

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: SINGULARITIES
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SINGULARITIES is a work of fiction; it is the beginning of a novel about a mathematician, Allie Waters, who is haunted--and still mesmerized--by her lover, Shelby, more than twenty years after her death. The novel is structured as a collection of individual pieces of Allie's memory as filtered through her mathematically-inspired theory of life based on the "Calculus of Residues." Some of Allie's "singularities" include her experiences growing up in rural Florida with her best friend Michael, a series of mystical out-of-body experiences that are ultimately diagnosed as temporal lobe seizures, her short but intense relationship with Shelby in college, and the complex connection she continues to share with both Shelby and Michael throughout her life.

SINGULARITIES

by
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Calculus of Residues

The first time the static came into my brain, I thought it was the radio. I was ten years old and it was almost-summer, 1977. My mother and I lived in a trailer nestled among the Florida pines and palmetto, and the only air conditioning was in her bedroom, not mine. At night I'd crank my roll-out window open as wide as it would go, but the air was thick and still. So I lay awake, sweating in my short-pant pajamas, listening to the crack-buzz-pop of my transistor radio through its wobbly old antenna. I'd just learned about skywave propagation from Michael's Encyclopedia Britannica, about how the Earth's atmosphere bent itself over after dark, reflecting radio waves farther and farther, which explained why I could get such far away stations on the AM dial but only late, late at night. That's what I was thinking about the first time the vibrations slipped under my skin.

Out of nowhere, static twisted and skipped, like changing stations on the radio but I hadn't touched the dial. I lay still. Then came a hum and a buzz, so close and so loud. Ten years old and determined I knew everything, I was sure it was the skywave bending lost radio beams around the ionosphere and landing them right in my brain. But as soon as that thought came, it was gone, as if it were captured and locked away. The erratic thrum, the rhythmic *err-whir-shh*, *err-whir-shh*, ricocheted through my skull.

An invisible force took hold of me; its chaos expelled me. I rose beyond the physical hold of my bones. I tried to open my eyes; my voice clenched and froze. The world moved without moving, and I was in a time bubble of unknowing, impossible to discern an instant from a year from a lifetime. I was a child but I wasn't a child, a girl and

not a girl, afraid yet braver than brave.

Over the course of my life I have come to know this sensation so intimately that I think of it as the sinew of my soul. Always there, under the surface of skin and bone, it lays waiting to connect me to the part of myself I cannot see, and still barely understand. But that first time was pure sensation. In a blink—or five thousand eternities—the static was gone, the hum dimmed to nothing, and I drifted up to the ceiling. A calming vibration lulled me up, up, away from my body. I floated in comfort and bliss, as the vibration rocked me gently, this way and that.

Was I lost? Or found? Was it God? Was I dying?

I thought those things; I'm sure I did. But whether it was then or now or some glimmer of twin infinities in-between, I don't know. There is no logic inside pure chaos, no reason inside infinite peace.

When I returned to myself that night, when my eyes opened, I lay rigid in my twin bed. Bright moonlight filtered through the pine trees out my window. I'd flown all the way to that bright shining moon, yet my slight tomboy frame had not budged.

It was the most significant moment of the first ten years of my life, and I held it as close as I could. Whatever it was that stole me away from my body, claimed me—total and complete—and I vowed to protect it, love it, keep it my secret. It was not the radio, not skywave propagation. I had no name for it, but it was mine.

The familiar DJ's voice tried to fill the empty air: "...*WWYZ, Zephyrhills, your hometown easy listening. It's midnight, Z-hills, in the county of Pasco. Rest easy.*" But I was not fooled. My soul had glimpsed another world, and "home" became a question without a simple answer.

Ever since that first singular moment, there's never been a simple answer.

*

When she gave the painting to me, Shelby said it was a joke, a puzzle meant to craze my analytical mind. "Art can't be solved," she said. "It's beyond that." So she painted me a chalkboard, filled with my favorite mathematical symbols placed in nonsensical disarray. Not a single cluster of numbers, letters, or signs juxtaposed against one another in Shelby's painting makes any mathematical sense at all. That, by itself, is quite an artistic achievement, and I told her so. "You have to understand how things *do* fit together in order to arrange them so contrarily...to achieve your desired effect," I said.

She winked at me, borderline-condescending, and said, "But you know I don't understand any of it. Right?" And that's when she coined the aphorism we would debate for years.

"Obsession is a content-free language," she said.

The black paint she used to render the chalkboard on canvas still darkened the tips of her fingers, the back of her knuckles, as she launched into her endless discourse on the varieties of obsessive experience. The red, bleary eyes of a gambler at a Blackjack table at 5 a.m. The constant motion of compulsive hands under a faucet, scrubbing and cleaning: it's never enough so they scrub and clean, scrub and clean, over and over again, achieving nothing but red and swollen skin. "You've got pads and pads of yellow paper with these incomprehensible scribbles from top to bottom," she said. "I don't know what any of it means, Allie, but I can feel it work its way through you. I recognize its texture

and tone, its rhythm and drive. It is obsession. Its language is loud and clear: and 100% content-free."

Moments later we were wrestling naked under a thick cloud of blankets, and we didn't stop for hours. But I never conceded this point. I will argue it beyond the limits of time, as Shelby is well-aware.

Today, the chalkboard painting, which Shelby titled *Singularities*, stands as large and grand as the real, slate blackboard that covers the wall adjacent to it in my office. She was right about the way it would affect the analytical mind. Staring at the chaotic arrangement of symbols drives most mathematicians, and my best students, to utter distraction. They yearn to revise it, to make order where clearly, there is none. I'm not immune to the impulse but I've been fighting it a long time. Over the years I've trained myself to focus on the beauty of the individual objects she captured so delicately. The smooth, elongated S of an integral. The sharp, stab of a summation. Pristine Greek letters, suggestive calligraphic fonts; the fine tip on an arrow of implication. The symbols in Shelby's painting are rendered with impeccable authenticity, since she watched me write them again and again, in notebooks, on the sides of grocery lists, coffee-stained napkins, liquor-store receipts.

"Do you ever *not* think about math?" she asked me once, and at the time, when I was nineteen or twenty, the answer was clearly No. I was absorbing definitions, theorems, proofs, straight through my pores, day and night. She knew I was thinking about math all the time, but I never gave her the satisfaction of admitting it directly. Today, my answer is more complex. My obsessions are more diffuse. Or at least, it feels that way to me. Shelby likely has a different view. But I still contend that I am not, nor

was I ever, a bleary-eyed gambler blind to my own destruction.

My work is not a compulsive habit. It is my life.

In my hand is a gold-embossed envelope that contains an invitation I picked up from the post office two hours ago.

*Michael Underwood and Naomi Clark
request the pleasure of your company
to share in the celebration of their marriage
Saturday, the nineteenth of November,
Two thousand and eleven
at four o'clock in the afternoon
East Pasco Presbyterian Church,
Wesley Chapel, Florida.*

Folded into a small square and pressed beside the invitation is a handwritten letter in Michael's tight, careful cursive. I sink into the low-riding leather chair between my desk and the chalkboard and read it for the second time.

Dearest Allie,

Even the most reclusive box turtles and armadillos in Pasco County are shocked out of their shells by this one. And poor Eddie. After so many years of struggle, he'd finally accepted that his only grandson was a confirmed homosexual--with only the slightest of hetero tendencies---and now look what I've done. It should be the most awkward reception ever witnessed by God. I can't begin to tell you how happy I will be to have my dearest friend there beside me. Thank you, again, for handling all of this so graciously.

I know we have 5 million ways to communicate these days but I couldn't resist a throwback to simpler times, and so I write this with pen and ink applied to good ol' paper:

I love you, Allie.

I am both thrilled and terrified for you to meet Naomi. That is to be expected. No?

Faithfully, and Forever, Your Friend,

Michael

It's Friday afternoon, late September, and my freshmen are in the throes of first-exam panic. My office door is shut but I hear the scuffle of sneakers, pacing back and forth in the hallway. Someone will knock, soon enough. For now, I take a moment to let the low-riding leather chair envelop me like a warm glove.

The arms of the old chair are worn thin from too many hands; its chocolate color has faded. The chair has rooted in its spot like an ancient tree. It cannot leave me.

I discovered the chair, abandoned and helpless, in an alley off Rhode Island Avenue in the spring of 1996. Michael lived in D.C. then, too, and together we dragged it down side streets and through crosswalks, then lugged it up two flights of stairs to my office where it has stayed ever since. I've never been drawn to fine, new things as much as the worn and storied. There was no way to know the chair's history before it met me but clearly it had one. And though it could never tell me its secrets directly, over time, they have become mine.

Michael teased me that day, as he often did, saying I was "a lousy excuse for a lesbian," needing a man to help move a chair. He was joking, but it's the truth. I am a lousy excuse for a lesbian; I always have been.

The chair was quite a find, though. Even after all these years it's still my favorite place to think; and as a guest chair, it serves its purpose well. The most casual kind of

student visitor--the ones who are fulfilling a requirement and have no real interest in learning mathematics--are caught off-guard by the proximity of the seat to the floor, and never stay long. But for some reason, mathematically prodigious students fall comfortably into its tattered embrace, limbs akimbo, as I do. My best student at the moment, Jordy Mathers, is tall and wiry and always highly caffeinated, but he can sit in my old leather chair for hours. We both admire the perfect angle it provides to gaze up at the chalkboard, eliminating glare from the overhead light and window. It's an extremely comfortable chair, addictive even, if you're willing to abandon yourself to its dimensions.

The other board in my office, covering the entire wall next to Shelby's painting, is the last surviving slate chalkboard at the university. Although it belongs to the college and not me, I consider it a prized possession. When technology remade the campus a few years back, the administration was so proud of all their "improvements." High-performance computer labs, tablets for faculty, touch-screens in classrooms, dry-erase whiteboards. Just let me keep my chalk, I said. The only devices I need to teach my classes are textbooks (in print, preferably, with hardbound covers), mechanical pencils, and engineering graph paper. But more than anything, good, solid mathematics requires chalk. Smooth yellow chalk rolling between fingers and thumb. A real slate, chalkboard is a mathematician's essential tool, I told the department chair, the Dean, the Chancellor. It is not a relic to be so hastily discarded.

I'm not sure how I convinced them to let me keep it, honestly. I probably have a few students to thank for lobbying on my behalf. I may sound like a cantankerous old Luddite but I love teaching, and I have an eclectic mix of loyal students—from the over-eager math-obsessives with whom I have so much in common, to the quiet loners

struggling in low-level courses without social skills or study groups who appreciate my willingness to repeat entire lectures in office hours if it proves helpful to them, and of course, there are the tomboyish girls (and the increasingly visible transgendered kids) who can't help but feel a kinship to the aging tomboy in me, regardless of whether they love or hate the math I try to teach them.

I like it best when the tray of my chalkboard is full of powdery yellow dust. I run my fingers along the edge while I'm thinking, rub the chalk deep into the creases of my palm. I need chalk on my hands the way Shelby needs paint under her fingernails. I do not sneeze or struggle with chalk allergies the way some of my colleagues and a growing number of students do. I feel for them, but I don't clean the board often because having a space to keep problems and conjectures close at hand is precisely the point of a chalkboard. You have to keep the math in front of you, I tell my students. Even when you don't think you're working, your brain is focusing on something. It's puzzling things out all the time, even without your permission. So keep the problems in front of you. Let your eyes see them, and if you're stuck, eventually, an idea will come. It may seem to arrive without warning, completely out of context, but if you give it enough time, it will be there. Whether you think this sort of thing is random chance, or all part of a master plan, well, that's up to you, and what you believe in. The mathematics doesn't care one way or the other. That's why I love it so much.

One half of my slate board is reserved for student use, the other is covered with the wishful graffiti of my research. At the moment, the left side contains a jumble of freshman Calculus and a lovely Complex Analysis problem Jordy brought to my attention earlier in the day. On the right side, written in my most careful hand, is the latest

sequence of sheaves, which I hope to be exact and coherent. This homological beauty presented itself to me in a dream, riding in the cargo hold of a riverboat, of all places. I didn't even know riverboats had cargo holds but there it was in my dream, perfectly real, containing the most tantalizing sequence, claiming in its own special dream-language to be exact and coherent, the very explicit mathematical conditions I need it to possess in order to advance my lagging theory of several complex variables. I think someone was playing a flute on the riverboat, too, but I didn't detect any mathematical content in the song. So it might have been a clarinet, or a French horn; dream details fade much too fast.

In the corner of the room there is a slither of white space between the wall that holds Shelby's chalkboard painting and the wall that contains my real slate board full of math. That's where my eyes land when my brain needs a break.

In two months time, Michael will be married. Not to Shelby. Not to me. Not to any of the dozens of men he has loved. In two months time, Michael will marry a woman he met on the subway in New York City. A woman who writes ad copy by day and stageplays by night and who has two teenage kids and who, after knowing him only six months, is ready to promise to love him, and no one else, for the rest of her days on this Earth.

A few weeks ago, Jordy Mathers stood at my board with chalk in hand, completely immersed in a proof he was showing me for the first time, when he stopped, out of nowhere, looked over at Shelby's painting, and said, "If that integration sign was reversed and moved down two inches, and if that differential was rotated ninety degrees and slid to the left--it would almost--*almost* be a well-formed expression." Then he turned back to the real board and resumed the presentation of his proof without further

digression.

I have known my best friend Michael for 39 years.

I am 44, and I have known him for 39 years.

Out my window, the sky is purple and pink, and the hallway is finally quiet. I open the door and even with the silence, I still expect a throng of students to be there, eager to ask me a fury of questions before Monday's exam. But there is no one. The hallway is empty.

I go to the blackboard and stare at the riverboat sequence for a few more minutes before deciding it bears too much resemblance to Shelby's artistic interpretation of mathematical gibberish. I pick up the eraser and rub it out.

A few blocks from my apartment I see Shelby in a black leather jacket and baggy cargo pants crossing Logan Circle, carrying a bag of groceries. Short, butch, close-cropped black hair, heavy work boots. I walk as fast as I can, panicked she's going to get away. She is right there, across the Circle from me. If I were to just call out her name---

I stop myself, feel a tightness closing across my chest.

I look again, and the woman's stride is all wrong. Choppy, and too anxious. Shelby is a Southerner, through and through. Even when she is angry, or in a hurry, her walk is a smooth glide of confidence and swagger. The woman with the groceries and strong jaw-line turns the corner and I lose sight of her.

A sharp breeze kicks up around the Circle, and I am standing next to the statue of General Logan atop his proud horse. A flock of pigeons swirl up and around, up and around, in swift unified motion; they touch down briefly on the statue, lined from head to

tail, then they swirl up again, and again.

You sit across from me at a tiny kitchen table. We're in my first apartment in midtown Atlanta. Your hair is close-cropped, freshly cut. You wear an old grey sweatshirt and boxer shorts. The table is covered in my mathematical notes and crumpled pages out of your sketchpad. We look up from our work at the same time. You lean over the table, and kiss me slowly.

I reach my apartment just as the sun slips below the city's white granite horizon. I close the short wrought-iron gate and feel the chill deeper in my bones. My apartment occupies the top two floors of an old Victorian row house on Q Street. I've called it home since 1995, when I arrived in Washington as a freshly-minted Ph.D., still high on the sound of "Dr. Allie Waters," even when the only one saying it was Michael, and he was often teasing, or humoring, me. He worked at the Treasury Department back then, and he lived two blocks down, in a flat on 16th. In all the years he lived here, he never saw Shelby coming across Logan Circle. At least, he never told me he did.

I cook my usual Friday night grilled cheese, and sit on the sofa to eat. My feet rest on the coffee table, tucked between an LL Bean catalog and the textbook for Single Variable Complex Analysis. I had planned to spend the evening reviewing my lecture notes but now I'm not sure that's the best idea. I only get to teach this course once every couple of years, and that is probably just as well. The mathematics is as breathtaking as falling in love and at the end of every semester I teach it, I miss it the way normal people miss departed loved ones.

Shelby once declared that if we included intellectual pursuits as lovers, then I was

as promiscuous, and unfaithful, as she was. As much as I loved to debate her, it was hard to argue that point. I consumed every mathematically-oriented discipline and sub-specialty with insatiable hunger. But falling in love with Complex Analysis changed me, the way only a great love can. I was so enamored with the subject when I was nineteen, and taking such a course myself for the first time, that I formulated a theory of life based on the calculus of residues.

I used to explain it to Shelby, usually just after sex, though sometimes before. She never told me to stop, but I can still hear her gravelly voice in my ear, whispering, "I have no idea what an analytic function is, Baby."

I can feel her hand resting warm on my stomach, her body curled around me, our love dampening the air.

Well, that's how my brain--with all its peculiarities--renders the memory today. So that's how I choose to believe it happened. I sit in my apartment on this Friday night and eat my grilled cheese, and I live the moment again in my head. Or I make it all up.

If I believe it, does it matter which it is?

