – he loves animals – and he seemed pleased to be doing something that had, for him, a tangible value. That ended somehow – I’ve gathered – to do with yet another relapse. I heard about this when Lara called to let me know that they weren’t going to be able to come visit me, after all, on the cross-country trip they’d planned from New York to California. She left this message on my voice mail. Because Evan had started using again. She sounded tired.

Evan is one of the most brilliant and remarkable people I’ve ever met. I remember thinking this was when he was a kid playing the row of glasses (varying water levels) he’d swiped from everybody’s places and arranged in front of him at the dinner table. His performance wasn’t a recapitulation of some science experiment from school – it was tonally pleasing. More beguiling was the fact that it was off-the-cuff, a

throwaway. True, he did excel in school, in the sciences as well as the arts. Particularly gifted as an artist. Very talented basketball player. He solved *Myst* in one day and called me to gloat – I'd been working on it for two weeks. It seemed he could solve anything he touched, and he always held his own in adult conversation. He had a great perspicacity, quickness to grasp meanings and leap to implications, and an ability to suss grown-up situations. Raw genius, untrained. He could've been an astro-physicist, filmmaker, surgeon, sound-engineer, artist, philosopher, poet. That's what I expected. Correction: could *be*.

Evan is also sweet and wise and funny. Right through adolescence I watched and waited for him to get surly and sullen – the inevitable coming-of-age tragedy. When his voice began to change, I started to mistake him, on the phone – sometimes for his mother, sometimes for his dad. I was embarrassed by this, although he was self-possessed enough to take it in stride. His affectionate nature did not diminish as he grew. At thirteen and fourteen, he continued to give his mom spontaneous hugs, love for her apparent on his face. His unusual perceptivity revealed itself at times such as the beginning of his parents' trial separation a year later, when Evan told his aunt that this was okay, probably the best for everyone, because, in all honesty, his parents really had been only roommates for years now. And there was the cheeky, audacious Evan as well: barely into his teens, he told me he was just waiting to grow up so he could go out with me, explaining later that I should dump my boyfriend in view of this. When he was about seventeen, we were eating burgers at the Empire Diner one afternoon, and chatting about the *Maltese Falcon*. I said I'd always wanted to be a detective, that I thought I'd really be good at it.

“You would be no good at all as a detective, Catherine,” he'd said.

“Why not?” I’m invested in my detecting abilities. My father was great at it.

“Detectives drink bourbon. You drink soy milk.”

• • •

It was ten years ago that Elizabeth told me that Evan had become addicted to heroin; that John had found “works” in Evan’s dresser drawer the summer after his freshman year at Columbia University; that he was in the second of two consecutive rehabs – a couple of the best in the country. We were standing in the kitchen of her Chelsea loft. She was matter of fact in her delivery. I nodded. All the feeling I’d had for this kid over the years must have somehow evaporated; I went cool with no qualms. I don’t remember much about the scenario, except the one thing she has repeated several times since: “Evan always takes whatever he does to the extreme.” Elizabeth is a no-nonsense person, strong and practical; she wasn’t looking for any big show of sympathy. That summer, in 1998, she was barely on this side of the horrible, protracted divorce from John that had dragged the four of them back and forth between New York and Maui, not always all together, for two years. Now she was in New York again, alone and exhausted. I must have told her I was sorry, really sorry about Evan. I don’t remember whether I asked her if there was anything I could do for her. I do know I didn’t ask for Evan’s address, or a phone number, or whether he needed anything. I was surprised and repulsed, and maybe a little angry. But I didn’t feel anything very strongly, because, and this I realize in retrospect, I shut down on Evan that afternoon.

I had made an oath long before that I would never have another active addict in my life again, ever. I'd had no compassion for my father as an alcoholic once I'd finally realized that that was what he was. The subject of his drinking and my parents' terribly unhappy marriage was never mentioned during my childhood. Perhaps my younger sister and I were stunned into this silence – at any rate, we meekly followed everyone else's lead. We couldn't, or wouldn't, understand what was going on. Though he was, in many respects, a fine father, he was an abusive and philandering husband. Nobody spoke so much as a peep about any of these problems until after my mother died of brain cancer in 1972 – actually, not until a few years after that, when my sister and I, as teenagers, finally let loose with each other about all of the unpleasantness that had been going on in our house for so many years. Only then, in finally discussing our father's behavior, did we realize that we were both angry, very angry. It was several years more before I understood that he was an alcoholic. I was in college by that time, and the realization, coming all at once, was both a shock and terribly shaming to me. I had grown up surrounded by alcohol, and somehow could not identify what an alcoholic was. My sense of foolishness, that I had missed all of the obvious, the glaring clues, was extreme.