One thing I know for sure: my residue theory of life was flawed from the beginning. But it floods back to me when I teach Complex Analysis, as real and powerful as the day I dreamed it up. Preparing lectures in my apartment, answering student questions in my office, or right in the middle of teaching a class. I can't stop myself from falling. Just today, I stopped beside the blackboard, chalk smooth between my fingers, just after I'd explained how every line integral of an analytic function can be calculated by examining a small set of singularities. Wind yourself around those isolated points where the function misbehaves, I told my students, compute their residues, and from that,

you can understand everything. What at first looks like an impossible task—integrating a complex function over a vast, complicated region—turns out to be trivial. A few simple calculations, a summarizing formula. Voilà. Problem solved. It's called Cauchy's Residue Theorem, and it's one of the most beautiful in all of mathematics.

It's the same with life. There are just a few moments that explain everything. Those crazy, wild instants that take our breath away. The ones that stop time. They are the isolated singularities of our lives. They have residues just like analytic functions. So if we wind ourselves around those moments the right number of times, if we sum up their residues, we can understand everything. Nothing else matters. Just the singularities.

Shelby wasn't impressed by my theory, and titling her chalkboard painting *Singularities*, coupled with her "content-free" declaration, would have been an unforgivable jab coming from anyone else. Shelby jumps on the counterpoint of nearly everything. It isn't malicious; it's playful. Downright flirtatious.

And so I fought back with a relentless telling and retelling of my theory, with a teasing exuberance, nearly every time we were in bed. Whether she hated it or not, it usually succeeded in getting her to climb back on top of me, to start us rocking and rolling into another round. And still, even now, that's where my residue daydream usually ends up. In one of those singularities with Shelby, twenty-five years ago, under a pile of quilts in my dorm room.

I feel your fingers slipping inside me; I taste the salt on your skin.

Then a student scrapes his desk across the linoleum floor and asks me to repeat the definition of a positively-oriented curve again. And I clear my throat and squeeze the chalk in my hand and will myself back to the world of solid, definite forms.

I teach the rest of my class; I fall deep into my leather chair; I curl up on my sofa. I clutch a gold-embossed envelope. I read that short handwritten letter again, and again. A throwback to simpler times, Michael said. And I try to fight off the fear that one of those singularities is swallowing me whole.

When I learned more mathematics I had to accept that my young-love-inspired theory of life is fundamentally flawed. Cauchy's Residue Theorem is magnificent but its application requires a single-variable function. A single variable, operating alone. The beauty, the elegance, the sheer power of the residue calculus all hinge on that horribly simplifying assumption. Introduce a second variable, or a third, and there is no simple analogy. Singularities entwine and confound and with all that unregulated interaction, they sometimes disappear entirely. There is no unifying definition of residue calculus over several complex variables. The theories are still in their wild, adventurous phase, as dense and luscious as a rain forest. Sheaves, manifolds, vector bundles, questions of coherency. I've spent the better part of my life entrenched in that jungle; it is the specialty of my research. Each new conjecture springs a well of work to be done. But oh, how seductive it is to return to the single-variable case. To languish there, in simpler times, and contemplate the winding number and residue of an isolated moment of ecstasy, or terror.

And so here I am, falling back into my singularities again, trying to convince myself that this time is different. That it's not just an excuse to relive the past. That the theory might be ready to reveal its answers. The thing is, you can't see singularities for what they are while you're standing inside them. You must literally wind yourself around them the appropriate number of times, over years, decades even, before the summation of

their residues becomes clear. I don't know for certain that now is the right time. But it feels closer. *You feel closer.* And so I begin.

You never traveled any farther north than the Carolinas and you've been dead for twenty-one years. But you live and breathe, every day, inside of me. You never left me.

Michael understood that. He was the only one who truly understood. For such a long time. And then, he stopped.

My life is not a series of meaningless obsessions. I am a mathematician. I seek solutions and covet rigorous proof. I work hard. But I also believe in the power of the unknown. I put my faith in things I cannot see or touch. I trust the universe to reveal what it is I need to know.

Examine the singularities.

Calculate the residues.

Call it what you will, but this flawed, human theory is the story of my life.

And so I begin.

Ice Storm

On the morning of my thirty-eighth birthday an ice storm threatened the entire East Coast. Every year winter seems to take the nation's capital by surprise, and half the city's population walks around bewildered (myself included), as if the trees had never lost their leaves before, the air never chilled, the ground never frozen. On TV in the faculty lounge, local weathermen poured over their maps full of pink and white predicted disaster. Expect heavy snow in Western Maryland, they said, and several inches of freezing rain in D.C. If temperatures dropped too fast, trees would fall from the weight of the ice. Power lines would go down. Prepare for the worst, they warned, and I was inclined to do just that. A fresh stack of journal articles and a winter storm advisory were the two perfect excuses to go home early, burrow into my apartment, and try to escape the passing of time.

When Michael called from New York that morning, I was still in my office, having made the mistake of opening the Journal of the American Mathematical Society and finding a new paper on the cohomology of convex manifolds. It took me a minute to hear what he was saying.

"--by seven o'clock. As long as the trains are still running."

"Today? No, not today," I said.

"It's your birthday! We can't let a little weather ruin it."

Out my office window, the trees were bare and vulnerable, their spindly limbs swirling under a light gray sky. I came by my winter amnesia honestly. Michael and I grew up together in rural Florida, where green foliage may wilt due to lack of rain but

never fully disappears. As a kid, I thought I was born in the most enchanted month of the year. Florida February days are mild, bright, full of promise. It did snow once, just before my tenth birthday, January 1977. I made a snowball off the hood of my mom's Pontiac and threw it at Michael's head; he wasn't quick enough to dodge it. We were both bewitched by the rare event of snow falling on our dusty dirt road. It was gone by noon, and never appeared again for the span of our entire childhood. So, there was a part of me that still considered winter storms magical things, and another part that longed for the more familiar birthday backdrop of palm trees and warm sun.

When we were kids, Michael and his grandfather, Eddie, lived across the road from me and my mom. Celebrating birthdays together was a deeply ingrained habit for us, no matter the weather. In our entire lifetimes, we've only missed a few.

On the other end of the phone, horns and loud voices. The frenetic buzz of New York.

"I was thinking about your 21st this morning," Michael said. "We should do that again. It's been too long."

Something shifted inside of me that I hadn't felt in a long time, but quickly, I said, "You're nuts. We're too old."

"Ha! Strip clubs are full of old geezers. We'd fit right in." The background noise on the phone went silent. I pictured him walking into an ATM vestibule, or a bathroom at Starbucks. The hollow hush of an enclosed space, a slight echo. Michael had lived in New York for five years at that point. We talked two, sometimes three, times a day. I knew his city better by sound than by sight.

"You should wait until the weekend," I said. "I don't want you traveling in this mess."

"You don't get off that easily. I'm a poor substitute for a stripper and a lapdance but I won't let you watch a DVD and go to bed early—and alone—on your birthday. The Union might revoke my Best Friend Forever card if I did. I'll see you at seven. No arguments."

I spent the rest of the day just as I'd planned: sitting on my living room sofa sipping hot tea, reading journals, doing math on a clipboard, my legs tucked under a fleece throw. Michael arrived at precisely seven o'clock with a red leather rose between his teeth and a Nordstrom's bag full of presents. "This love never wilts," he said, then tapped the top of my head with the fake flower.

As soon as Michael arrived, my apartment always felt smaller. Not cramped or claustrophobic, but physically smaller, as if the ceiling dropped a few inches and the walls adjusted themselves to bring us closer together. I hung his peacoat in the closet and focused on my breathing, while he flopped on my sofa, his arms spread wide across the back. His lawyer-blue suit looked wrinkled from the trip and he wore hiking boots I'd never seen before.

I kicked at his toe. "Still a country boy," I said.

"No. I'm afraid I'm turning into a New Yorker. When I leave Manhattan now, I feel unsteady, as if I'm falling out of civilization."

"Special armor is advised when venturing to the wilds of Washington. We are a bit barbaric, I'll give you that."

He smiled, but not at me. Something was on his mind but his expression was closed, not open. I sat down beside him, slipped my fingers in between his. Michael's hands were always warm, no matter how frigid the day, and mine were like ice from November to April. He was used to me feeding off his body heat; he never minded. And holding hands was one of the few physical affections we'd always been comfortable sharing.

His beard was neatly trimmed. He looked thinner than I'd seen him in a long time. I told him so, and he raised his eyebrows as if he'd just won a prize.

"I know it's about ten years beyond the trend but I've given up bread and pasta and a whole host of other sins, if you can believe it."

I shook my head. "That sounds more like California than New York. What's next? Surfing?"

"I'm nothing if not contradictory." His expression remained grim. The patch of gray at his temple looked whiter than it had a month ago. I'd been keeping tabs on its progress, the same way I studied the deepening lines on my own face. Michael's patch had started out shaped like a small egg a few years before, but it was expanding into more of a streak. Not quite ready for skunk jokes but close.

He looked around the room, as if searching for something, then he stood up, stretched his arms above his head, and said, "I assume Thai food is your choice? *Thai-tanic*? Spring rolls, Pad Thai with shrimp and some hot tea. Then a walk to Kramers if it's not too wicked cold. Cheesecake for dessert. With strawberries if they have them. Yes?"

"Am I that predictable?"

"Yes, you are."

He circled the room slowly, running his hand along the spines of my books, as if he hadn't seen them a million times, as if he hadn't helped me stain the bookcase cherry red. He stopped at Shelby's picture. The best black and white shot I ever got of her. It's a close-up, in profile, just her face and a piece of her shoulder, ripped denim jacket.

It's not in the picture but all we know you're standing next to your father's black Mustang. That overcharged beast you loved, and died in. The Varsity Restaurant sign hangs in the background of the photo, partially obscured by your head. The mid-80s Atlanta skyline looks understated and small from twenty years away.

Michael caressed the frame. "It's funny. This picture we love so much, and she's not looking at either one of us."

"You weren't there that day," I said. "She didn't have a chance to look at you."

"Where was I?"

He knew how I would answer. He'd heard it a thousand times. This is the game we played. The same questions; the same answers. Again, and again. I don't know where he was that day but it was a Saturday afternoon, just you and me driving around the city, taking pictures with the old Pentax my Uncle gave me.

"I took so many shots of her trying to learn how to use that damn camera," I said. "And it never got better than that first day. It's a miracle I didn't expose the film and ruin that picture."

You loved the shot, too. You used it for your artist's profile. Michael knew that. It's what he was supposed to say next. But he didn't.

Looking at Shelby in that gold-rimmed frame was like peering into our youth, unblemished and preserved. There was no gray patch to watch grow and she would never

have laugh lines. Michael and I both stared at her pictures often. A normal Shelby meditation brought forth stories, shared memories to rehash or argue about for the millionth time. But he'd stopped the story short, and just stood there, staring.

"What's going on?" I said.

His eyes got wide, bordering on revelation. For a second I thought he was going to tell me something new about you, something he'd never mentioned before. It had been fifteen years, so wishing for something fresh was crazy, I knew that; but still, my heart raced at the possibility. Something to savor for my birthday. But instead, Michael expelled a deep breath, and said, "I'm starving. Let's go eat."

I tried to mask my deflation by turning away.

He put on his coat, stood by the door.

"The Thai place delivers. Let's just call them," I said.

"It's your goddamned birthday, Allie! I didn't come all the way from New York to order delivery."

I went into the kitchen, opened a cabinet and moved some mugs around, pretending like I had a few urgent chores to finish before we left. A rush of you filled my eyes, and I grabbed hold of the counter. A silky dark patch of hair against the palest of skin. Thick fold of muscle. A heavy afternoon husk of laughter. *Come closer. Let me savor you.*

Michael's heavy boots shuffled across the floor in the other room. When I returned, he stood by my desk in the corner, flipping through mail, sorting bills from junk.

From the window I could see my neighbor, Raphael, out walking his Pomeranian. He wore a silver down coat and a baby blue knit cap tucked over thick curly hair. I tipped the curtain open for Michael to see. "He still asks about you," I said.

"He plays bongo music during sex. It wasn't meant to be."

"What do you have against bongos?"

He stacked up the bills he'd discovered under mounds of credit card offers and coupons for gym memberships, then he moved across the room with the edgy distraction of a small bird. His hands and fingers fluttered over every surface he passed.

"Don't ignore me," I said. "I'm asking a serious question."

"Do I hound you about your sex life, or lack thereof, Princess?" His voice had a tone I didn't like. The strain on his face reminded me of the day he told me he was moving to New York.

"Something is wrong with you today," I said. "Tell me what the hell it is. Did you get a new job? Are you moving to San Francisco, or Seattle, or some other far away land?"

Michael's gaze moved to the painting above my mantle. Shelby's bold orange swath slicing into jagged blue triangles with white-capped tops. Her abstraction of the ocean at sunset.

"No," he said. "Nothing like that."

From the moment we met, when I was five and he was seven, the cat and mouse routine was always one of Michael's favorite games. The more you pushed, the more he held his secrets close. He couldn't stand it, however, if you lost interest in the game. So I

played the only move I had left. I pulled my coat out of the closet, and said, "It's my goddamned birthday, Michael. Take me out to eat already, will ya?"

Even triple-layered in long-sleeve shirt, sweater, and wool coat, the wind sliced through me and I had trouble catching my breath.

"This is so much more refreshing than a nice evening indoors." My face was half buried in my scarf and I wasn't sure Michael even heard me, but he wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close. His warmth was a comfort and we walked to the restaurant that way, huddled together as the fog of our breath commingled in front of us.

The host greeted us at the door with an enormous smile and his customary wink aimed only at Michael. He wore a pink sweater that felt a touch too obvious, and diamond stud earrings in both ears. The narrow, brightly lit dining room was empty.

"Crazy Tuesday in D.C.," I said.

The host waved the menus in invitation. "Any table you like."

We passed on the booth by the drafty front window and opted for a small table against the wall, close to the bar. The red leather and chrome chairs were straight out of a roadside diner but they accented the silver and blue décor with a frivolous kind of sense. Nothing matched and nothing clashed inside the *Thai-tanic*. Not the gold swirl of the tabletops or the framed elephant artwork or the martini-glass-shaped barstool backs. The first time I walked in, I thought: Shelby would love this place. I could see her at that small bar every night.

There was a flat-screen TV behind the bar and another hanging above the front door. Usually they were tuned to some sports event and ironically ignored by the regular clientele, but that night it was the news, weather, preparations for the storm. One newscaster announced the next morning's school closings, another the evening's traffic jams. Correspondents checked in from grocery stores overflowing with panicked customers stocking up on essentials. Radar showed a circular band of pink closing in on the city.

"The suburbs are getting it now," I said.

We ordered hot tea and pretended to read the menu we both knew by heart. When the waiter returned I took the small tea cup between my cold hands and ordered exactly what Michael had predicted.

He hesitated, then ordered ginger chicken with vegetables.

"Jasmine rice?" the waiter asked.

"No, thank you."

"Noodles?"

Michael bit his lip, then said. "Just the entrée, please."

The waiter disappeared quickly, as if the place were packed and he had a dozen tables to tend.

"Aren't you always telling me that an ascetic life isn't living?" I said.

"Because I'm skipping the noodles? Shall I enumerate all the basic human needs you abstain from, Ms. Stone-Thrower-From-A-Glass-House?"

"You're being awfully mean to me on my birthday," I said. "You realize that, right?"

He cleared his throat and looked away. "So, 38. How does it feel to you?"

"2 times 19. Nice clean factorization. No squares. No cubes. It feels good."

Michael's shoulders dropped, like a balloon deflating, his customary response to math talk. "Scary thought, isn't it? To be twice 19?" he said.

I sipped my tea. "It's better than 4 times 10."

"Ah, but I liked being 10."

"I'd do 19 again before 10."

"Really?" He fiddled with his fork, turning it over, then righting it again. He looked across the empty restaurant toward the windows. "You're right. I should have ordered the noodles. Do you think it's too late?" He looked for the waiter, twitching with a hint of panic. I grabbed his hands across the table.

"Whatever it is, I can handle it," I said. "Forget it's my birthday and just tell me what's bothering you."

It started as a smirk. Like he was about to tell me a great joke. Then he began to laugh, casually, letting go of my hands and leaning back in his chair, as if we were buddies having a drink after work, telling stories about colleagues. Then it became a sour sort of chuckle, morphing into the kind of outburst a cartoon villain might indulge in before clobbering his nemesis with an over-sized club. I felt myself rearing back, on the edge of being afraid. Michael's laughter spiraled out of control; a blue vein pulsed on his neck, just below the line of his beard. His laugh became full and rough, unbearable to watch. The bartender and waiters stole nervous glances in our direction.

Gathering himself, Michael leaned across the table, and lowered his voice into a whisper-shout. "You can handle it? Honey, you can't go to the grocery store without

calling *me* to remind you what kind of detergent to buy. You don't remember to service your car until the damn thing conks out on the beltway. You take your shirts to the dry cleaners and you never pick them up. But you can tell me exactly how many times, and in what positions, you and Shelby Everett had sex, on any particular night, twenty goddamned years ago. Allie, you are a mess. You have no idea how much of a mess you have become."

"Why are you so angry? I'm not incompetent, Michael. I can take care of myself." I didn't try to keep my voice low. There was no point.

"I'm not angry," he said. "I'm losing my mind."

He reached into his suit jacket and pulled out a small box. It wasn't wrapped like the other birthday gifts. He squeezed it tight in his palm. "This is my insanity...right here."

My face flushed with the redhead's curse. There is no way for me to hide sudden anger or embarrassment. Both burn my skin scarlet and darken my freckles into deep brown splotches. And I was both. Embarrassed at what I assumed was inside that box; and furious that Michael had managed to turn a marriage proposal into a screaming match in the middle of my favorite Thai place.

The waiter appeared, carrying our food on an enormous tray. Nothing stopped the *Thai-tanic* from serving its customers quickly. He set out the entrées, and garnished my Pad Thai with chopped peanuts spooned out of a silver bowl. He refilled our teapot, freshened each of our cups. Michael pursed his lips.

"Anything else I can do?" the waiter said.

"No, we're fine," Michael said, not able to stop himself from smiling.

Michael could go from hot to cold, angry to bemused, faster than anyone else I'd ever known. It infuriated me how quickly he could diffuse tension with a smile. By the time the waiter disappeared, my blush was gone, and I was smiling, too.

"Despite appearances, I've given this a lot of thought," he said.

The box was still in his hand.

He was acting so contrarily, I refused to make it easy for him. I filled my fork with noodles, and started to eat. Michael watched me for a few minutes, without moving.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"I know crazy pretty well. This is close," I said.

He pushed the box across the table. "I'm forty years old and you're the only one that matters to me, Allie."

"Jesus, you are quite the charmer, Michael. I know we are far from traditional but first you yell at me about my fucking dry cleaning, and then you bring up *age*? On my birthday? Yeah, you really thought this thing through. I can tell."

"Shut up and let me talk," he said. "Please?"

I put my fork down, and tried to prepare myself for whatever revelation he was about to unfold, but my anger simmered just under the surface.

Michael and I had a deep—if mostly unspoken—understanding, built over decades of friendship and support. Shelby was the love of my life, and he knew it. He knew there would never be anyone else for me. But still, he found a way to open his mouth, and say: "I know you don't believe this, but for me, it's always been about you, Allie. I've watched you wither your life away, unable to put the past behind you, and I can't do it anymore. Shelby's been gone for a long time. We need to let her go."

My first impulse was to argue with him, the way we always argued, playfully, and without consequence. But he was serious. He was pulling my safety net away, and as he did, my head began to swim.

"We've been best friends for over thirty years," he said. "Thirty years, Allie. That's a marriage. We're already married in so many ways."

He sat up straight and touched the box in the center of the table, where it sat between the soy sauce and the teapot. "I want to marry you, Allie. I think we should get married and be happy together. Just you and me. I think it could work. If you're willing to let go of the past, and try this with me."

The tabletop swirled red and gold.

How many times did we argue over commitment versus freedom? Monogamy was a trap, you said. No one loves anyone else exclusively. A vow is a lie, a promise waiting to be broken. And through all of your bullshit ideology, what I craved, always, was a moment like this. A proposal. A lifetime. With you.

I measured my breath, and said, "This isn't you and me, Michael. This is some ridiculous attempt to be the Shelby I wanted."

His jaw tightened as he pulled his hands, and the box, away from me. "That wasn't necessary."

"None of this is necessary," I said. "We're in this together. I'm not the only one who can't let her go. You've never been able to do it either."

"I'm willing to try," he said.

The waiter appeared at our table again. "Take your food away?" he asked.

We'd pushed our plates aside though I didn't remember doing it.

"Wrap it to go, please," Michael said.

I was grateful for the ice storm at that moment, grateful there were no other customers in the restaurant to witness our display. Only the waiters, the busboys, the quiet Thai girls behind the bar. I looked at the box in Michael's hand, and said, "Please tell me there's no diamond in there."

"You know better than that."

Slowly, he put the box back on the table, and opened it. Protruding above a red velvet cushion were two identical silver bands, one slightly larger than the other. Brushing my fingers over them, I couldn't help imagining you on the other side of the table. It was a betrayal in a dozen different ways, but I couldn't help myself. The silver band would have looked breathtaking on your thick, strong finger.

"How does this even make sense?" I asked. "You don't want to live in D.C. again. And I have tenure. I can't just up and move to New York."

"Don't make this about our jobs, or where we live. This isn't a business decision."

"Why something so conventional as a marriage?" I said. "What does that mean to you?"

Michael closed the ring box, slipped it back in his pocket.

"Okay," he said. "I hear you."

I didn't want the conversation to be over but the waiter appeared again, with our dinners wrapped in paper boxes, then Michael took out his wallet to pay, and began to act as if we were late for an important engagement elsewhere. He shuffled us out the door and down the street, the ring tucked away in his coat again. It began to rain. Large, heavy

drops. Just inside my building's front door, Michael brushed water off his coat, and said, "Some ice storm, huh?"

He changed into sweatpants and the faded old Braves T-shirt he kept in my closet, and we landed in front of the television where we watched the local meteorologists narrate the storm's arrival. Rain, sleet, sloppy wet snow; it was hit or miss throughout the entire Mid-Atlantic. We ate the rest of our *Thai-tanic* dinner straight out of the cartons.

"Do you have ice cream?" Michael asked. "Anything we can put a candle on? I've ruined your birthday."

"You wouldn't even order rice tonight. And now you want cake and ice cream?"

"Birthday, Allie. Ruined."

"Shut up. We don't need a damned cake. And no, I don't have ice cream. It's February."

"What are you, a communist?"

He dislodged my legs from their fleece cocoon, and snaked his arm around me. Michael's body always felt slightly damp to the touch, as if he'd pulled wet clothes from the dryer and put them right on. I kept my head tilted down, against his chest. I didn't want to look up at him. I could feel his heartbeat against my ear. He said my name, softly, then, "The weekend at Shelby's house."

I closed my eyes, squeezed him as tight as I could.

"Memorial Day weekend, 1986," he continued. "Shelby's parents were out of town. She wanted to throw some ridiculous bash for my graduation but thankfully, we talked her out of it. So it was just the three of us, in that enormous house."

"The carpet in the basement was brand new," I said.

"And there weren't any pictures on the walls. A complete apartment down in that basement, but there weren't any pictures on any of the walls."

"You and Shelby watched creature feature," I said, as he stroked my hair, in the same comforting way he always did.

We'd told this story to each other so many times I'd lost count. But this time was different. His voice cut deep with anguish.

I pulled away. "You don't want to do this," I said.

He began to stack the empty food cartons, one on top of the other; then carried them to the kitchen. When I came in behind him, he was scrubbing my stove with a sponge.

"Do you ever wipe this thing down?" he said. "What do you do after you cook something, just walk out of the room?"

"What would it mean to you, if we were husband and wife?"

He kept scrubbing, didn't look up.

"Would we never talk about her again?"

He ran the sponge under hot water, then returned to scrubbing the stove.

"Do you want to be lovers? Are you going to give up men?"

I watched him for a few minutes, scrubbing harder and harder, until it was clear he wasn't going to answer me. So I left him there, cleaning my kitchen. I went upstairs to my bedroom, shut the door, and locked it. When I turned around, I tripped over a pair of sneakers, and fell against the bed frame. Pain shot up my leg and I flipped onto my back, too fast. The pale blue wall swirled over and around the mahogany armoire, like a wave

crashing on driftwood. Even when I closed my eyes the still-moving sensation clung to me.

The aura was already there. Pulsing. Whirling. Pulling me under.

Your studio is suffused with amber light, and you're standing over an enormous canvas spread out on the floor, dribbling paint like Jackson Pollock. Your concentration is intense. You don't know I'm there, and my heart floods with panic. I've never been inside your studio while you're painting. It's your sacred space and you don't allow visitors. I make myself as quiet as I can, flatten myself against the wall, hide inside the shadows, float to the ceiling. There's music playing, from far away. A symphony, with heavy percussion. Cymbals and steel drums.

I watch from above, as you lean down. The red paint dribbles from your brush, pours out of your fingers. You're wearing tattered jean shorts and a white wife-beater, splashed with paint. You're only a few feet from me. I am dying to touch you, dying to speak. I am dying.

When I came back to consciousness, my room was pitch black and Michael was pounding on my door, yelling my name. The power was out. Green specks flashed my peripheral vision. I'd gone deeper than I had in a long time.

Michael's pounding grew louder. "Allie! Are you okay?"

"Dizzy," I said. "Just a minute."

When I opened the door, Michael fell toward me; he'd been trying to wrestle it open.

"Why'd you lock it?" he said.

"Because I didn't want you to come in, Genius."

"Did you fall asleep that fast?" he asked.

My eyes began to adjust to the darkness but time was playing its tricks on me.

Everything moved too fast, and simultaneously, too slow.

I sat down on the side of the bed. "I passed out," I said.

His hands were all over my face, my hair, my arms, as if I were a jigsaw puzzle in disarray.

"I'm okay," I said. "Just a little black out. No big deal."

"How do you know? Are you sure that's all it was?"

I stretched my neck, inched away from his hands. "I'm pretty sure. Give me some air, all right?"

He crawled up onto the bed. "Come here," he said. "You should rest."

I pulled a small flashlight out of the bedside table, aimed it at Michael's face, flipped it on and off a few times, in a steady beat. "No strobe effects, please," he said.

I laid the flashlight on the bed between us. "How long has the power been out?"

"Just a few minutes. You don't remember?"

"I was already out," I said. "I hit my leg on the edge of the damned bed. I'm going to have a bruise the size of Montana." My thigh throbbed with pain but I tried not to grimace as I touched it.

"Oh, Allie," Michael said, holding his hand over his eyes.

"I'm the one with the injury. What the hell are you crying about?"

He wrapped his arms around me, and squeezed until I could barely breathe. "I love you so much," he said. "I just love you so goddamned much."

"Shhh," I said. "You know I go out like a light at the first stab of pain. I'm fine. It was nothing."

He held me tighter, and kissed the top of my head. "I know," he said. "I know."

The flashlight between our legs gave off a dull glow, amber and diffuse. My unconscious image of Shelby's studio jolted back to me, and I flinched.

"What?" Michael said. "Are you okay?"

The amber light. The red streams of paint flowing from your fingers. My body slipping into the walls.

"Do you need something?" Michael asked. "Water? Tea? A cold washcloth for your face?"

"Warm," I said. "Warm washcloth."

He took the flashlight to the bathroom. I didn't need a washcloth. I just wanted a moment to hold on to the power of your visitation. I laid back and closed my eyes. It was still so clear, vivid, the most potent kind of dream image.

Michael was back in no time. He pressed the rag against my forehead, my cheeks. I could hear ice pelting the windows.

"Is it accumulating?" I said.

He went to look. "A little, yeah." As he opened the blinds, the room lightened from the white winter sky. We curled up next to each other but not so suffocatingly close. After a few minutes of silence, I took a chance, and said, "I saw Shelby's studio. When I was out."

He put his hand on my arm.

I told him about the Jackson Pollock style painting, the red flowing from your fingers, my desperate longing to touch you.

"Did you ever see that for real?" he asked.

"Oh, it was real," I said. "Horribly real."

He waited a minute, then clarified. "When she was alive."

"No," I said. "It wasn't a memory."

His hand was warm on my skin. His voice, his body, his concern, they were all comforts. Comforts I needed, more than I'd ever be able to admit out loud. We both stared out the window, watching the sleet fall, the icicles form on the trees.

"Michael--" I said.

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

I didn't analyze it any further. Didn't ask any more questions or set any conditions. I felt the dull ache in my chest, the air filling my lungs, the buzz clearing from my brain, and there, in the dark of my room, on the night of my thirty-eighth birthday, I said, "Yes. If you still want me, I will marry you."

$$* \int * \Sigma * \partial *$$

A few of my life's notable events--like agreeing to marry Michael on my thirty-eighth birthday--fall rather cleanly in line with the definition of an isolated singularity. If you will indulge me for a moment, the mathematician feels compelled to state the actual definition our theory hinges so critically upon. Bear with me; I will try my best to be clear.

*A complex number z is an **isolated singularity** of a complex function f if there exists an open neighborhood of points around z such that f is well-behaved (I.e., analytic) everywhere in the open neighborhood except at the point z .*

Take note: isolation is the key concept here. All around the point z , the function must be smooth (that's a mathematical term, but you can think of it as it sounds: calm, serene, peaceful). The dark stillness of a lake just before dawn. The glistening white of a country road after fresh snowfall. But at the singularity itself, the behavior of the function becomes unpredictable, erratic, instantaneously infinite. A rocket blasting into space. A gunshot piercing human flesh.

A pure isolated singularity is hard to miss. Same with its residue.

However, as I've previously confessed, my theory is flawed. The jewels of pure isolation are hard to come by in this red-blooded mess of life. Like it or not, we must contend with multi-variable complexities, and all that they imply. It helps that I've never cared for easy problems. Good research breeds more questions than answers.

And so we travel next to a more slippery time. A more opaque singularity. But with a residue quite critical to unwind.

$$* \lambda * \exists * \prod *$$

The Summer Before

Michael met her first. No matter how many times I imagine it differently, the oldest memories I have of Shelby are Michael's, not mine.

It was June, 1984. I was seventeen, just graduated from high school, and still living back home in Florida. Michael was nineteen and pre-law at Emory. He stayed in Atlanta that summer, hoping for an internship at the Fulton County courthouse. When he lost it at the last minute, he ended up stocking shelves at a Walgreens on North Druid Hills in Decatur. That's where he met Shelby; she worked there, too. He mentioned her to me in letters that summer but only briefly. I didn't think she was important to him, until after I met her myself. Am I a thief to take Michael's memories and make them mine? Perhaps. But I believe that in life, as in mathematics, the most beautiful truth is found where the real and the imaginary entwine. And when I inhabit these stories, I am with Shelby, even before she ever put her hand in mine. How can I resist?

The first time Michael met Shelby he didn't like her at all. It was his first day at that Walgreens on North Druid Hills, and he was applying little sticky price-tags to cold medicine boxes using a roller gun. Shelby came into the store looking like she'd just lost a fight at a roughneck bar and was mighty pissed off about it. A blue bandanna covered her head. You could have mistaken her for bald if it weren't for two thin strips of black hair peeking out, a slight approximation to sideburns. She wore steel-toed workman's boots and white painter's pants. Not the trendy kind from a department store but real, working painter's pants with loops to slip brushes through and huge pockets to store rags.

She buried her fists into those two enormous back pockets and her voice was rough and loud as she yelled at a mousy co-worker near the cash registers. Michael couldn't make out what she said, but it wasn't friendly. And when she walked past him a few minutes later, the first words he heard her say clearly were directed at him: "What are you looking at, Nerd Boy?"

Up close, he saw the lightning bolt tattoo on her left arm that shot out from under her black T-shirt. She was short and tough, built like a prize fighter. Her biceps were huge, her shoulders broad, waist narrow. She wore the angry scowl of a teenage boy.

"Nothing," Michael said.

He averted his eyes, scared of her at first sight. He was still wearing his thick black-rimmed glasses that summer, hadn't started growing the beard yet, and his jeans were too tight and too short. He looked like a nerd; Shelby was right.

After that first encounter, Michael expected Shelby to become his nemesis. He expected her to be a bully, and he expected to hate her. But two days later she walked over and offered her hand for a shake.

"Sorry if I was bitch the other day. I'm Shelby."

"Michael," he said. "No problem."

"Good grip," she said. "I'm bisexual, by the way."

"Okay," Michael said, his jaw dropping a fraction of an inch.

Then Shelby went on. "I don't like to dick around making people guess, you know. Guys, in particular, are superficial and dense. You see my muscles and my butch hair cut, and think: 100% dyke. So, it's just a lot faster to get it on the table up front."

She smiled, thoroughly pleased with herself, as Michael stood there, speechless,

in the Tampax and diapers aisle.

Her tone was playful, unconcerned with consequences. She appeared absolutely certain of her identity as she boldly proclaimed it. But that was the thing about Shelby. She wanted you to believe she was certain of everything she said; she wanted you to stand in awe of that certainty. It worked with most people. Even Michael, for awhile.

Seconds ticked by as the two of them stood there among the diapers and feminine protection products and Shelby's smile didn't fade. In that moment, Michael realized her very odd self-introduction was actually a flirtation. She followed it up with a wink, and turned and walked away, drawing his attention to the small wonder of her ass.

That's how it began for the two of them.

That same June I was living at home with my mom, on the same dirt road in Pasco County where Michael and I grew up. We'd upgraded the trailer to a double-wide by then, and Mom had a full vegetable garden going strong in the back. Still, I was a fresh high school grad and revved up to be out on my own. I thought I was invincible; I thought I was an adult. I thought Mondale and Ferraro had a good chance against Reagan and Bush.

Mom was more practical than me. She'd saved up a little money to get me started at Georgia Tech in the fall but she couldn't do much on secretary's wages. Math came to me easy as breathing and my small-town teachers swore I was a genius, but unfortunately, my standardized test scores did not back them up. Michael said the SAT was culturally biased against rural kids like us but I refused to allow him such an opinion after he aced the damn thing and got a National Merit Scholarship to Emory. Me, I was

just thrilled to be accepted at a good school in the same city as Michael, and grateful for the hodge-podge of grants and loans that would almost cover my out-of-state tuition.