My relationship with my father was rocky throughout my twenties. I had become less timid, and although I wasn't confident enough to show it, I was angry with him much of the time. He had a raging temper; he demanded an allegiance he didn't deserve; he became more and more often irrational and belligerent. Both my sister and I hated him for the way he had treated our mother. I struggled between love for his warm and charismatic side and respect for his brilliance, and disgust for his weakness. In 1985 we had a blowout argument over the phone while I was working on a movie in a town three

hours away from our family home in South Carolina. Afterwards, I cut him off completely, refusing to speak to him for what turned out to be the last five months of his life. Little did I know – then suddenly he was dead, at age fifty-three, from the effects of acute alcoholism. A doctor had warned him a couple of years before: his liver, his heart. But none of us believed it. He'd always been so strong, despite. At least my sister and I didn't believe it – she said he was too mean to die. For several years, I'd been considering the idea of a forced intervention, but we were afraid of him and the inevitable backlash that would come from any such attempt. I decided to agree with my sister. Won't die, too mean, forget it. When he did die, I was Evan's age, twenty-eight. I was both wracked with guilt for my selfishness, and deeply angered at the unforgivable squandering of his life. He was a failure. A failed human being. The man who'd man who'd been a talented artist, builder of gyroscopes, owner of patents on fishing devices. Threw all his chances, and then his life, away. He was the one who'd coached me to speak in complete sentences and to swim as a tiny child; how to handle a car if it spins out on ice. Not to be afraid of taking things apart when they weren't working, and how to put them back together. To be, always, persistent: to plough through a string of *no's* until you got *yes*. Finally dead, my father's chances with me improved. He had been the only one I could call at two in the morning to chat. I missed him so much. Too late.

I moved to New York a few years after he died, to pursue work in the film business. I lived there from 1989 to 2001, working as a set decorator – mostly in the city, although often on location as well. It was a helter-skelter lifestyle; I didn't work nine to five, but rather anywhere from six am to nine or ten pm. It is creative work, and certainly

rewarding in many ways, but it's a tough world and it is grueling. I was tired of it, and I decided to go back to school, leaving in the fall of 2001 for a one-year Master's degree program in Virginia. That year I left behind, regretfully, my life-partner of nearly ten years: although he'd considered going along, in the end he chose not to accompany me. It was a relatively short period I'd be gone, and we'd been used to four and five month stretches of my time away on location. But when I finished my program following May, I returned home to a sudden and devastating break-up with this man. I was incapable at the time of fighting for my apartment. So it happened that I left New York suddenly, within a few weeks of coming home. I had already made plans to continue on in graduate school in Mississippi, and although I now felt I was in no condition to take it on, I couldn't imagine trying to piece my life back together in New York at the time. My closest friends were worried – they didn't know what would happen to me without some sort of structure, and they all strongly urged me to stick with my plan to continue in school. The hastiness of my departure resulted in wholly inadequate good-byes to many of them; in some case there were none at all – I simply disappeared. I was a wreck; my self-confidence was broken. Once in Mississippi, I maintained poor contact with my friends, and didn't go back to visit. Over the next three years, I got better, and I stayed in school, despite the difficulties I was having. My progress, in all things, was slow.

In the summer of 2005, a friend called to see if I'd come back to New York to help him with a movie he was starting. Just for the summer. I was in classes, but the day he called, I'd been looking through my filing cabinet for a stock certificate to cash in – because I was flat broke. I said yes to his offer.

I returned to New York with trepidation, but reunions with friends and former co-workers were warm and easy. I stayed first with a friend on Bleecker Street. When I went up to see Elizabeth, her loft felt like ever, home. She was doing really well now – good job at Tiffany’s, and a real mensch of a boyfriend. Lara was living back at home with her, going to school at Hunter College; continuing to study art. She was stunning, even with blue hair. Also, at 5’11, she’d become absurdly taller than me. It had been much too long. Soon enough, though, the bad news: Evan was in a court-mandated facility on the lower East Side. Yes, he’d been using again. And on top of that, he was anorexic and bulimic. There were legal issues as well. I asked if I could go see him. Elizabeth told me that visiting hours were on Sunday, one to four pm. I put it on my calendar, and I went.

Avenue D was a lot further East than I’d remembered, not that I’d frequented the hinterlands of Alphabet City. I walked fast, meanwhile worrying that I was going to end up in the wrong place. I hadn’t seen Evan in at least five years. I had dropped out of his life; he was deeply in trouble: what would we think of each other now? I overshot the cross street by a block or two and had to walk back up, but I still wasn’t sure I was in the right place. I walked right past the building I was looking for, not seeing it. There was no big facility, no imposing structure that you’d imagine being connected with court mandates. It was a dinky little building on a seedy block. A couple of guys were hanging on the sidewalk, smoking.