Mom said the best way not to starve in college and beyond was to have a few practical skills. So she forced me to take a typing class my junior year of high school. It was mostly girls and I hated the way the teacher assumed we were all destined for the secretarial pool, but I loved the rhythmic hum of the electric typewriters and the smooth feel of the keys beneath my fingers. When it came test time, I did 65 words a minute on an IBM Selectric, and I landed a part-time data entry job at an insurance company my senior year. It was easy work and better than manning the drive-thru at McDonald's. I went full-time on the night shift the summer after graduation, to save money while I could. I blazed through my quotas most days before the first break; I got a \$50 bonus. And I met a girl named Lauren Thomas, just about the same time Michael met Shelby, but I didn't know that then.

Lauren started at the insurance company in late June, 1984, and I was assigned to train her. That meant I had to spend every minute with her the first week she was there. I taught her office procedures, showed her how to navigate the mammoth green-screened computer terminals where we did the data entry. We even took our breaks together.

Lauren was a few inches taller than me, incredibly tan, and blonde. Even in slacks and a fancy blouse she looked ready for the beach. Her smile was so wide it seemed fake at first, as if it had been sculpted in place. It was creepy sometimes, but mostly friendly, if a little over-exuberant. The first night of her training she sat so close to me, I could feel the warmth of her arm against mine. My throat turned dry as sandpaper and I kept having to get more water out of the fountain to keep from going hoarse as I went through the

training manual with her.

When I demonstrated entering a claim into the system, she leaned over my shoulder, and said, "You're very fast."

It took me a long time to manage more than one syllable when talking to Lauren, unless I was reading straight from the training manual. Lauren liked to talk, though. On the second night she told me about her fiancé, Gary. He dropped out of college and wanted to be an air-traffic controller; he'd flunked the exam two times already. He drove a beat-up Corvette, played folk guitar, and wanted to move to California. "He's got a great head of hair," Lauren said. "He'll never go bald. I'm sure of it."

I didn't know anything else about Gary but I was pretty sure I didn't want him controlling any airplanes, in Florida or California or anywhere in between.

Lauren was twenty-two in the summer of '84, and she took to data entry as easily as I did. By the end of her second week, her nightly totals were almost as good as mine. A friendly competition ensued.

"If I beat your total three nights in a row, you've got to buy me a drink," she said.

We were on our dinner break in the company café. We sat across from each other in one of the hard plastic booths.

"Coke's only 50 cents in the machine. That's not much of a bet," I said.

"Not soda, you silly girl. A real drink. A beer or a cocktail."

"I'm only seventeen," I said.

"Jesus. Are you serious?"

I don't know how this came as a surprise to her. My soft round face and the bright freckles across my cheeks had never made anyone think I was older than my years. I

wasn't tough or brazen like some tomboys, yet I fought every suggestion of feminizing my appearance. I wore polo shirts and jeans almost every day, and not a bit of make-up, ever.

Smoke swirled around the café. The old-timers with the leathery faces were always smoking at dinnertime. I hunched over our table, as if it were possible to duck underneath the stench of the room.

"Seventeen?" Lauren said. Then that wide, wide smile. "I know where we could go. I know where you could buy me a beer."

"Where?"

"You'll see. I've gotta beat your total for three days first." She took a bite out of her egg salad sandwich, and winked at me.

I liked girls more than I was supposed to; I'd always known that. But Lauren took things to a new level. She was outgoing and smiled at everyone, but with me, it felt more directed, purposeful. I'd had crushes on plenty of girls, but none of them had paid me any attention in return. It would be easy to say I liked Lauren's almost-flirtations because surely I did. But a queasiness in my stomach came with it. Even in my seventeen-year-old innocence, I guess I expected heartache to follow. But shit, I was seventeen and thought I was ready for everything. So on I went, whistling at my good fortune.

Lauren did beat my totals the next three nights in a row. I didn't slack off to make it happen, either. I was the best data entry clerk the company had ever seen before Lauren, and I didn't give up the crown easily. But the "date" I won because of my defeat certainly helped ease the pain.

"Saturday night," she said. "I'll take that beer you owe me."

I agreed, acting as if it wasn't a big deal, though I'm sure I didn't fool her. We were standing outside the building after our shift, next to the palm tree lit from below by three spotlights. The air was thick with mid-summer, and the other night-shifters streamed by, on the way to their cars.

"I hope you're not sore about the totals," she said. "I've been typing longer than you. I was a secretary at the phosphate plant for two years. I couldn't stand the smell of that place though. Stinks to high heaven down there, as my old man would say." She reached into her pocketbook and pulled out a long string of keyrings latched together. Plastic pink flamingos, green alligators, sports team logos, a bottle opener. A few actual keys jingled together as she swung the rings back and forth by her side.

"My mom's a secretary," I said. "She made me take typing."

Lauren smiled. "It's a good skill to have."

"That's what Mom says."

She looked straight at me, shook her head, and again, she said, "Seventeen. I still can't believe it. And you're on your way to college in the fall?"

I nodded. "I skipped the third grade."

"A smartie. Yes. I can see that." That big, big smile.

We walked into the parking lot together. The insurance company was on the northern outskirts of Tampa. It took me thirty minutes to drive home. Lauren lived in the other direction, in a suburban apartment with Gary. She'd told me about the two swimming pools in their complex, one for families and one for adults only. She liked to sunbathe in the mornings. That's why she worked the night shift. I pictured her laying on her stomach on one of those poolside chaise lounges, her bikini top untied and hanging

loose to avoid a tan line across her back.

"Saturday," she said.

"Saturday," I repeated.

Our cars were parked right next to each other. Lauren had asked me which car was mine the first night of her training, and every day after that, she parked her cute little Toyota as close to my Buick as she could. "My car" was really Michael's grandfather's most recent spare that he loaned me for the summer, but I didn't tell Lauren that. As crappy as the car was, it felt better to call it mine than a loaner.

"Let's just meet here on Saturday," she said. "We can ride together the rest of the way."

She'd made it clear I wasn't going to know our destination until we were there, so I didn't bug her with more questions. I stood with my hand on my car door. I would have stayed there another hour talking to her, if she'd wanted.

"7 o'clock," she said.

"Okay."

"Here," she said.

"Right here."

"Good." She smiled, then got in her car. Still smiling, she started the engine.

"All right," I said.

She rolled down her window and waved at me as she drove away. I stood there with my sweaty hand on the car door, watching her go.

Michael knew I'd be in Atlanta by that fall and believe it or not, long-distance

phone calls were expensive back then. So we didn't talk much that summer. He attended my high school graduation in May, and we exchanged letters often, as we had for the two years he'd been away at school. But the content of our correspondence stayed on the surface level of our mundane summer jobs. I wrote him about the intricacies of data entry and insurance company bureaucracy; he wrote me about the hottest new items in cold medicine and skin care. Looking back at those letters now, it's amazing how little either of us elaborated on our new female companions. I'm not sure why I withheld the details about Lauren from Michael as it was happening, but I imagine it had something to do with not wanting to jinx things. And perhaps Michael felt the same way about Shelby. Or maybe neither one of us really knew what the hell was happening until it was over. Whatever the reason, it took me years to puzzle out that summer's timeline, hearing Michael retell his stories about Shelby, and remembering my time with Lauren. So much time has passed now, it's all twisted up together in my mind anyway. And that's okay. I see the Shelby scenes as clearly as if I were there, and I wonder how it's possible I wasn't.

The first time Shelby and Michael went out together, it was to shop for blue jeans, for him.

"You've got to lose the fucking highwater pants if you want to hang out with me," she told him.

There wasn't a lot of fashion sense in the wilds of Pasco County where Michael and I grew up. Levis were cooler than Wranglers; that's about all I knew. Shelby came from the well-to-do Atlanta suburb of Buckhead, so she was wiser about that kind of thing. Her dad was a hippie turned mortgage banker, so she had money to spend, and she was generous with it. After she remade Michael's wardrobe on her parents' credit cards,

she started in about his face.

"Your cheeks are puffy. Like a fat baby," she said. "But you're hairy as hell, so you should be able to grow a beard in about two days. Give it a try."

She was right. Michael had an enormous amount of body hair, and the beard came in incredibly fast. Once his pants fit and his baby face was well-hidden with facial hair, he and Shelby started hanging out pretty regular. Movies, fast food dinners, playing pool at campus bars. They were buddies, like guy friends. Michael wasn't sure how he felt about that. He'd never had many guy friends, the same way I'd never had many girl friends.

Then one afternoon when they both had the day off, Shelby said she wanted to go to Piedmont Park, the big green oasis in the center of midtown Atlanta. They walked around the lake several times, picking up rocks off the gravel path. Shelby said her parents practically lived at the park in the 60s. Doing drugs and God knows what else.

"I could have been conceived here. Right in the park," she said. "Funny, huh?"

"Hilarious," Michael said.

She wanted to go to the playground and swing on the swings and slide down the spiral slide. Michael thought it sounded silly but he followed her there.

The playground sits on the edge of the park, near the 12th Street entrance. It's an elevated spot where you can gaze down onto the lake or across Piedmont Road to the skyline rising above the tree-tops. And in the middle of a weekday, at least in the mid-1980s, you were more likely to encounter a wino propped against the seesaw than an actual child playing there.

Michael sat on the swing and kicked his sneakers into the dirt while Shelby

pumped her legs to go higher and higher. They talked about Star Trek and comic books, two things Michael never appreciated until he met Shelby. He was so serious about history and philosophy as a kid. He read biographies of the presidents and textbooks on existentialism. But Shelby was crazy passionate about her comics, and she wasn't stupid. She could convince just about anyone that the Silver Surfer was deeper, and more soulful, than Nietzsche or Kierkegaard.

After Shelby grew bored with swinging, she grabbed Michael's hand and dragged him to the spiral slide.

"This is my favorite spot in the entire park," she said.

It was a large steel cylinder with stairs that spiraled around two times leading to a small landing at the top where you could stand and look out over the park and the city. Then, if you wanted, you could slide down the metal slide that spiraled around the cylinder, and climb back up and do it again.

Shelby crawled inside and motioned for Michael to follow. It was a cloudy day and there was a spot about half-way up the stairs where it was dark and super quiet. Shelby stopped in that spot and sat down. She had a strange look in her eyes; by the time Michael described it to me, I knew it intimately. It was the look that said she had a naughty idea, and she was certain you would never think of it. She crawled up a few more steps and peeked out the large spy-hole near the top of the slide.

"Deserted," she said.

The sky had grown dark and a warning shot of thunder clapped in the distance.

"I'd rather not be in this heap when the lightning comes," Michael said.

"Don't be a wimp."

Shelby eased her body toward his. I imagine she smelled the way she usually did, mildly of sweat and Prell shampoo. Michael leaned toward her, thinking they were about to kiss, but she stopped him.

"I'm not much for making out," she said.

Before he had time to feel rejected, she placed her hand on his crotch and squeezed him hard. Her breast grazed his shoulder as she worked on his zipper. "Relax," she said.

The moment her fingers wrapped around him, Shelby's gruff, indifferent exterior disappeared. Her hand was warm on his skin, her movements fluid and certain. She rocked back and forth with the rhythm of her stroke, as if she were pleasuring herself instead of him. It was not a merging of two bodies, but rather, a splitting, a reconfiguring. A loss and a gain.

After it was over, she told him, "You should know that I don't believe in boyfriends or girlfriends, romance or commitments."

She still had her hand on him, rubbing slowly as he tried to catch his breath.

"Okay," he said.

"It's nice," she said, still stroking him.

What did you feel, holding Michael in your hand? It wasn't as simple as desire. Michael and I always agreed on that. Was it admiration? A projected sense of possession? Did you yearn to live inside his skin, and not your own? Was that the attraction?

Shelby's feelings were never transparent. Whether it was surprise, or confusion, or a deep wish fulfilled, I don't know. Michael said she acted as if he were just the latest in a

long list of guys. But that wasn't true. It was her first time performing that act; he learned that much later on, and we were both astonished by the revelation.

Piecing it all together, I came to believe that this moment triggered something inside of you. Something you never put a name on, as far as I know, maybe never even understood, but it bound you to Michael, deeper than either one of you ever realized. I'm the one who saw both sides. I'm the one who understood.

I worked Monday through Friday, 3:30 to midnight that summer, woke up long after my mom was at work and got home long after she'd gone to bed. We left notes for each other on the kitchen counter. "Leftover beef stew in the fridge," hers would say. "Thanks," mine would reply. I didn't tell her about my Saturday night plans with Lauren until that morning, weekends providing our only face-to-face encounters.

She was sitting at the kitchen table, spreading grape jelly on a piece of toast.

"Who is this girl again?"

"Lauren Thomas," I said. "From work. I trained her a couple of weeks ago."

"And where are you going?"

"Out for dinner," I said. I had no idea if dinner was involved in Lauren's plans but I couldn't tell Mom we were going for beers at some unknown location, probably a bar.

"Is she going to college in the fall, too? Is she your age?"

I sat down at the table, dug my knife into the jelly and concentrated on its application to my own slice of toast. "She's a little older than me," I said. "Her boyfriend wants to move to California."

"Does she go to USF? Is this a temporary job for her, too?"

"She hasn't said anything about college. She's engaged to this guy, Gary. He wants to be an air traffic controller."

Mom's shoulders relaxed a bit, and she took a bite of her toast. My continued mentioning of Lauren's fiancé was not a randomly offered detail. Mom and I didn't talk about boyfriends very often but I knew she worried over my lack of one. Having a friend in a normal boy-girl relationship was the best I had to offer, and it seemed to alleviate her unspoken fears, at least for a few minutes.

Still, she wanted to know where we were going for dinner.

"I don't know," I said. "We haven't decided yet. But I'll be home before midnight. Okay?"

I was already at the sink, washing our breakfast plates and utensils, trying to act nonchalant.

"Okay," she said. Then she came up behind me and put her head on my shoulder. "My baby. I can't believe you'll be 500 miles away from me in less than two months. It's impossible to imagine."

"Yeah," I said, "I know."

Though of course, it wasn't impossible for me. In my mind, I was already gone.

That summer I carried a puzzle book with me wherever I went. I could sit and do word searches or mazes or cryptograms for hours at a time. I designed my own, too, and Mom made Xerox copies at her office. I sent a set to Michael at the beginning of that summer but he never said a damn word about them. I was pretty mad about it at the time, but after I moved to Atlanta and met Shelby, I forgot all about puzzles, too.

I arrived at the insurance company parking lot thirty minutes early, to meet

Lauren for our Saturday "date". I buried my nose in a puzzle, trying to distract myself before she arrived. I'd been on a few dates with boys from school and I was usually more bored than nervous on those occasions. Seeing stupid movies or playing putt-putt golf, I spent most of those evenings eager for them to be over.

I told myself I was being ridiculous and this outing with Lauren wasn't anything like an actual date. But still, my hands were shaky and I could feel sweat dampening my clothes. I'd only had beer once before, when I was eight and Michael was ten and we stole samples out of the keg at Mom's birthday party. I remember it tasting awful and thinking it wasn't nearly worth the trouble we got into when the grown-ups found us staggering around behind the house, playing drunk more than feeling it.

So I wasn't eager for beer that night, but I was thrilled to see Lauren's Toyota pull up beside me. She was early, too.

"You ready to party?" she said, her tanned arm hanging out her window.

"Sure." I tucked my puzzles under my seat.

She motioned for me to get in her car, said she wanted to keep the mystery location a surprise as long as possible.

We drove down Dale Mabry Highway from the northern suburbs, into the heart of Tampa. The inside of Lauren's car was full of little plastic gadgets and toys, cheap little trinkets they sold at gas stations to keep kids occupied on long drives. I ran my fingers over a pink bunny rabbit with painted blue eyes.

"It's a finger puppet," Lauren said. She slipped her pointer underneath, then tapped my nose with the bunny's ears.

"Cute," I said.

"They're an obsession. Gary hates them." She tapped her lips with the bunny, as if she were getting away with something naughty.

Lauren hadn't shared much that she actually liked about her fiancé. I wanted to ask why the hell she was thinking about marrying him at all, but I didn't have the nerve.

She turned up the radio with the tip of the bunny, then flashed me one of her enormous smiles as she tapped the puppet against the steering wheel, keeping time with the song.

We passed the Country Western clothes store where Michael's grandfather bought his cowboy boots and bolo ties. We passed Tampa Stadium where the Buccaneers played on Sundays in their bright orange uniforms. We passed strip clubs shaped like space ships, steak houses with enormous cow statues out front, and a half dozen car dealers, one right after another. Lauren liked to change lanes for no apparent reason, weaving around cars without any warning. I held onto my seat as tight as I could. When we passed under the Interstate, the three southbound lanes narrowed to one, and traffic slowed to a crawl.

"I've never been this far south on Dale Mabry before," I said.

"Really? You've lived here forever, haven't you?"

"This is a long way from Pasco County."

"Yeah, I guess so. I've never been to Pasco. Is it pretty? Do you have horses?"

"I don't have a horse but my best friend Michael did when we were kids. A palomino named Chester."

"Cool," Lauren said. "I always wanted a horse. I guess most kids do."

After Dale Mabry turned to just two lanes, strip malls crowded both sides of the road, barber shops and record stores and dry cleaners packed in clumps that felt

claustrophobic after the expansive car lots by the stadium. Without any fanfare, Lauren took a quick right turn, drove up a narrow strip of stores, and parked in front of a small Mexican restaurant called El Toro. I must have looked confused.

"I used to waitress here," she said. "I know everyone and they won't card you."