Pride Site, it was called.

I stepped in, registered, and waited. And then there he was, moving through the doorway, lanky and tall, stiff shouldered and loose-limbed, in a black tee shirt. Shockingly gaunt, despite Elizabeth’s forewarning on the anorexia. His color wasn’t

good, and he had a dark, bruised look around his eyes. A massive snake coiled up his right arm, tattooed wrist to shoulder. His hair was long, stringy, and unclean. But, Evan still. That is, Evan revised.

Elizabeth and Lara also came that day, along with Elizabeth's sister, who was up from Philadelphia. We all sat with Evan in the grim cinderblock courtyard, surrounded by clusters of other residents and their visitors. This was not a pretty place. The residents were a rough looking bunch. Evan was in the midst of a group where he would have never belonged as I had known him before. But he fit in, looks-wise, now; and that was all I had to judge by, looks. He was dour and fairly withdrawn – not surprising. His teeth were deeply yellowed, very worn and pitted. He wore a large nose ring, split in the center, which he revealed only once we sat – it had been pushed up in concealment while he was in the presence of the staff. A line of smooth round pink spots ran up the inside of his left arm. Cigarette burns, his aunt pointed out after we left.

Elizabeth had brought Scrabble and playing cards, a quintessential best-foot-forward gesture on her part. I dreaded the prospect of playing these games more than sitting in silence for three hours: it seemed too absurd, although her approach was actually the antithesis of what might appear to be reality avoidance: okay, folks, no pretending, we're in hell, so who's dealing first? If they played, I'd play too. Each one of these family members was an old hand at this now: I didn't know the details from over the years, but it was clear they all knew the drill. Elizabeth also had fruit in zip-lock bags, again, so typical of her, as well as chocolate and cigarettes. I brought him a book, typical of me. Evan played a good host; he offered us coffee, juice and cookies, whatever Pride

Site had set up that afternoon. He told me the grey in my hair was new. He told me he had Hepatitis C. He had felonies, he told me. I didn't ask.

The best part of the visit was watching Lara and Evan show each other the drawings in the notebooks each of them pulled out. Elizabeth had told me that Lara held tremendous anger and resentment towards Evan, so the obvious affection between them here was a great relief, and quite moving. Both of them are talented artists, and while Lara is majoring in art in college, Evan spends a great deal more time doing it. He sketched a good bit while we sat that afternoon.

There but for the grace of God go I. This seems a better way to express my reaction to Evan's situation than ascribing my own better fortune to random dumb luck. I've got the genes in spades and plenty of the inclination. I pushed my own limits with alcohol, amphetamines, and cocaine when I was in my teens and early twenties. I dabbled in bulimia myself, over a period of years, though it had no name for me at the time. My problems with boyfriends are characteristic of what some twelve-step devotees call love addiction; codependence, despite the clichéd term, has applied strongly in many levels of my dealings with other people. Over-spending problems, cushioned by denial, as well. I haven't meant to give the impression that I'm Pollyanna. Compulsion and despair are, in no way, alien concepts to me. As Elizabeth told me in the beginning, Evan takes everything he does to the extreme. My own forays hadn't been a patch on his, but I wasn't completely clueless. I used to tell myself a lot of bullshit about will power and choices, mostly in criticism of my father. That was before I had spent years in Al-Anon meetings, the sister program to AA, the one for friends and family of alcoholics. All of

the above, I suppose, have factored into the reasons I've had compassion lately in the place where I once had revulsion.

Luckily for me, there's Prozac, and things like the *Pony*. They work well enough, not always perfectly. I wonder about the difference between my deep dark places and Evan's. If there is any. No way to know what's going on inside someone else's head. He's been on dozens of medication combinations; my fix-it here is easy, and so much more successful. I wish I could simply give him something... well, like the *Pony*, for instance.

On the other hand, there's my sister – the only member of my core family still alive. Several years after my father died, Marissa, at age thirty-two – emaciated, seriously unwell, after a year of snowballing catastrophes – had called me for help. She'd been drinking since she was fourteen; by the time she was twenty-four, I was certain that she, like our father, was an alcoholic. Maybe because of this, coupled with my guilt over doing nothing to help him, I did attempt an intervention with her – she was maybe twenty-seven at the time. But that had succeeded only in making her hostile. And, ever after, wary of my intentions. We'd had bitter, ongoing fights over the family property we'd inherited – she had threatened to sue me. By this time, 1993, I was in no rush to return her calls anymore – I was finally at the point of giving up on her. I was working on a commercial in Bermuda the week she called several times, and despite my boyfriend's suggestion that she sounded like she really needed to talk to me, I waited until I finished the job and returned home to New York to phone back. I had to idea it was THE CALL. When I finally spoke to her, I understood, and flew down to North Carolina to help her.