Lauren slipped the pink bunny off her finger, placed it on the dashboard. "It's cool," she said. "Don't be scared."

I am cursed with a revealingly expressive face. Cool, I thought. Sure. It's cool. I'm cool. We're all so very cool.

Lauren came around and opened the passenger's door from the outside.

Shortly after their trip to Piedmont Park, Shelby took Michael to the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Michael and I had heard about Rocky Horror in high school but it never played anywhere in Pasco County. There was one theatre in Tampa that showed it but we'd never gone. We knew the deal though. Michael read about it in the Village Voice, which he used to browse every time he went to the big public library in downtown Tampa to work on his term papers. So he was psyched about seeing Rocky that first time. Though he says he played dumb with Shelby, making her think he'd never heard of it before. That was his routine that summer, acting the part of country-bumpkin nerd, playing it up way too thick. It amused him, how easily Shelby bought his naiveté. After she decked him out in the right kind of jeans and punk-rock t-shirts, she was proud of her boy-toy creation. She acted as if she'd invented his entire existence, and thus, she was convinced she knew him, inside and out. Michael would never admit it, but he liked being her pet project. No matter what he says to the contrary, he liked everything about

that summer he spent alone with Shelby.

So that first night at Rocky Horror, Michael watched with fascination and awe, but not surprise, as Shelby believed. They got a six pack of beer and drank most of it in the car sitting outside the theater before the show. As Michael expected, there were both guys and girls in high heels and leather and lingerie. Shelby knew everyone there. They all waved, and smiled, and gave Michael the same condescending smirk Shelby couldn't suppress either.

"I got a Virgin here," Shelby told everyone.

Virgin, Virgin, Virgin. As a Rocky first-timer, Michael heard it all night. And he loved the attention. I know he did.

After the movie, they ended up in Shelby's car, and she didn't start the engine right away. She said she wasn't tired and didn't want to go home, then she laid her head on Michael's shoulder. Her hands fell in his lap. It was just like the spiral slide but this time Michael wasn't shocked when she reached for him. He unzipped his jeans and she took it from there. Her hand was warm and confident, just like before. He didn't last long.

"Damn," Shelby said. "That was fast."

"Sorry," he said.

She didn't let go of him right away.

Michael knew by then that he would never call Shelby his girlfriend and she would never act like one. He couldn't categorize their relationship, but it wasn't romantic. Still, he turned to her, and said, "You wanna stay at my place tonight?"

She shook her head, as if he'd suggested mini-golf and she was in the mood for bowling instead. Then she let go of him, and said, "Not in a million fucking years."

Lauren wasn't kidding about knowing everyone at the El Toro. A group of waiters in matching maroon polo shirts descended on her like rabid fans as soon as we walked in. They hugged and kissed her and touched her hair. She introduced them to me with a sweep of her hand.

"Allie, this is Marcus, Tommy, and Rico."

"Hi," I said, burying my hands in my pockets. All three waiters looked me up and down, studying me with a disorienting intensity.

Lauren stood there smiling, her arm wrapped around the one she'd called Rico. He had a friendly face, thick eyebrows, curly black hair.

"Where did you find *this* one?" Rico said to Lauren.

I felt my face flush, and Lauren smacked him in the stomach. "Don't embarrass her, Ricky. She's practically my boss. She *trained me* at the insurance company."

Tommy and Marcus burst into laughter.

"I'm not her boss," I said.

The boys kept laughing.

"Seriously," Lauren said. "Be nice and get us a table. Allie owes me a beer."

Tommy and Marcus scurried away, giggling to themselves.

"Sit at my table," Rico said. "I'll take care of you."

Lauren kissed him on the cheek, then reached for my hand. She dragged me through the restaurant following Rico. He sat us in a booth near the back and left us alone.

I looked at Lauren, and said, "What was that all about?"

She sat there smiling that big, ridiculous smile. "They think you're cute, that's all. They were teasing me."

"Teasing *you*?" I said.

"They're silly boys. Rico's a sweetheart, but the other two...well, I never liked them much, honestly."

Tommy and Marcus were nowhere around but I still felt their eyes on me. I had no doubt all three waiters were gay. They could see right through my shy tomboy demeanor, and the overexposure flushed my skin. Later I would wonder how much Lauren pre-calculated that evening, the ability to order beer clearly not the only reason she brought me to El Toro.

"Did you like waitressing here?" I said. "Were the tips good? Was it better than data entry?"

"Whoa. One question at a time," she said, as she rolled her fork and knife out of the paper napkin, set them on the placemat.

"We've got all night," she said, smiling.

I sat on my hands. "I imagine it's draining. Waitressing."

"Always tip generously," she said. "Especially if you plan on going back to the same place. And don't piss waiters off. Trust me on that."

She picked up her water glass and made a gagging sound, as if she were about to spit.

"Gross," I said.

"Exactly."

"I can see data entry might be more civilized. But why'd you leave here?"

"The tips can be great but other than that, waitressing sucks. I wanted a more steady job. Something that might lead somewhere."

The thought of making a career at the insurance company depressed me. "Did you ever consider college?" I asked.

The question sounded more judgmental than I intended, but Lauren didn't appear offended.

"I took some community college classes a few years ago. High school with ashtrays; that's what it felt like. I quit when I met Gary. That was stupid, I guess. But classes just felt like a hassle after awhile."

Rico returned to our table, holding an order pad. Lauren looked relieved.

"Did you say something about beer?" Rico asked.

"Yes!" Lauren said. "Two Dos Equis, please."

He looked at me. "And for you?"

"Um, I, uh--"

He winked at me. "Just kidding, sweetheart. I'll be right back."

Rico brought two bottles and set one in front of each of us. The beer was cold and tasted nothing at all like my sour childhood memory. We had a few of them and we ate tacos and chips and salsa and after awhile, Tommy and Marcus came back over with Rico and they were more friendly than before. But I still tensed up every time one of them looked at me. I tried to fade into the booth as they gossiped about other waiters, about the owner, and customers they hated. Every once in awhile Lauren would wink at me and one of the boys would smile. I tried not to make anything of it. I told myself I was imagining the flirtations; I didn't want to get my hopes up.

But then Lauren wrapped her arm around my waist as we walked back to the car. I was wobbly from the beer and she was steady and calm, smiling extra wide, as always. I told myself it was natural as could be.

As we pulled back onto Dale Mabry, I rolled my window down and let the warm summer air swirl around us. I tilted my head to the side and looked for stars. The sky was milky grey and twinkled with traffic lights; I couldn't make out a single constellation.

Lauren said, "Hey, Gary's band is playing tonight. You wanna go see him with me?"

"What?" I said, hoping I'd heard her incorrectly.

We were stopped at a light. Lauren repeated what she'd said, and my head started to throb.

"I should probably get home," I said.

Her eyes got wide, and when the light changed, she pulled into the ABC Liquor Store on the next block.

"Have you ever had Asti Spumante? God, I love Asti. I want a bottle. Right now."

I looked at the Liquor Store's front door, then back at Lauren. "I can't go in there," I said. "I look twelve."

"You stay here." She was out of the car before I could stop her.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back and tried to convince myself I wasn't going to be sick.

That first night I went out with Lauren was early July. Years later, looking back at

the calendar, I determined it must have been the weekend just after the 4th. But when I think about it, when I replay it in my mind, I see it happening in perfect synchronicity with Michael and Shelby on the 4th of July. They went to see the Braves play that night. When Michael retold that story, he always lingered forever on the actual game. How the Braves sucked so bad and lost to Montreal, 7-4. How they were losing the whole damn game. But the real story happened after the Braves lost, after the fireworks were over at the stadium, after Michael had eaten two hot dogs and Shelby had drank too much beer and so of course, they ended up in Shelby's car again, with Michael's fly down and Shelby's hand working him over. They'd left the stadium and bought more beer and parked behind a liquor store in midtown. Michael was starting to feel sleazy, getting so many hand jobs parked in Shelby's car, but he knew nothing would happen at all if they went back to his apartment. She only unzipped him in the strange anonymity of almost-public places.

But that night, on the 4th of July, Michael was feeling brave, or stupid, because while Shelby was jerking him off, he took a chance and put his hand on her breast. Focused on her task, as she always was, she just pushed him away and didn't say anything. So he leaned forward instead of laying back. She didn't stop stroking him; she didn't let anything distract her once she got started. He took it as a positive sign, and went all out. He put his lips on hers, held her face and kissed her. That's when she jerked her head back and dug her fingernails into his cock.

Whenever Michael tells this story his hands reflexively protect his groin and his face contorts into a horrible grimace.

"Jesus!" he said. "What the fuck?"

Shelby never shaped or groomed her fingernails but she wasn't regular about cutting them either; and she wasn't a nail-biter, like me, so they were sharp as hell and Michael was in serious pain.

"I told you, I'm not into making out," Shelby said. "I don't want to kiss you, Michael. Don't ever try that again."

"You're nuts, you know that? You can't get enough of my dick but you won't let me kiss you. What the hell is that about?"

Michael pushed her away and zipped himself up. She sat back in the passenger's seat and folded her arms across her chest.

"Is this some kind of game?" he said. "Some kind of power trip?"

She wouldn't look at him. "I'm sorry if I hurt you," she said. "I can't explain it, but there are some things I just won't do with you."

Lauren came out of the liquor store cradling a brown paper sack to her chest like a football. She got in the car, showed me the bottle, and said, "You're gonna love this. Sparkling Italian wine, smoother and sweeter than champagne. I drink it straight out of the bottle."

And that's what we did. We sat in front of ABC Liquor and passed the Asti bottle back and forth until it was gone, until the cars streamed down Dale Mabry like angry rivers. White on one side, red on the other. Headlights, brake lights. It was beautiful and I said so.

"You're wasted," Lauren said. That was true, but I do remember the details of that night.

I remember the way her fingers felt when they trailed up my arm, the way her smile faded yet I knew she wasn't sad, the light scent of her perfume as my lips fell to her neck. I was leaning across my seat into hers. I remember hesitating, slightly, before I kissed her. She didn't hesitate at all when she kissed me back. I remember thinking how much I loved beer and Asti Spumante. It was an absolutely ridiculous thing to be thinking in the middle of the first real kiss of my life, but there it was. Hallelujah, alcohol. Praise to the bravery of the buzz.

And I remember Lauren touching my face, gently, after our kiss, and saying, "You're very sweet, Allie. So very sweet."

We didn't go see her fiancé Gary's band play that night. Instead, we sat in her car and she told me about her sexual curiosities. She told me how she'd shared them with Gary and he thought they were cool. How he wanted her to find the right girl, someone who wouldn't mind if he watched.

My buzz dissipated promptly after hearing that. I stared out her dirty, streaked windshield, not blinking.

"It's creepy, I know," Lauren said. "Some kind of porno fantasy, I guess. I thought it would be okay, in the abstract, you know. But now, now that I've met you, I think it's crazy."

Her blue eyes were big and round. She drove me back to my car and before we said good night, she squeezed my hand and told me her parents had a condo in Clearwater. She said they were going to be out of town the following weekend and she was going to stay there, by herself. She said Gary's band had a gig in Orlando and he'd be away all weekend.

"You should come to the beach with me," she said. "We could get another bottle of Asti. We could watch the sunset."

"No Gary," I said.

She shook her head. "No Gary. I promise."

Michael's birthday is July 10th. He felt pretty awkward with Shelby after what happened on the 4th but they saw each other at work and after a few days, things were almost back to normal. So he told her his birthday was coming up.

"No shit," she said. "We should do something special for your big day." They were at Dairy Queen eating burgers and ice cream.

The way she said it, sort of tender and sweet and almost girlish, made Michael think, for a second, something had changed. Then she picked up the plastic boat her banana split came in and poured melting ice cream and the last few bites of fruit down her throat, swallowing like an eating contest hero.

"I'm scheduled to work the night shift on my birthday," Michael said. "It's not a big deal."

But when the day came, he found out Shelby had asked the manager to change her schedule so she could work, too.

It was a crappy shift. They had to take inventory of the foot care and first-aid aisles and they had to close up. Michael and Shelby and the Assistant Manager were the last ones there. It was after ten o'clock and Michael was grumpy as hell. He wanted to hear a friendly voice singing Happy Birthday. I'd sent him a card and a book of crosswords from the New York Times as a present but that wasn't enough. Michael

always insisted he was missing me that night and that's why he was blue, but I've never believed that.

This story is a difficult one. I won't say I don't believe it happened but I've struggled for a long time to make sense of it, to understand what it meant, for Shelby, and for Michael. It's easiest just to tell it the way Michael did, and not interject my doubts, or fears.

He was standing in the storage closet, double-checking the inventory, when Shelby came in, and closed the door behind her. She turned the lights off; it was pitch black. Michael couldn't see a thing. He felt her hand on his shoulder, and another on his chest. She stood in front of him; their bodies brushed together.

"Don't say anything," she said.

She put her arms around him, and her lips touched the base of his neck. Her hands found his waist and she pulled him against her. He kept his arms by his sides, afraid to make any advances. Her lips nibbled his skin, from neck to ear. She pushed him against the wall and with her whole body pressed tight against his, she kissed him.

Michael wasn't stupid enough to ruin that moment by saying anything. He just stood there in the dark and let her kiss him. He let her grind against him until he was about to explode. Sensing his excitement, she unzipped his fly, took him into her warm palm, and finished him off. Then she moved behind him, and with her body flush against his back, she tucked him into his jeans and zipped up. She left him in the storage closet, and when he came out, she was gone for the night.

I did call him that night on the phone. I sang him Happy Birthday and we talked about Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and its possible connection with the mathematics of

chaos; and he didn't say a goddamn word about Shelby Everett. And I didn't tell him about Lauren Thomas. I didn't tell him I'd kissed her, or that I was planning to spend that weekend with her at her parent's condo in Clearwater.

But as we hung up the phone we said the words we always said to each other.

"I love you."

"I love *you*."

"Good night, Allie."

"Good night, Michael."

I did spend that weekend with Lauren. And I fumbled my way through my first horribly embarrassing attempt at sexual intimacy. And afterwards, when we walked on the beach together, Lauren told me it wasn't what she'd expected at all.

"It was softer and gentler and sweeter than any sex I've ever had with a guy," she said.

Even at stupid seventeen I knew that wasn't entirely a good thing. But I smiled and looked up at the moon, and I felt less soft, less gentle, less sweet, than I'd ever felt before. There's a certain kind of swagger you can only get one way. And I got it first from Lauren.

But I knew she was going to move to California and marry her stupid fiancé; I'd known that all along. I met the guy a few weeks after the Clearwater weekend. He wasn't as much of an asshole as I'd imagined, and yet I didn't feel a bit of guilt over what Lauren and I shared. It was just an experiment for her, and I was grateful she'd gone through with it. Doubly grateful she never told Gary. In its own twisted way, that seemed like an act of

faithfulness to me. I guess that says something about my moral character, but there it is. Maybe I was more naturally prone to open relationships than I realized, at least before I met Shelby.

Lauren and I worked together the rest of the summer; we hung out a few more times. But we never went back to El Toro, and we never spent the night together again.

I'd like to think I was pretty cool about the whole deal. I felt that way at the time. But I didn't tell Michael any of it while it was happening, and I didn't spend much time analyzing why. I told myself I'd be in Atlanta soon enough and there would be plenty of time to share stories. And we did share them. Over and over again, Michael and I shared them all. In our own time, and sitting together, side-by-side.

Unfortunately for Michael, his summer of '84 didn't end quite as agreeably as mine.

After celebrating his birthday in the storage closet with Shelby, he called in sick to work for quite a few days. He didn't care about his job at Walgreens and he considered quitting without notice so he wouldn't have to see Shelby anymore. He thought she might be crazy. And as much as it surprised him, he feared he might be falling in love with her. So he was trying to make a clean break.

After a week passed, she showed up at his apartment with a pot of homemade chicken soup.

When he let her in, she looked him up and down, and said, "You're not sick."

"I haven't felt like myself," he said.

"I cooked a chicken, you fucking jerk. I cooked the chicken, I chopped the vegetables, and then I made soup. And you're not even sick."

She put the pot on the kitchen counter, and stood with her arms crossed. "So?" she said. "What's your problem?"

Just looking at Shelby made Michael feel like the biggest idiot in the world. He felt like a clinging lovesick girl. But he wasn't fool enough to tell her that. Instead he walked over to the counter, peered into the pot, and said, "I could eat some soup."

And that's what they did. They ate chicken soup and talked about the Silver Surfer.

"He has the Power Cosmic," Shelby said. "But he'll never defeat Galactus. He's always protecting others, you know? Always making some goddamned deal. And what does it get him? Exiled. Trapped in that silver skin, surfing the skies inside some force field built just for him. It just doesn't pay to love anything. Ask the Surfer, man. It just doesn't pay."

Michael finished his soup, and as he listened to Shelby talk, he realized she wasn't going away. With an increasing sense of dread, he knew that she'd inserted herself into his life, totally and completely, and that soon--very soon--he would be introducing her to me.

$$* \subseteq^* \Rightarrow^* dx^*$$

I sometimes wonder if other mathematicians contort theorems into explanations of life, as I do. I don't mean applying math to physical applications, engineering, or science. That's lucrative work, but it doesn't appeal to me. I appreciate the practical aspects of my discipline, and I teach applications daily, but I prefer to dwell in ideas, to swim in the pool of pure abstraction. And I am fortunate that the college pays me to do so.

I've had plenty of opportunities to ask friends and colleagues if they ever developed their own mathematically-inspired theories of life. But strangely, I never have. It's a pretty personal thing, I guess, admitting I believe the calculus of residues could hold the key to unlocking personal truth; that a theorem, even one as divinely constituted as Cauchy's Residue, could transcend the crisp, clean world of mathematics and speak to human frailty, loss, regret.

I need to beg your pardon for my non-linear approach. The mathematician would prefer to keep things flowing in their proper order. But singularities live in the domain of memory; and we're playing in the complex plane, so it's not even one-dimensional. The real part, coupled with the imagined, sweep out the space of our complex remembered lives.

You're wandering, Allie. Return to the Theory. Check your hypotheses.

Cauchy's Residue Theorem requires the function to be defined on a simply-connected domain. Definitions. We live and die by our definitions.

*A domain of the complex plane is **simply connected** if every simple closed polygon formed by points in the domain is fully contained within the domain.*

Even for a mathematician, that's a tricky one to puzzle through the first time. Put rigor aside for the moment; the basic concept is easy. A simply connected domain is a space without holes. To get from one side of the space to the other you can twist and turn and bend yourself around; you just can't drop a segment out of the middle.

Young and bold at nineteen, I didn't hesitate to cast my remembered life as a simply-connected domain. At forty-four, I'm not so sure. Are there holes in the past we can't find our way to fill? Critical places where our function needs to exist, but doesn't.

How unknown is the unknown?

$$* \otimes * \geq * \vee *$$

The Algebra Thief

If my life's simply-connected domain has a center—an origin—a place where my identity began to take its permanent form, I believe it falls squarely in the middle of my tenth year. Almost-summer, 1977. After the static came into my brain that first time, I had trouble concentrating at school. In class, or on the bus, I'd stare out the window, dreaming about those vibrations under my skin, the sensation of flying out of my body. Time moving faster, slower, perhaps not existing at all.

I was in fifth grade, and Michael and I were still riding the school bus twenty minutes each way, to and from Dade City Elementary. He was in seventh grade that year, his last before making the jump to Zephyrhills High. We didn't live in Dade City and we didn't live in Zephyrhills; we were in what Michael's grandfather, Eddie, called "unincorporated Pasco County." Mom called it the boonies. Whatever name you had for it, there weren't any schools nearby, and not many kids either.

Mom and I had arrived to that barely inhabited swath of old Florida when I was just five years old. Living across the dirt road with his grandfather and a ton of farm animals, Michael Underwood was the only other kid within shouting distance. So we defaulted to the easy companionship of youth plus proximity. While I was devouring encyclopedia entries on radio waves, the solar system, and tropical rain frogs, Michael read books on Greek mythology and world history. He memorized the names of all the countries in Africa when he was eight. He played the saxophone and he was scared to death of spiders. My mom called him a delicate boy once, and Eddie got mad as hell.

Eddie had been an engineer when he was younger but retired early after inventing

some mechanical thing that made assembly lines go faster in the early 60s. He was a big guy, with a meaty chest and shoulders. His skin was rough as tree bark, and he wore western cut shirts with pearly snaps. Eddie fully occupied every space he stood in, even the wide tangle of his twenty-acre plot. His teeth were a sickening yellow-gray from smoking too much but when he smiled it was like a light switch turning on. Michael had a few of Eddie's features, but not many. Even after I read the encyclopedia entry on dominant traits in genetic inheritance, I was still fascinated by the difference in their eyes; Eddie's glistened crystal blue while Michael's were deep dark brown.

The school bus never took us any further than where the asphalt ended on West Drive, at the edge of the Clayborne Ranch. From there Michael and I walked another half mile of gravel and dust to get to Dunhill Drive, the dirt road we lived on. One day, when my head was still searching the sky for static, Michael stopped to watch the painted ponies graze in the Clayborne's side pasture. He hung his arms over the side of the wooden fence and told me he got a letter from his mother. He never talked about his mother.

"She's in New Mexico now. Another commune, another stupid group of hippies."

He pushed away from the fence, kicked a stone into the road. A brown lizard darted in front of us. We'd only been out of the bus a few minutes but the afternoon sun felt like a heavy hand pressing down on the top of my head. There wasn't a bit of shade on that part of West Drive.

"I used to want her to come back for me," he said. "But I wouldn't go with her now. I wouldn't go even if she begged."

He picked up a long stick by the side of the road, treating it like a cane. He

touched it to the ground before he took a step. He was twelve, soon to be thirteen, and finally taller than me. His face was round, his body plump. He'd started to get pimples and he was sensitive about it. Michael's preference would have been to sit under a sleepy oak tree eating chocolate and reading books all the time but Eddie kept him busy with chores so he never got outrageously fat.

"Do you think your mom will come back?" I asked.

"No," he said. "She's not coming here."

He leaned on his walking stick like an old man, and the road stretched out before us. "I heard Grandpa on the phone with her a few weeks ago. His voice got real quiet, which it never does, you know, and after they were done talking, he took Kipper out for a long ride. Didn't come back until after dark. Then he stood out there in the pasture, brushing him down for hours. She's not coming for me. She's never coming for me."

Michael had never talked that way to me before. And what I remember most are how the rocks stabbed the soles of my shoes as we walked and that hot, heavy sun beating on our backs. My mind fixated on that sensation that had pulled me out of my body. I knew it was something inside of me, yet another way I was different. But unlike all the other things, my static was invisible. It wasn't like not having a father, or being too good at math, or not liking girlish things. The static was mine and I wanted to hold it close. I wished for it to lift me over the trees, to escape Michael and the sad story of his mother.

By the time we got to Michael's house, I was craving those vibrations, that sensation of flying.

First lesson in the content-free language? Obsession. The origin.

I spotted Michael's algebra book on the kitchen table, after he'd disappeared into the walk-in pantry, searching for Graham crackers. I opened the book to the first chapter and started to read.

*Take two number lines and set them perpendicular to each other. The lines are called **axes**. The horizontal one is called the *x*-axis; the vertical is the *y*-axis.*

I ran my fingers over the picture, as if it were Braille, feeling an immediate jolt of energy. I sat down, my fingers scanning symbols, lines, arrows. I still get this spark from reading mathematics. Falling into some new theory I've never seen is like walking through a portal to a different dimension, where ideas are as solid as rocks, rocks as fluid as dreams. Where time and space pose no limits, no boundaries.

Michael rustled through boxes and bags in the pantry. It was Friday and he always put off his algebra homework until Sunday night because he hated math, so I slipped the book into my bag and covered it up with my pencil box. I'd never had the urge to steal anything before that. I could have borrowed the book from him. He wouldn't have cared. But my brain was buzzing, tripping over seconds faster than the clock. I was high on the trail toward the static, the vibrations, and the impulse to steal it was strong. I thought, if reading about skywave propagation in the encyclopedia could make me fly up to the ceiling, all those equations in Michael's math book might send me straight to the moon. And so my obsession with mathematics, as a gateway to altered consciousness, was born.

Michael emerged from the pantry with cookies and a bag of Fritos.

"Five minutes until Gilligan's Island," he said, looking unbelievably childish.

I watched the whole stupid show with my hand tucked inside my bag, resting on top of the algebra book. I wanted to run home and have the book to myself for a few

hours before Mom got home from work. But I always went to Michael's after school because Mom thought I needed adult supervision and Eddie was always around, out back washing down the pig's slab, or building something out of wood and spare nails. I asked him once if he missed being an engineer. "Nah," he said. "I like my new job better, raising kids and pigs and cows for slaughter." Then he pinched Michael on the ear, and said, "So you be good boy, or we'll be pulling your chops outta the freezer next year."

Eddie was a good friend of my Uncle Clark's. I was pretty sure they'd made some sort of pact when Clark moved away that left Eddie with an over-exuberant sense of responsibility for both my mom and me. The four acre plot of overgrown palmetto I grew up on belonged to my Uncle Clark, though he never lived there with us. Shortly after Mom and I arrived from Virginia, where I was born, Uncle Clark married a rich girl from Memphis, and abandoned the property to us. "It's four acres of good land and it's yours if you want it," he told my mother. The snakes and possums and Florida panthers felt more like owners of those acres than we did, but we didn't have anywhere else to go, so it became our home.

When Mom packed us up from my grandparents house in Richmond and moved us down to Florida in 1972, she said she envisioned the white sand vacation shots from her childhood. She pictured her father driving his shiny red Chevy with the windows rolled down on their family trip to Clearwater when she was eleven. She imagined seagulls and colorful billboards and salt air brushing her skin. What we found instead were rattlers and scorpions tucked amidst underbrush and wild-rooted vines so thick and twisted they broke the blade on the first backhoe that tried to tame them. Mom said she wasn't surprised when Clark cut and ran from his purchased blunder. She loved to tell the

story about when her brother was thirteen and spent all of the family's S&H green stamps on a chemistry set. "It's the coolest thing ever," he said. He left it in the backyard during a hailstorm and the next morning all the glass beakers were broken and the solutions were contaminated with rainwater. Mom said if we hadn't claimed it, the property in Pasco would have been Clark's chemistry set all over again. Those sweet four aces of brush would have grown back over to wild in no time. It wasn't the Florida of postcards and springtime vacations, and Mom was never fond of the snakes or the possibility of a stray alligator showing up on our doormat, but there was no breeze sweeter than the one found under our canopy of pines just after a three pm thunderstorm blew through and washed out the crater-size pothole in our lonely dirt road.

When I finally got home that afternoon, I spread the algebra book out on my twin bed and skipped right to the equations. I'd been annoyed with math all year because my teacher, Mrs. Towson, only called on the boys in class and never me, and she moved her mouth into strange shapes when she wrote on the board. Her lips formed a big round circle when she said the word "zero". I liked reading Michael's book all by myself. Simplifying expressions and solving equations felt like working out puzzles. I loved it when the problem appeared complicated at first but then everything fell away and the ugliness canceled out and the answer was something simple, like $x+1$, or $y=3$.

My mom worked as a secretary in the English department of a small Catholic college and she liked to tell stories about her day while we sat at the kitchen table for dinner. My favorite was the one about the monk who ran away with a student. Apparently Mom resembled the college girl who fell in love with the monk so people brought the story up all the time, telling her some new detail she hadn't heard before, while staring at

her as if she might actually be the girl herself. The story became a daily barometer for Mom's mood. If she was happy, she'd laugh about the coincidence and her unwitting fame on campus. If she'd had a bad day, she'd curse about the evils of gossip and small-minded people. But that night, I barely registered Mom's chatter as I shoveled my mouth full of corn and mashed potatoes and saw equations in the shadows the curtains made on the kitchen walls, nodding my head to the pure rhythm of her words.

"The puzzle books," she said. "Did you hear what I asked you?"

My head was full of the quadratic formula. The last example I'd read bothered me. The book said there was no solution but that didn't seem right. I reached for my iced tea.

Mom shook her head. "I said I talked to Grandma today. She asked if you liked the puzzles she sent."

I nodded, and ate more corn.

"Slow down with that. You have somewhere to go?"

To the stars, I thought. To Venus and Mars. I slowed my chewing and counted to ten. What if I could knock over a lamp while I was floating out of my body? Or move a book across a table? I'd read about the scientific method. I understood the concept of experimental evidence.

I didn't contemplate God or heaven very often and when I did, it was usually tangled up with thoughts of my father. And that was something Mom and I didn't talk about at the dinner table. His name was Alexander Waters and he'd been a United States Marine. Enlisted, not drafted. He went to Vietnam in 1966; I was born the following winter. He earned three purple hearts but he never came home. He died in 1968, in the Battle of Khe Sanh. Mom told me bits and pieces about him but she never dwelt on the

subject. The most concrete thing I knew was that I looked just like him. I had his auburn hair, fair skin, light freckles. Sometimes Mom would touch my face, and her fingers would brush my skin, slowly, as if each freckle were a memory.

After Mom went to bed that night, I went back to the quadratic formula examples where the book said "no solution." What good is a formula that spits out answers but only part of the time? It was sticky hot that night so I took off my pajama top and when I could hear Mom snoring through the thin trailer walls, I took my notebooks and pencils into the kitchen, and laid down on the cool tile floor. I stared at solutions to quadratic equations until I could see them with my eyes closed. My body was tired but my brain still spun. I turned out the light and laid on my back, flat against the tile, arms by my sides.

$$\frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

A frantic rush; not static this time; not vibrations; it was swift, desperate, being pushed through a doorway by a crowd, more voices than I'd ever heard in one place before; no faces, no forms. Only sound. Loud, angry, panicked sound. Then. Lifting. Smooth. Floating. Peaceful. My spirit rose, and I tried to coax it toward the window. But as soon as I was certain of my body and mind's dislocation, something jolted me back. Eyes open. My temples throbbed, and I felt more tired than I'd ever felt in my entire ten years of life. I caught my breath, laid my head back against the tile, and fell into a deep, deep sleep.

When I woke, Mom stood over me, a puzzled expression on her face. I was still spread out on the floor, arms and neck stiff and aching. Light spilled through the windows and papers were scattered around me, sheets torn out of spiral notebooks with numbers and equations written from top to bottom.

"What are you doing?" Mom said.

I scurried up, tried to stack the papers as the frayed spiral-bound edges fell away like confetti.

"Nothing," I said.

"Why aren't you in bed?"

I tucked the book under my arm. "I was hot."

"Were you here all night?"

My pajama top was missing, and I stood in the kitchen, half-naked.

"Allie?"

Papers slipped through my fingers and I bent down to gather them again.

"Let me see that book," Mom said.

She caught me by the arm as I tried to lurch past.

"That doesn't look like your usual homework. What is it?"

I went limp under her tightening grasp. "It's not for school," I said. "It's algebra."

"Algebra?" She said the word like it was something horrible, like pornography or murder.

I jerked away and darted into the living room, down the hall to my bedroom. I closed the door and rushed around like a miniature lunatic, certain I was about to be carted off to jail for studying math beyond my grade level.

Obsession is a content-free language.

It was a damned algebra book, and if I'd stopped and thought about it for more than a few minutes, even at ten years old, I should have realized that no one would care that I was interested in it. But what drove me, what sent me frantically scribbling down

problems as fast as I could before Mom forced me to open the door, was an undeniable high, which instinctively, felt forbidden. When my brain engaged with those symbols, equations, concepts, when I felt that rush come flooding through the quadratic formula, my mind filled with a thousand voices screaming, "No solution? No Solution!?"

"Allie, don't make me barge in on you. Open the door."

I tried to act casual as I let her into the room, but she went right to the book and started flipping through it.

"Is this Michael's?"

I nodded.

"He let you borrow it?"

"Yes."

I've always been the most horrific liar. If I know something is a lie, the fact of it burns across my face like a flashing red light. Even a single word is a challenge.

"Did you take the book from Michael without asking?"

I shrugged, looked at the floor, then said, "He hasn't looked for it yet."

She dropped herself onto my bed, her shoulders slumping as if she were exhausted. "So you admit that you stole the thing and then you just lied to me about it."

"It's not a big deal."

I also have a penchant for not knowing when to shut up.

Mom looked around as if she were doing her own series of calculations. She seemed desperate for something, but I wasn't sure what. That was the way her love appeared to me sometimes, wild and full, large enough to fill a room without saying a word. She'd been so proud to find that purple fabric to make curtains for my ninth

birthday; and she loved the paisley bedspread she bought out of the Sears catalog to match. I enjoyed the rich colors, like purple and royal blue, but fabric and decorating were far beyond my interests. As she scanned my room I feared I was a disappointment to her, a failed daughter. A tomboy, an algebra thief, a liar.

"I'll take it back to him," I said. "I'll apologize."

She pulled me toward her as if she'd forgotten the whole thing already.

"Why did you sleep in the kitchen? Is it too hot in your room? Do you need a stronger fan?"

I shrugged.

Mom hugged me tighter, and said, "We'll get you a new fan. Okay?"

"Okay," I said into her shoulder.

She didn't let me off the hook about the stealing, though. She dragged me up the small hill to Michael and Eddie's house later that morning. I walked as slowly as I could, pushing dirt around with the insole of my sneakers. Mom strolled along beside me, whistling. Driveways on Dunhill Drive were made of habit, not asphalt. A strip of well-worn tire tracks in the grass led up the side of Eddie's property, then curved toward the mustard yellow house. Pine needles covered the old Buick as it sat shaded by the towering tree. Sunlight streaked through the tree's branches and framed my mother's face. I didn't think about it often but she was a beautiful woman. Whether she was walking down a dirt road or going to a fancy event, she never wore cosmetics. Her skin was clear and her fingernails always perfectly shaped. She wore her light brown hair almost to her waist back then, often pulling it together in a ponytail on the weekends. But that morning she just slipped it behind her ears, and off we went. Mom sewed her own clothes and she

kept things pretty simple there, too. Cotton pants, pullover shirts, the occasional vest or skirt. She wasn't as rugged as our country lifestyle might have suggested. She could plant a vegetable garden, mow the lawn, and pump water out of the well but she was no lumberjack or handyman. We were extremely fortunate to have Eddie close by.