Just like our father, Marissa had become what we used to call hard-core – start drinking upon waking and continue until unconsciousness – moreover – *she didn't have a problem*. She told me later that she'd had a moment of clarity, had realized that she was going to die, and didn't want me to have to come find her like that in a filthy apartment with the power turned off and a starving cat. The idea that you don't that to cats or people – this was somehow what my sister felt back when she called me for help. It's possible that an altruistic impulse saved her life.

Hell of a thing, that.

Later on, I felt that she had scored a victory for all of us. To an extent, Marissa had even vindicated my father, done what he couldn't. She had gotten it right. I was astonished and eminently grateful as she became well. Nonetheless, I slid into a depression over the next few months. It wasn't about ideas and I wasn't conscious of it for a long time; not to mention the fact that this reaction was completely counter to logic. But I was tired, and somehow my family history came crumbling around me after Marissa got sober. That's when I made my oath: never again, never another addict in my life. I started going to Al-Anon. For me, this time, not for her – not like the time five years before when I'd tried it with the sole purpose of learning how to *fix her*. It was enormously helpful, and I made a lot of lasting friendships. The idea that we have the power to choose the people in our lives was a revelation. And unlike most people I knew, with so much of my family being dead – grandparents, along with many of my closest aunts and uncles – I had few obligations. Few obligations, at a terrible price – I figured it was a bad trade-off, but I wasn't the one who dealt it. At any rate, in regard to my oath and choosing, hadn't I earned the right to *choose*?

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July 2005. The Sunday after that first visit to Evan, I called to see if Elizabeth was going to see him. No, she corrected me: visiting hours are only the *first* Sunday of the month. Three hours out of every thirty days, the residents were allowed to see friends and family, or any other humans at all, outside of Pride Site. I decided I needed to be there every time. It was a drop in the bucket, it seemed to me, the very least I could do. So once a month, through the summer and fall, I went. Evan and I gradually reestablished a friendship, a new one based on the old. He told me more about his situation, explained some of the medical stuff, more about the Hep C. I was dismayed to learn that he wasn't getting treatment for it – I think because of the money. Worrisome indeed.

During this time, I confided in Evan as well. I told him about the struggles I'd had myself, my depression, my sometimes-sense that I'd screwed it up, all of it. My former drinking and bulimia. I told him about my father and Marissa – he actually knew my sister, but not her whole story. I was sharing, I was trying to bond, I sought to tell him things that might help. I was anything but a shining role model, but I wanted to get across the idea that you could fuck up and still have it come out okay. Just as Patti Smith sings, *Life is full of holes*. Sings in this same song, the one in which she's urging us to dance. *Land of a Thousand Dances* – there you have a lot of options. He listened, but I don't know if anything I said mattered at all. Responses, as usual now, subdued.

Evan was released from Pride Site the day before Thanksgiving, after a nine months' residence. He was staying at his mom's loft for the moment, and she was spending the holiday with her boyfriend's family, out of town. When I called over early

on Thanksgiving afternoon, Lara answered. She said she thought Evan was fucked up. I thought she was being ornery, and pursued my idea of us all going to a movie.

“No,” she said, “he’s cooking breakfast, and he made way too much food, and he’s swaying back and forth at the stove and I think he’s going to fall over.”

I spoke to him, and concluded that Lara was right. It was clear that talking was of little use – we got off the phone before long. Lara kicked him out of the apartment afterwards. Evan had been in a lock-down rehab for nine months, in his mom’s apartment for one night, had gone out and scored –and by his second day free, was homeless one more time in New York City.

A couple of days later he was back at Pride Site, and this was a lucky thing: the relapse had been swept under the carpet. Square one? I didn’t know.

But he must have been on good behavior, as he began to get a few more privileges (he’d often been on restrictions of one kind or another before.) Around Christmastime, he had a pass, so we all met for a meal and bowling one night. I had no idea my friends were such talented and ruthless bowlers. All three of them, very competitive. I had a strained elbow, and sat it out watching and snapping photos; I bowled only once or twice. It was really good fun nonetheless, and most important to me, it was the first time I’d seen Evan appear to enjoy anything since I’d returned to New York. I have seventy pictures from that night; I’ve gone through them over and over since. Lara is gorgeous, and Elizabeth is vivacious and beautiful. One of my favorites is of Lara lying curled in the lane, where she’d hurled herself in the agony of a bad roll. Evan looks mostly gloomy; rather spectral in a several shots. I notice a scar in his eyebrow, an injury he’d had during his last relapse. (He’d laughingly said something about running into a telephone pole, and I

hoped that was all.) There's one of Elizabeth and Evan with their arms around each other, it's blurred, but a definite keeper. His slight smile is only in his eye. The other eye, reminiscent of a long ago Evan, was shut – he'd had the levity to wink as I snapped.

Three months later, Evan was released from Pride Suite once again. I met him with my car down on Avenue D, he loaded a large duffel and a couple of boxes of stuff in, and we drove over to Brooklyn where he'd arranged to stay with a program friend. The particular neighborhood wasn't a nice one. A couple of young guys were sauntering back and forth, back and forth, across the street. Shiftless, I thought. I hoped for the best.

Evan bounced around, staying different places. He kept up his meetings. As far as I knew, was staying sober. He stayed in hostels some nights – his mother paid. Sometimes I doled out money that she'd left for him whenever she was went out of town, which was fairly often. Once he spent the night on the roof of Elizabeth's building – another tenant had buzzed him in – Evan no longer had keys to his former home. All night diners. Other places I'm sure, ones I'd like not to think about.

During the year following my return to New York, I moved in and out of places nine times. Some were repeats, kind of like Evan. Old hat to him, whereas, despite my gypsy-style work and school, this level of temporary living was something new to me. Now a small thing in common. I lived at Elizabeth's loft twice, one of the times coinciding with a stay of Evan's. I paid a minimal rent to Elizabeth, and she put me in her bedroom, off from the rest of the sprawling loft. She moved to a smaller room, adjoining Lara's. Meanwhile, Evan crashed on the sofa; I felt guilty getting a prime bedroom spot while the son was on the sofa, but Evan wasn't allowed in Elizabeth's room. There was

too much jewelry in there, the door had to remain locked at all times. Problems in the past, I didn't ask for any details. The arrangements were a jigsaw puzzle that Elizabeth carefully worked out.

Being there with the three of them – it was more like a family than ever. But Evan rustled around all night. I watched quarts of ice cream disappear from the freezer in triplicate. He and I shared a bathroom, and the bits of vomit around the toilet began to get to me. It was psychically crowded as well. Around that time, a great deal on a sublet on the upper west side fell into my lap. It was really hard to tell my friends that I was going to be moving out; I was torn about it as well.

Shortly afterwards, though, I got Evan an intern gig on the movie I was working on. It was a risk, something I'd never done before even with a stable friend, and I considered it very thoroughly. I wasn't deluded about the possible consequences. He was suffocating from a lack of stimulation, and I knew he would be terrific at all of the creative and research stuff. He was.

Around this time, the friend with whom he was currently staying kicked him out of her apartment. He called and told me she'd freaked out on him, implying she was wacko, but not specifically denying any fault of his own. Deep breath, but I said okay, he could come over. I wrote down a list of rules on a piece of paper, before he got there. There were two lists actually. Things that were not allowed to do in my apartment: like eating all the food out of my fridge, puking it up in my toilet, using heroin, or staying up all night. Embarrassed, I gave it to him to read before I went to bed and didn't mention it again.

Things seemed fine for a while, him staying with me. And nice, too. One evening he sat in the chair, talking over to me on the bed, piles of books and stuff around me like I do. He kidded me about being in my nest. Sitting there with his legs crossed, some gesture he made, I saw Elizabeth in him. Who knows why that pulls on your heart? We went out to dinner and breakfast before work, most of the days he stayed at my apartment. It was off and on, not all the time. He was bouncing around. He had also stayed at his mom's loft, some more, off and on. Now, once again, he wasn't allowed to be there. Elizabeth had taken a renter after I left, and one night Evan had come into the loft very late. He made some food. Sometime during the night, the renter walked into the kitchen, and found him naked, asleep on floor. She flipped out, and threatened to call the cops if she ever saw Evan anywhere near the apartment again. Elizabeth needed the rent money, she didn't argue. She'd had it with her son, anyway.

Evan ended up relapsing again. The last time he stayed with me he ripped the toilet-paper holder off the wall; I guessed he'd been using it as a handhold over the john, getting a grip. And there were empty cartons of ice cream, which had fallen between the sofa bed and the wall. He had made a lot of noise rumbling around that night. This was a sublet I was in, my landlords were on the floor below me, and my own tenancy was hardly secure. His transgressions were no big deal in the larger scheme, but on the other hand – not allowed, my house rules. Things were plainly getting worse. Then Evan screwed up his position on my movie: thankfully, only by his absences. The agreement for him to stop coming was mutual, though more or less by default.

During this period, I tried to leave Elizabeth out of it as much as I could. She was tired, and what she didn't need to know, I didn't tell her. Part of what I was doing was

trying to give her a break, for herself, besides my fear that all his family was going to give up on him. I'm pretty sure it had happened before, and understandably. Things like the puking I could skip; losing the job I couldn't. She'd been asking all along, she wanted to know how it was working out. It was around this time – the more I became involved in helping Evan – that she had started telling me I needed to start going to Al-Anon meetings again. I hadn't been to any since I left New York in 2002. She was right. I didn't like her suggestion at all.