Mom rang the bell. "We should plant some flowers for them," she said, looking at the bare beds. "What do you think? Marigolds or geraniums?"

Her sing-song voice kicked in, and I could feel her disappearing behind a mask of cheerfulness. She never stayed upset with me for long but that too-happy tone of her voice felt worse than a scolding.

"Flowers are too much trouble," Eddie grumbled, as he opened the door. "I'd rather grow tomatoes." He wore a faded red T-shirt and jeans that were loose and dirt-worn at the pockets. Grey stubble lined his chin. He held a mug of coffee in his right hand.

"We're sorry to disturb you this morning," Mom said. "Allie would like to have a word with Michael, if he's available."

Michael sat at the kitchen table, a wave of dark hair covering half his face. White elephants marched trunk-to-tail across his blue pajamas. He shifted his legs under the table, and said, "Hey," into his cereal bowl. It was cool inside the Underwoods' house. They had air conditioning that worked in every room.

"I took your book," I said, laying it on the table in front of him. "I'm sorry. I should have asked first."

He put his spoon down, and his face formed the most annoying kind of smile. If it were possible to laugh without making a sound, that's what he did.

"I bet you don't understand the quadratic formula," I said.

"Yes I do."

"All of it?"

Michael and I stared each other down as Eddie offered Mom a cup of coffee, then shuffled around the kitchen, opening cabinets and drawers, pulling out mugs and spoons and sugar.

"Someday I'm going to know all the math that's ever been known," I said.

Michael flipped through the pages of the book, acting nonchalant. "If you say so."

There was a strange quiet in the room. As I turned my head it felt as if it weighed twice as much as normal.

"Grandpa knows a lot of math," Michael said. "Don't you?"

"A fair amount. Most engineers do," Eddie said.

I spun around to look at Eddie.

He stood propped against the kitchen counter. Mom held a cup of coffee. They smiled at each other, a funny kind of smile, slow and careful. And then I blinked and the whole world stopped for a second. Nothing moved but I could see a jagged frozen fragment of time rippling back and forth like a pebble skipping across water. A shimmer flickered through everything and I was certain I'd seen it all before. Standing in that exact spot in the Underwoods' kitchen, with Michael looking exactly the same, and Mom sipping her coffee just like that, and Eddie propped against the counter. All of it, every single piece of that moment, I had seen before. But the second I knew it was the absolute truth I also knew it was impossible. The four of us had never been together on a Saturday morning, in that exact position, with Michael's algebra book resting between us. As far as

I could remember, the four of us had never been together that early on a Saturday morning, ever. Like ripples in the water, that moment vibrated through my body. The truth of it, and the falsity. Coexisting, together.

I stood still and blinked a few times.

Eddie raised his eyebrows. He put his coffee cup down and rubbed his hands together.

"The quadratic formula, huh?" He had the same excited look as when he was about to build something out of wood or old metal scraps in the yard. He pulled a notepad out of his back pocket and grabbed a pencil out of a tin can next to the sink. "You learn complex numbers yet?"

"No," I said. "What's that?"

He sat down at the table, and wrote: $i = \sqrt{-1}$.

"The square root of -1 is called i , for imaginary," he said. "A math type would say: i is defined to be the number whose square is -1."

On the paper, he wrote: $i^2 = -1$.

"Is defined to be," I said.

Eddie tapped my nose. "That's right."

He went on about imaginary numbers, complex numbers, plotting them on the complex plane. I urged him back to the quadratic formula, and he gave me the book's missing explanation. All the problems really did have solutions, if you were willing to accept their imaginary parts.

"Of course, imaginary isn't really *imaginary*," Eddie said. "It's just a different kind of number. You understand?"

I didn't but I nodded my head with confidence.

"She stayed up all night reading that book," Mom said. "On the kitchen floor."

Eddie laughed, sipping the last of his coffee. "She's going to make a great engineer someday."

Michael put his cereal bowl in the sink. The sound of his silverware banging the porcelain prickled my skin. I was thinking about imaginary things, about what it means to exist at all. I leaned back against the wooden chair, and felt my body grow heavy as steel.

"I think we've disturbed you guys long enough," Mom said. "Tell Michael you're sorry again, Allie, and we'll be on our way."

Michael turned around from the sink; his eyes were big and round. I could tell he wanted to disappear into his room and pretend this whole algebra thing had never happened. He really did hate math.

"I'm sorry about the book," I said. "I shouldn't have taken it like that."

Mom and Eddie shuffled out of the room, talking.

"You can have the damn thing for all I care," Michael whispered. "I have no idea why you like that crap."

"You like history and war books so what the hell do you know," I said.

He nudged me. "If Paula heard you swearing like that you'd be in way worse trouble, girl."

I punched him in the arm, and said, "Shit, fuck, damn. And if Eddie knew who taught me those kind of words--and worse--you'd be shoveling horse shit until you were 80."

"You *are* trouble," he said. "Trouble *is defined to be* Allie Waters."

"Ha. You learned something today, too," I said, finally making him smile.

A few days later, I made a deal with him about the algebra book. Michael agreed to let me read it for an hour after school every day while he practiced his saxophone. In exchange, I wasn't allowed to tell Eddie how little he understood math.

"I've been faking it and making Bs all this time. I don't need you ruining it for me, okay?" he said.

"Deal," I said.

So for the last month before summer vacation, every day after school I sat in Michael's big yellow beanbag chair with a notebook propped against my knees and copied problems down until my fingers ached. It started out as a game. I'd read the book at Michael's house then take the problems home to work just before bed, trying to coax those strange vibrations in my brain to let me fly up to the ceiling again, for the chance to glimpse something beyond myself. But after a few days, the static subsided and the algebra itself became the attraction. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn.

When I read about systems of inequalities in the last chapter, I saw Michael's handwritten question marks and scared looking notes in the margin, so I told him, "I can show you how to do these problems."

He put down his saxophone. "You really understand that stuff?"

"Yeah. You use the inequalities to draw regions in the plane. You make a picture, that's all."

I pointed to an example I'd just worked out. "See?"

Michael took out his notebook. "Grandpa can't find out you're helping me."

"I'm not going to do the problems for you. I'm just going to show you how."

"I know," he said. "I still don't want him to know. You're ten. It's humiliating."

"Whatever," I said, then I scooted closer and showed him what to do.

By the time summer came, I had mastered algebra, but I still hadn't told anyone about my strange vibrations. Most of the time the episodes were brief and benign, a trembling under my skin, a heightened sense of awareness, of both body and mind. Sometimes the static filled my brain to overflowing, and I escaped the confines of my bones, like the first time. Sometimes it was a peaceful flight, like a dream, and sometimes it rocked me with terrifying turbulence. The episodes weren't hurting me. I never woke up with bruises or scrapes or lingering headaches. But I was hooked on the sensation. Enthralled with the idea that I might be able to exist outside of my body. That I could travel to places—really travel there—powered only with thought. Even at ten years old, out-of-body travel registered as something deeply peculiar. Something not everyone would understand. So I kept it my secret.

During the summer of 1977, I spent some days with Michael and Eddie, on their farm, and some days at the college with Mom while she was working. The drive there was full of rolling hills and cow pastures. Towering wide oak trees with hanging Spanish moss circled the edge of the college campus while thinner, spindly pine and palm trees lined the classroom buildings with white crosses adorning the rooftops. There was a large pool with a high dive and lifeguards and I could stay there all day if I wanted. I liked to frequent the cement handball court, too, where I could toss tennis balls against the wall and catch them, over and over again. Sometimes I played inside empty classrooms near Mom's office. With two pieces of yellow chalk and a dusty eraser, I'd pace back and

forth, writing on the board as if I were a teacher. I'd sit in the wooden desks with the fold-over tables and stare out the window dreamily, the way I pictured college kids would.

Mom took classes there sometimes, working on a degree in business. She wanted to start her own company, to have a secretary instead of being one. But she worked full-time; she took care of me and our trailer and yard; and she didn't actually finish that degree until I was twenty-five years old and long gone from Pasco County. I felt guilty about that for a long time but it was my own hang-up, not hers. She never gave me any indication that she wanted her life to be different than it was.

When I was a kid, she loved to share her campus with me. She took me to the college library for the first time that summer. It was a beige stone building with very few windows, looking almost prison-like from the outside. But as soon as we walked inside, it overflowed with possibility. On the second floor the stacks fanned out in every direction. Books shelved floor-to-ceiling in rows so close two people couldn't walk side-by-side through the aisle. It smelled musty and reminded me of my grandparent's house in Virginia. They had a lot of books, but the college library was a different world—a world I immediately knew I belonged in.

"QA," Mom said. "That's the math section."

We made our way there, and I trailed my fingers across the book spines, reading titles like *Modern Algebra* and *Advanced Calculus*. I stroked them, slowly, until I reached *Complex Variables*.

I slipped the book off the shelf and lost myself. Mom sidled up beside me.

"Listen to this," I said. "The imaginary number i was invented in 1779. Before that, I guess they wrote $\sqrt{-1}$ everywhere. You think Eddie knows that?"

"Library voice," Mom said, quietly.

I whispered, "Can you check this out for me?"

"You sure you want that one?"

"I want all of them," I said.

She shook her head. "Pick out a couple more."

I got four math books on four different subjects that day. Two of them—*Complex Variables* and *Real Analysis*—I wouldn't understand until I was an undergraduate. But the symbols and pictures fascinated me from the start. I also got *Plane Geometry* and *Introduction to Trigonometry*, which I was sure I could teach myself.

That same night, just as I was ready to pour myself into those books, hopeful for the return of my vibrations, Mom sat me down and said she had something to tell me. I thought we were going on vacation, maybe a trip to Virginia to see my grandparents. But before I could ask if that was it, she took my hands in hers, and said, "Allie, I have a date this weekend."

She still had on her work clothes, a skirt and blouse and silver Timex watch. I stared at her wrist, heard the second hand ticking. My mother didn't go on dates. She stayed home and watched television; she took classes at the college; she planted tomatoes and peppers in the garden; she sewed shirts and pants from McCall patterns.

"You're going to stay with Michael and Eddie Saturday night," she said.

"All night?" I said. "Where are you going? Who is your date?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm going into Tampa for dinner with a man I met at the college. His name is Peter. Professor Peter Reynolds. He's an anthropologist."

"What does Eddie think about this?" I blurted out.

Her face turned red, and she began rummaging pots and pans out of the cabinets to make our dinner. "Eddie is happy to have you stay over," she said. "Any more questions?"

I knew that meant I better not say another word, so I went to my room and closed the door.

I only had one picture of my father and I'd held it so much I'd worn the edges away. It was taken in 1966 and he was wearing his Marine dress uniform. His expression was serious and he looked incredibly young. I'd never seen him smile. I didn't know whether he had dimples or whether his face lit up when he was happy, or whether his grin was sly and half-crooked, like mine. I didn't know what his laugh sounded like or whether his voice was deep or soft or gravelly. I knew nothing about Alexander Waters except that he was a Marine and he went to Vietnam before I was born and he never came back.

Looking back, I know it was odd that my mother waited so long to start dating again. But at ten years old, the idea of her leaving me for an entire night put me in a state of shock. It had always been just the two of us. How could she want to change that?

I didn't read any math that night. I lay in my bed and listened to WWYZ with the lights out. The shadows from the pine trees made long, shifting faces in the corner of my room. I thought about riding the skywave to pick up a far away station but I didn't feel like it. I didn't want to go to sleep; I didn't want to stay awake; I didn't even feel like trying to float out of my body. I didn't want to think about my mother going on a date. And I didn't want to think about my father or the Marines or Vietnam. But once my mind got a grip on that subject, it would take hold of me for days. And even though I'd learned

not to say a word on the subject of my father to my mom, I couldn't help the way my brain would spin around the notion that half of myself—half the person I was, half of everything that made me—was lost to this world. He was gone and I didn't know anything about him. I'd seen his parents—my other set of grandparents—once or twice back in Virginia when I was real young. They must have told me things about him but I was only two or three years old and if they did, I'd forgotten what they said. Once I got older and could remember things people told me, the information stopped coming. I didn't know how it was possible for a mind to spend so many hours thinking about things it knew so little about, but mine sure found a way.

A song came on the radio I didn't recognize. There were no words, only a saxophone playing the purest note I'd ever heard. It was crisp and beautiful and I remember thinking how Michael would have loved it. That's the last thing I remember before the freight train rolled through my brain and shook me out of my bones. I couldn't open my eyes; my body was rigid, and this time the buzz in my skull had rhythm, a deep methodical pace like rolling thunder. It kept going. And going. And I could see myself, or something like myself, lifting off my bed and careening toward the window. I didn't float. I pushed and pulled and trudged and fought against it, but it took me anyway. Out of my flesh and blood and once I was out, the static's volume began to crush me. An electric guitar pulsing my veins with feedback. I tried to turn around and go back but I couldn't. I tried to feel my way but there was nothing solid to grab or hold. I tried to lift, to scrape, to claw, but the glue I was in wasn't real. I tried to scream. I tried to cry out for someone to help me. It felt endless.

Then it was over. I woke in my bed, and instantly I was aware that no piece of my

body—not my arms, legs, hands, fingers, knees, toes, nothing—had moved from my original position. The certainty of that recognition was as frightening as the episode itself. It was terror and the illusion of terror, colliding inside my brain.

Still, I didn't tell anyone.

When Saturday arrived, Mom started primping and getting ready for her date early in the afternoon. She took a shower and washed her hair and then disappeared into her bedroom, with the AC running and her stereo blasting disco. After about thirty minutes I couldn't take it anymore. Without warning Mom I was leaving, I went to Michael and Eddie's.

I let myself in the back door and went straight to Michael's room, flopped on his beanbag. A stack of clothes rested on the edge of the bed, Michael's t-shirts tiny in such an orderly pile.

Whistling his way down the hall, Eddie peeked his head in the doorway.

"Hey kiddo. Your mom here, too?"

"No," I said. "She's getting ready."

"Okey dokey," he said.

I don't know why I expected Eddie to be disturbed by Mom's plans. He was twenty-two years older than her, and they'd never been anything more than friendly, as far as I knew. But the four of us felt like a family. I didn't want to be Michael's little sister, but I wouldn't have minded Eddie being my dad. If some new guy entered the picture, where would that leave us?

I leaned across the beanbag chair and ran my fingers over the keys of Michael's saxophone. I pictured him playing that song I'd heard on the radio, sustaining that note

without losing his breath or letting the tone waver. I startled when he appeared at the door.

"Hi," he said. "Didn't hear you come in."

"Just got here." I moved my hands away from the sax.

"Wanna play it?" he asked.

"You know I don't know how."

He cleaned the mouthpiece, slipped a new reed out of a case next to his bed and handed it to me. "Lay it on your tongue for a minute," he said.

I held the reed up to the light. It was the smoothest, thinnest piece of wood I'd ever seen, almost transparent.

"You have to get it wet before you can play," he said. "Put it in your mouth."

I handed it back to him. "I don't feel like it."

He shrugged, and put the saxophone down. "Come on. I've got to feed the animals."

Eddie said he wasn't a real farmer because he didn't make money off his land. But he always kept a couple of pigs and cows. He bought them young and raised them for slaughter. He had a special freezer in the laundry room that was full of steaks, hamburger, and pork all the time. He gave the animals names to emphasize their purpose. The two pigs in the pen were Pork Chop and Bacon. The cows in the pasture were Sir Loin and Ribeye. He said we wouldn't get attached to them that way, but I still thought the cows had sweet faces. I liked how they gazed at me, as if they had important things to say. I watched them chew and chew and chew on their cornmeal and hay while Michael tended to the pigs on the cement slab. Eddie said pigs were naturally clean animals, given the

right environment. And yet they were crafty about sneaking out of that pen if the gate was left open, even for a minute. And as soon as they did, they went straight for the dirt near the cow's water trough and rolled and rolled until they were caked in muck. They liked being dirty; it seemed obvious to me.

I was shocked at how fast they grew from piglets to full grown hogs. I called the animals by their given food names and I knew they'd be meat on the Underwood's table some day, but I still felt sad when they went to slaughter. I missed them. Didn't stop me from enjoying Eddie's hamburgers and fresh pork sandwiches, though. Not at all. Eddie said that made me a real country girl, and I couldn't disagree.

"Love your animals, enjoy your food. And understand how it all fits together," he said.

I was in the pasture with the cows and Michael was slopping food over the pen for the pigs when the telephone rang. There was a receiver on a pole that Eddie had rigged up in the backyard. You could hear it all the way into the pasture. Just a minute after the phone stopped ringing, Eddie's car started up. The engine revved and his wheels spun out as he sped down the driveway and onto the dusty road.

"Hey," I said. "What do you think that's about?"

The dust and dirt kicked up by Eddie's Buick turned into a heavy cloud. He was driving like a lunatic, and he only went as far as my driveway.

"What the hell?" I yelled, and started running. Michael called for me to slow down but I ran faster, through the dust, down the hill, toward our trailer. Blood pumped in my ears. I stumbled on a rock, skipped two steps, and kept going.

When I got to the front yard, I heard Mom scream. It didn't sound like her voice.

It didn't even sound like a human voice. It was animalistic, but it was her. I stopped. My arms went numb. I was sinking into the ground. Michael caught up with me, and his hands fell on my shoulders.