One Saturday, near the end of April, of this season in 2006, my cell phone started ringing at 5:30 in the morning. Evan, caller ID. I didn't pick up, but did take the trouble to listen to the message, which said that he'd spent all night in diners, and he didn't have anywhere to go. And that if I'd let him crash it would be great. But that if I didn't want to, he understood. And if that were the case, could I just lend him a blanket or two, because it was pretty cold out, if he was going to go sleep in the park? I turned the ringer off. I thought about blankets – the only ones I had belonged to my landlords. A petty difficulty. I mulled for a minute. No. No blankets for users. The door buzzer started going soon after the first couple of calls. It was loud. I sat and listened to the quiet in between my buzzer blaring, but couldn't tell whether he was ringing other buzzers in the building too: a frequent MO of a New York grifter; I was afraid I'd hear him knocking on my inside door next. I became furious – I was working sixty-seventy hours a week, and this was my only morning to sleep. It was April, ten months after I'd returned to the city. So what if Evan, the user was a little bit cold? I was colder.

I stayed in bed until 2:30 that day, hiding. I was afraid to go out of the building because he might be waiting there to ambush me. Not afraid of any violence, merely of his presence.

A few weeks later Evan came to get the duffel of stuff he'd left behind. He sat on the pullout sofa, same one he'd slept in while staying with me; I sat on the floor across from him. Small awkward talk, and then suddenly I was yelling at him:

“Do you know how lucky you are – do you understand what extraordinary gifts you've been endowed with? Do you think it is okay to waste them?” Even though he wasn't really there, the Evan I knew, but dull and hollow – ghost Evan – I screamed at him. “And you've never once said, never actually said, that you really want to quit.” I didn't voice my fear that he might have HIV as well, although I knew the chances were excellent. Then I sat and cried. But he was mad right back at me, my friend who wasn't there, not really *there*.

“Do you think you're telling me something I've never heard before? Any clue how many times? Do you think it's helped?” He didn't address that last question about quitting, maybe because I didn't pose it as a question, maybe for another reason. He also told me that he was really disappointed in me, that I'd turned away from him when he needed a blanket that day several weeks before. Sitting there in front of the hollow man, I was chastened. And wondering if I maybe I was the one beginning to lose control.

Over the years, before I started working in film, I worked at pools and lakes around my hometown. I pulled a couple of panicking kids out of the water in the course of my job. That kind of saving you can do. I was trained, I was working, I would have

done it anyway. It occurs to me now that they both fought me, the little one who didn't know how to swim as well as the big one who did – whom I'd taught myself. My father, who was my first (and always my primary) swimming instructor, had cautioned me to expect this. After my final life-saving course test, he had made me pull him out of the ocean, through the waves to the shore. The official test wasn't good enough for my father, though I'd passed both it and the course. He played a compliant victim, but six foot two and well muscled; I was fourteen and it was hard work. He told me the story of nearly having to knock out a stranger, a non-swimmer, during a boating accident, in order to pull him to safety. Laughing, he said "I was trying to get him out of the ocean, and the guy was fighting me like hell." My father wanted to make sure I could handle what I was undertaking to do, and that I understood the difficulty.

It's not the same. I know you can't save people from addictions. I know you can't fix them, I want to make clear to Elizabeth and anyone else who might be wondering. Hey, I know that. Still, it's something to think about. For years I bore the title Life Guard. Maybe it's a trained inclination. And yeah, that same father of mine, the drunk. *Life is full of holes.*

Soon Evan was back in a rehab. This time at Beth Israel Medical Center. It was more user-friendly than Pride Site: the approach here wasn't as severely behavioral, and there were visiting hours twice a week. I'd finished my job on the movie, so I had plenty of time, and I went as often as possible. I took him books; he didn't read them, I found out later. I took him chocolate, worrying whether he was just going to puke it up. A thing beyond my control. I even bought him cigarettes once.

Evan was different this time than he had been at Pride Site. He asked me to help him with research on halfway and sober house programs, some place to go into after he got out of this short detox. He was motivated and already doing an impressive amount of work himself, but his resources were limited in the clinic. He was adamant that he needed to get out of New York, and his reasoning/instinct was convincing: every time he came back to the city, he relapsed. He was leaning toward Newport Harbor, a place in California that his dad had found. It sounded like a good, structured place.

When Evan left for California, July 2006, he left a card he'd drawn for me, containing a long hand-written letter. I had gone off to work on a new job in Rhode Island, so I didn't get it for almost six months. Elizabeth gave it to me when I passed back through New York, finally headed back south to resume my studies after an unplanned hiatus of nearly two years. The card was an ink drawing, painstakingly rendered on fine cotton paper. A scowling cloud spews rain and bolts of lightning beside a large, symmetrical, equanimous sun. A snake lurks below the cloud, in the foreground. He refers to the images in his letter:

“I tend to play clouds to your sunshine but it's just my way of letting you know I love you.” Despite the carefree attitude, I sensed honesty. There were more solemn thoughts as well – he raised a question that I had actually given a lot of thought to over the preceding eighteen months:

“I tend to question everything so I wonder why you've been so good to me especially in light of my rather erratic and sometimes disrespectful behavior. Apparently you care, which as a creature of rather low self-image, I view suspiciously at times but nonetheless appreciate. I guess I'm used to more *quid pro quo* relationships, which tend

to accompany my line of work which is rampant dysfunction and absurdist delinquency and other forms of chemical/moral/behavioral folly.”

The reports about Evan had been good since he'd left, and I had talked to him a few times on the phone. It was six months later, so I didn't feel pressed to call him to address his quite reasonable questions. Elizabeth had also thanked me over and over for the attention I'd given him. She's smart and more experienced in this arena than anyone should ever have to be; she'd probably figured out most of the possibilities on her own. There's an excellent chance she knew more about what I was doing than I did myself. But I often heard a silent voice asking: “Catherine, why are you doing all of this now? Why, after all this time?”

I think the single biggest reason is because I could. For three years after I left New York, I couldn't have helped anyone. It seemed I was barely able to help myself. I was a mess, though in lessening degrees over time. The lessening degrees had so much to do with the help and love I got from my friends, people from all over the country. People who went out of their way to do more than they had to do, certainly more than was convenient. The list is long, I can't begin to cover it here. I don't know what would have happened otherwise – there's no way to know. I probably would have survived, but there is no doubt in my mind that I could possibly have done it so well. When I returned home, went back to New York in 2005, I finally had enough strength to spare. There was no question in my mind about whether or not I should.

The reasons having to do with my father and sister are obvious. Elizabeth is a friend of with Marissa as well, and she knows all about our family history, she

understands my grief and guilt over my father. She's also a long-term veteran of AA and Al-Anon, and could see the textbook adult-child-of-an-alcoholic compulsion in me to fix things. It's classic, and it's true.

I knew Evan wasn't a stand-in. I know he's not my chance for a do-over. I know you can't fix people.

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Evan called me two weeks ago at 4:30 in the morning. March 24, 2008. I'm back in Mississippi, finally finishing up my last semester of coursework. We'd been emailing earlier that night, I'd sent him a poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Short simple poem, easy to read, words maybe not swimming in front of his eyes, as he says they do now. I keep trying – can't let go of looking for something he will read. By the time he called, I was asleep, my ringer was off. No message. I've been calling and emailing since, no luck, no reply. I started leaving messages for his mom 'just to say hi;' keeping my tone light. If something is wrong, I don't need to add to her grief. But I'm hoping for good news, to stop worrying. I finally got her on the phone a couple of days ago. Not a happy Elizabeth.

"Things aren't so good: *x*, and *y*, and Evan is using again." X and Y made no impression, I couldn't hold onto them in view of the news about Evan. I told her she may have guessed that that was why I was calling. "Because you knew?" she asked. I told her no, but that I'd been worried and why. "Well, I called the morgue," she said, "not because of anything in particular, just that I couldn't find him. So now he's living in his

car, at the place he works, and he won't take the money I've offered him to go into detox. So far he's not taking it. He's not ready. He's in despair. I don't know."

"I'm so sorry," I told her. "I'm really sorry to have bothered you. But now, well now I'll stop worrying," I paused here because I have trouble with this word, "and pray."

"That's a girl," she said. "I love you."

Despair. It's peculiarly difficult to summon what it feels like – when you're lucky enough not to be in it. It's hard to explain to anyone else. Like you are talking underwater, with your words warping into unintelligible bubbles. But when you're there, *in it*, it requires a supreme act of imagination to entertain the thought that you might – ever again – be out of this hell you are in now. It requires hope, maybe something stronger, like faith. That's how I imagine Evan is feeling, out there, in the car, short on hope and faith.

I feel like a voyeur, an opportunist, a toad. How fragile is the equilibrium? I have no sense of power in anyone's life, that I could do anything that might push them over some edge. But can we talk about anything safely? Maybe I shouldn't talk to him at all.

About equilibrium, I suppose the answer is that, in his case, there is none.

What does it mean to be a human being? What does it mean, in this case, to be this human being, me? What does it mean to be that one: you, or him, or her? It's a commonplace that we are, by nature, seekers. The developing child torments its tutors with a thousand whys, so many of them unanswerable. It appears though, that the child has faith that the adult knows the answers. Perhaps because the adult doesn't walk around

displaying those aspects of awe and uncertainty with which the child is so familiar. What if we told the child that most of the questions have no answers, or none absolute – and that to be an adult was to be filled with all those same questions and more. Mostly without the wonder and delight. Insert heaviness, anxiety, the suspicion of *not* having been let in on some crucial secret, or worse, having been tricked outright. Who am I, where am I going, and where was I already supposed to have been, well before now? Why does it so often feel so not good?

Look, Evan, just *Pony*. You don't have enough endorphins, the ones you have are clearly compromised.

Look at me. See? Alive.

I have a grisly image of a hollow man doing the Pony. Bones and loose skin, his teeth chatter and limbs flap. He clatters at the mercy of taut, needle-thin wires. When you look into his eyes, you see *nothing happening at all*.

Stop.

Now that I have lost contact, my only recourse for continued conversation is hypothetical. I wish I could just insert what I know into Evan's head. But you can't make people know stuff. Especially since it may be stuff that only you, so to speak, *know*. In some circles called an opinion. I can pursue the argument all I want though, because it's in my head, not in Evan's ears:

Meaningless is unappealing to me, so I choose meaning. Because I don't know what the meaning is, I have to make it up. For my own private use, of course. A

conclusion so far: part of the meaning of life is to be happy. The alternative, whether by choice or default, just seems stupid. All of which, for me, Evan, doesn't contradict the basic fact of the absurd. *Life is full of holes*. There's an inherent conflict in doing things that make us happy but that are at the same time destructive. I concede that this is a balancing act. Also that everyone is free to do as they wish. Really. Yes, there are consequences, duh.

Maybe I ought not talk to Evan at all. But I pray that I have the opportunity: the *whether* of which is a terrifying uncertainty. I can't do anything to help him. He's out there in a car in parking lot in California. Shooting up, shooting himself in the head, or not. At the edge, over the edge, or not.

Or, or not.

There's nothing I can do. Just hope. Elizabeth isn't returning my occasional, intentionally innocuous messages. I don't begrudge this. Lara and I send silly emails back and forth late at night. We speak on the phone once and laugh a lot, we like to laugh, say we miss each other. I don't ask her about Evan. There's a good chance she doesn't know. If it came to the worst, however, of course she would know, and she'd tell me.

I can't get Patti Smith's song out of my mind. I have started dancing to it less, and thinking about it more. This isn't a happy thing.

Since I started writing this, my friend has gone from hanging in, to off the radar. From having a place to live, to homeless again. It would be so much easier for me emotionally to put him out of my mind. That is, I think it would, if I could do that. Life is

nicer when one puts troubling things out of one's mind. I have done so before, there's proof that I can.

So many people believe that anyone who makes choices like this gets what he or she deserves. Substance addiction is the most horrible disease there is, from where I stand. I say this with a substantial degree of reference, having watched my mother suffer for a year with brain cancer before her death. Addiction is a thousand times more complicated than choices and strength of will, although I'm not saying those aren't involved. Personal responsibility, no argument. But I think it takes a miracle as well, whatever miracles are. How do you fight your way through a poisoned mind to get to the other side? It's a vicious paradox. I think all those recovered addicts out there are walking miracles. I know my sister's recovery was a miracle, I watched it all the way through. She couldn't conceive of an existence without alcohol, so how could her drunken brain convince her otherwise? But it did, against all probability. I think of it as some amazing window that opened for a moment, for her. She's stayed sober, remained in recovery. I think that's a miracle, too.

You can't hand people miracles.

Meanwhile, I keep ringing Evan's cell. No answer yet, but I'm hoping. Well, hope doesn't quite cover it. He's living in a car in a parking lot, out in California, god knows where. I think of the altruistic impulse, one like my sister's, and *pray* (as I'm not saying the word aloud) that Evan might have one, if it comes down to it.

For now, I only want to tell him, to be able to tell him, that I'm still his friend.

Elizabeth has just called me. Evan is out of the car, in detox. He's alive. The small hairs on my arms, wrists to shoulders, have risen. For the moment, he is safe. They are making plans together for what next, a stable situation, a psychiatrist focused more keenly on the neuro-chemistry. The roller coaster may still be running, but the quotient of hope has gone up.

And I'm going to get to tell him. Or maybe I'll tell him something else. Maybe I won't say anything at all. But I could, and right now, that feels like enough. More than enough—maybe a miracle.

In the meantime, I'm queuing up Patti Smith on the iPod. I'm going to *Pony*. I'm going to Pony and, for this hour, forget the rest.

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