Mom cried out again. If there were words, I couldn't make them out.

Then Eddie's voice. Clear, loud. "It's okay. It's okay," he said.

The door opened and Eddie half-carried my mother down the front steps. Her fanciest skirt was filthy and torn, her feet were bare. Only one of her legs touched the ground. She buried her face in Eddie's neck and began to scream again. Then I saw her knee. Only it didn't look like a knee at all. It had deformed, shifted. Was that red, twisted mass part of my mother's body? Could it be? I turned away.

Michael gripped me tighter. Mom muffled her cries into Eddie's shoulder as he helped her into the backseat of his car. Every movement must have caused her more pain because she cried out again and again. I couldn't bear it; I thought I might pass out. When Eddie finally got Mom into the car, tears streamed down her face. I wanted to run to her, to throw my arms around her neck, and say, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I wasn't there." But Michael held me in place as Eddie got into the driver's seat and started up the car. Mom wouldn't look at me.

Eddie leaned out the window. "Going to the hospital. You guys go back to the house. I'll call you in a little while."

Then the Buick kicked up the dust again, and they were gone.

Michael tried to entice me with board games and television and food but I just sat in Eddie's large recliner by the window and stared down the driveway for an hour.

"It's a long way to the hospital," Michael said. "They'll be gone for awhile."

I sat perfectly still and focused my gaze on a small patch of dirt at the edge of the driveway. I could still see the road in my peripheral vision. I could detect the presence of a car, if one were to appear, but my eye found a rock near the grass and I concentrated my attention there. It was triangle-shaped, like a piece of pie.

Michael slammed cabinet doors and rustled silverware in the kitchen.

I wished I had that trigonometry book from the library. I shifted in the chair, tried to imagine an equation that only I could solve. A coolness came over me. My ears, face, hands were all strangely cold, and light. The rock was sand-colored on top and bottom but dark in the middle, as if it were a pie crust filled with chocolate.

Michael brought in the TV dinners. He set up the fold-out tables, gave me a fork and a glass of Kool-Aid. The aluminum tray contained Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, and green beans. It looked disgusting, but it smelled good. He sat on the sofa.

"You need to eat," he said.

"Do you think she broke her leg? Will she have to wear a cast?"

"I don't know," he said. But he thought it was bad. I could tell by the way he wasn't saying.

He touched the food tray. "You'll feel better if you eat something."

I didn't want to feel better. I wanted to sink into the dirt, be left outside with the cows.

The telephone rang. We both darted for it but Michael got there first.

"Yeah," he said into the receiver. "Yeah, we're okay."

"Is it my mom? Is she all right?"

Michael listened to the person on the other end, then handed the phone to me.

"Mom?" I squeezed the phone tight. But it wasn't her. It was Eddie.

"Your mom's a tough cookie," he said.

I loosened my grip on the receiver. "Can I talk to her? Is she right there?"

"No, Sweetie. I'm afraid you're stuck with me at the moment. They've given her some medicine for the pain. She's resting while we wait for some test results."

"Is it broken? Is she going to have to wear a cast?"

Eddie sighed. He was trying to sound casual but the mask was thin. "Sweetie, can you put Michael back on?"

Michael stood across the room, eating a cookie. I had the urge to throw the phone at him.

"He wants to talk to you," I said.

I didn't stay to hear half a conversation. I went outside, to the pie-slice rock. I ran my fingers over it, cupped it in my palms. It was even smoother than I'd imagined. I sat down and caressed it, loving it as if it were a puppy or a kitten.

The sun was completely gone when Michael finally kneeled beside me in the front yard. He smelled stale and salty, like the animals. I wondered if he'd been out there talking to them. It was dark and the cows would be far back in the pasture, laying under a tree sleeping. I didn't know how long it had been since Eddie called, but I knew every groove in that pie-slice rock.

Michael ran his hands through his hair. "She might have to have surgery," he said. "It's her knee. It's pretty bad."

His eyes were the deepest, darkest kind of brown. Almost black. He didn't look away.

"You're going to stay here tonight," he said. "I'm supposed to make sure you get some sleep."

"What kind of surgery?"

"I don't know exactly. Grandpa didn't say much."

"He told you not to tell me."

"No. He didn't tell me the details."

"Why did he want to talk to you then?"

Michael sat down, folded his legs in front of him. He picked a long strand of grass out by its roots, tied it into a knot. Then he brushed it away as if it were a bug.

"He asked about you," he said. "He wanted to know if you were okay. So he could tell Paula."

Michael wore cut-off shorts. I remembered when his legs were smooth, like mine. His body was changing, his voice deepening. Dark, long hair grew on his legs and arms.

"I didn't tell Mom when I left the trailer today," I said. "I came down here without telling her."

Michael leaned back and looked at the sky.

"Big dipper," he said.

I looked at the dirt under my feet. "Was she outside? Do you know where she was when she fell?"

Michael kept staring at the sky. I could hear him breathing, heavy and slow.

"Just tell me," I said. "I know you know. You're my friend. You should tell me."

He did know, and finally, he told me.

Mom had been far back in the woods, looking for me when she tripped in a hole,

twisted her knee, and fell hard. He told me the pain was so bad she couldn't put any weight on the leg that was hurt. She couldn't pull herself up to walk, so she crawled—using only her good knee—all the way back to the house to call for help. It took a long time to get there.

Michael said it wasn't my fault but I knew it was. Mom wouldn't have been in the woods if I had waited for her. I ran off without telling her, because I was angry and selfish. I wanted her all to myself, and when I couldn't find a way to say that, to beg her not to go on that date, I ran away.

A throbbing pain settled above my right eye. I laid the pie-slice rock in the grass. I didn't deserve such a smooth, beautiful rock and I wouldn't let myself keep it.

Michael led me back inside the house. He got out sheets and blankets and pillows. He pulled the sofa bed out in the family room, and gave me a pair of his pajamas.

"Grandpa said he'd call in the morning if they weren't back before then."

Michael's room was at the edge of the hall. I could see the light under his door from the sofa bed. I watched until it went out, listened until I didn't hear any sounds in the house except the heavy tick of the grandfather clock. I wanted that trigonometry book but it was at my house.

I pulled my T-shirt and shorts on over the pajamas. I went out the front door and closed it as quietly as I could. I'd never been outside by myself so late at night. The moon glowed bright and high and made me feel as if the world were lit from within. At the end of the driveway I heard the loud "Who-Who" of an owl. I squinted at the treetops, the fence posts, but didn't see him. As I walked on, he "Who"d again, mocking me.

I walked down the hill and up the driveway to the trailer. The door was locked and I didn't have my key, so I dropped myself onto the front steps and looked back into the darkness. Then I did something I hadn't done in years. I talked to my father. I'd done it a lot as a real little kid, when I was trying to understand what it meant that he was gone and never coming back. I'd find a quiet place away from my mother and I'd talk to him, right out loud.

My voice was hesitant at first. I concentrated on the stars. And the more I said, the more I was sure he could hear me. I started out talking about Mom, about her knee and how sorry I was that I'd run off. I didn't feel the need to stay focused or make sense when I talked to Alex. So I told him about algebra, too.

"Were you good at math? Did you like equations and word problems and learning things that everyone else thought were too hard? You didn't go to college so maybe you didn't like that sort of thing. Maybe you were a regular guy who liked sports and cars and boats and didn't read books or think hard about science or math. That's okay."

My mind opened as I talked, so I went on. "I think there's something wrong with my brain. I thought the static was good at first. I thought I had a special power, that I could fly out of my body and maybe touch the sky. Not the real sky with real stars but something like the sky. I thought my spirit was going somewhere good. I thought I could travel free and easy, if I just worked at it. But sometimes when the static comes now, there's another feeling and it's not like floating. It's like time skipping or shifting or something and it makes me dizzy and confused. And then the other night. What happened then wasn't right or good or special. It was horrible and I thought it was going to kill me. And now look what I've done to Mom. I pulled away from her, and now she's hurt.

Because of me.

"I don't have a special power. There's something wrong with me. I'm scared to go to sleep now. I'm scared it's going to come for me again and if it does, I may never wake up."

Tears clouded my vision and as I wiped them off my face, Michael stepped out of the shadows by the pine tree. He wore his elephant pajamas and big clunky sneakers with no socks. I cried harder.

He sat down, leaned his body toward me just enough to be comforting, and said, "Tell me about this static thing, Allie. I'm your best friend, and I think you should tell me everything."

All the times I spoke to my father in the dark, he never talked back to me. But Michael appearing out of the shadows like that, it felt like a sign I wasn't supposed to ignore. And so sitting there on the front stoop of the trailer, with the moon glowing bright above us, I told Michael the secrets of my brain. The good parts and the bad. And when he put his arm around me, I didn't pull away.

"You have to tell your mom," he said. "You have to let people know what you're feeling, so they can help you."

"I know," I said. "I will."

We sat there for a long while, watching for a headlight to appear in the darkness. Waiting for everything to change. But it wasn't going to happen that night. It would take time. And when we finally walked back to Michael's house, I looked up at the stars and thought about the radio waves bouncing against the ionosphere; it was a scientific fact. They were all around us. Right that very moment. My father was there, too. Somewhere

not entirely imaginary. I believed in these things I couldn't see, or fully understand. The skywave, the spirit world, complex mathematics. I don't know why it's always felt so hard to lean on the real people standing beside me. But it was true then, and it's still true now. As we walked, Michael reached for my hand, but I was busy, looking at the clouds.

$$* \notin * \oint * \zeta *$$

Mathematicians get a lot of mileage out of proving that things which appear to be different are actually the same. The winding number is a great example. The winding number plays a critical role in Cauchy's Residue Theorem, and thus, my theory of life. On one hand, the winding number is defined simply in terms of movement on a curve around a point. Specifically:

*The **winding number** of a closed curve in the plane around a given point is the total number of times the curve travels counterclockwise around the point.*

You stand still in one place. I travel on the curve; how many times do I sweep around you, counterclockwise? That's the winding number of my curve around you. If I'm being contrary, and insist on traveling clockwise, my winding number will be negative.

A precursor to Cauchy's Residue Theorem is Cauchy's Integral Formula, a remarkable result which shows that the values of an analytic function on the boundary of a disk determine the values of the function at all of the interior points inside the disk. (Note that a disk is just what it sounds like: the space inside a circle. Think of a DVD, a compact disc, a vinyl LP--solid though, no holes in the middle.) And keep in mind that we're in the complex plane: real numbers on the horizontal axis, imaginary on the vertical. Every point inside our disk has a real part and an imaginary part, working hand-in-hand.

Where am I going with this?

It turns out that a special case of Cauchy's Integral Formula says that the **winding number** of a closed curve C around a point a is equal to the following contour integral:

$$\frac{1}{2\pi i} \oint_C \frac{dz}{z-a}$$

While such a fact excites me, I have to admit, this characterization of the winding number looks much more complicated than the first one. But it is exactly the same number.

Two entities presenting themselves to the world in entirely different skins. And yet, the mathematician knows: they are precisely the same.

$$* \cup * \emptyset * \infty *$$

Freshman

What attracts one person to another? What ignites our passions, makes us long to be close, connected, consumed, by another human being? I've had a lot of time to think about this, a lot of years I've lived alone, and tried, unsuccessfully, to feel attracted to someone new. I walk around my city; I look at women on the streets, in restaurants, coffee shops; I even tried to be political for one disastrous year, in an effort to meet new people. Nothing works. Whatever it is, this alchemy of attraction, I was not meant to sample it repeatedly.

In lighter moments, I liken it to allergies. Some people have them in youth and then they disappear. Other people get them later in life. One day you're at the all-you-eat shrimp bar, the next day your face looks like a balloon and you can never eat shellfish again. I often envy Michael; he was never allergic to a goddamned thing. So many lovers, men, women, gay, straight, all varieties of queer. He said there was no secret formula for how to get so much action. "You just have to lower your standards. Stop expecting to be swept off your feet." For better or worse, I'm not wired that way. For me, in love, it's all or nothing.

I wonder how different an all-consuming attraction would be if it came much later in life. If I'd met my life's love at thirty-five, or forty, would it have been easier? I've imagined meeting Shelby that way. At forty-something. Or fifty. Both of us weary and unfulfilled, still searching. And when we connect, the puzzles of our lives snap into place. After yearning for something meaningful for so long, when we find it, we can't let it go, or take it for granted. That's not our real story, but it's a good dream. Because in *that*

complex world, we are adults. Alive and aware. Not foolish teenagers unable to see the power—and the rarity—of what they are feeling. In that world, I don't spend decades trying to piece together how I lost my heart, so completely, at such a fragile, young age.

Sunday, August 26, 1984. It was a pre-determined life-altering day. If I'd understood what singularities were then, I could have marked it down in advance, because I was leaving home that day, heading to college in the center of the biggest city I'd ever seen. Everything was about to change for me, and yet, when Eddie drove Mom and me and all of my stuff away from Dunhill Drive at one o'clock that morning, I was still unprepared for what I would face over the course of the next twenty-four hours. And for that, I blame Michael. In his letters that summer he kept everything he knew about Shelby Everett from me, except the most boring, innocuous references to their stupid jobs at Walgreens.

Michael and I were best friends. We knew each other's secrets by then. Although I hadn't told him about my deflowering with Lauren Thomas, he knew I was attracted to girls; and I knew he wasn't sure about anything regarding his own sexuality. Later, he would claim that he spent most of that August trying to figure out how to keep me from meeting Shelby at all. But I never witnessed that hesitation. By the time I arrived in Atlanta, it felt like he was delivering her to me.

The first spark of the day was made by Eddie's Buick as we pulled onto the Interstate, heading north. Burdened with all my worldly possessions, the car's rear end scraped the ground when we made the turn, blurring dust in a metallic flare. Mom sat in the front beside Eddie for the entire trip, hands folded in her lap, alternating between gut-

wrenching silence and repeatedly thanking him for driving. Mom's dating life never took off and she and Eddie had turned into near-constant companions. Living in separate houses across the road from each other for twelve years, they weren't a couple, as far as I knew, but they were close. I often wondered what their friendship looked like from the inside. Did they understand each other the way Michael and I did? Growing up, a part of me sometimes hoped they would breach whatever it was that kept them from becoming more than friends. But if they ever did, they kept it to themselves.

By noon we'd traveled eight hours, arrived at Tech, checked into my dorm, and unloaded my stuff. We ate peanut butter sandwiches and then Mom and I stood in front of Glenn Hall—my new home—trying to find a way to say goodbye without saying it. The circular drive next to the dorm was packed with cars, other students unloading, everyone absorbed in prolonged farewells.

"That storm may get bad later. I think we should head on," Eddie said, running his hands through his thin hair.

Mom jutted out her chin, trying to act brave. "You're on your own, kiddo. What do you think of that?"

I felt numb, the excitement and anxiety of the day canceling each other out, leaving me empty. I looked around, trying to make an emotional connection to the red brick dorms, the cobblestone street, the city skyline looming above the trees. I looked at Mom, and shrugged.

"I'm not going to tell you to study hard because I know you will. So instead I'll say: Have fun." She put her arms around me, and squeezed. "Within reason," she added, as she let me go.

"Allie's wild times in the city," I said. "Who knows what I'll do once you guys leave."

Eddie chuckled as he got into the car, then leaned out the window, and said, "Tell that bum of a grandson to call me."

Standing there on the curb, watching them drive away, a wave of dizziness filled me, and I wanted to pull them back. After years of being desperate to grow up and move away, in the moment they left me, all I wanted was for them to come back. Give me another minute, another hour, of Mom and Eddie in the front seat of the Buick and me in the back, on the way to Atlanta, but not quite there yet.

More students and parents pulled into the drive. They carried boxes and bags, they argued, said their good-byes. I went to my room to hang posters and unpack clothes. I stole glances out the window all afternoon, wishing for the Buick's congested rumble, Eddie whistling to Johnny Cash.

At some point, the Resident Assistant came by and gave me a small basket of soaps and toothpaste and a furry yellow nameplate for my door. She handed me a second one for Madeline, my roommate, who wasn't set to arrive for two more days.

I stood in my dorm room and stared at the two twin beds, two small desks, two identical lamps, two clunky chairs. I'd never shared a room with anyone before. I sat on the bed I'd claimed as mine and tried to imagine changing my clothes in front of another girl, day after day, night after night. I stood up and turned my back to the other bed, pulled off my t-shirt and practiced putting it back on, acting nonchalant. I decided to take a walk.

Michael was working at Walgreens and we'd arranged to have dinner after he got

off that evening. He hadn't been home to Florida since my graduation in May and we had a lot to catch up on. Way more than I knew at the time.

Glenn Hall was on the east side of campus, sandwiched between the roaring 75/85 Interstate and Grant Field, Tech's football stadium. Fraternity houses with wide front porches and a stream of red brick academic buildings lined the narrow street that led up a steep hill to the Library. By the time I reached the top I was out of breath and sweating. I was in lousy shape, and a thick layer of moisture clogged the late-summer air. Three guys and a big yellow dog milled around by the fountain in front of the Library. The dog jumped up on the ledge and one of the guys bounced a tennis ball into the water; the dog followed it, splashing.

I guessed them to be students, probably frat boys, though I had no basis for that judgment. None of them looked at me. I was used to being ignored by guys my age, and I didn't mind. Oddly, it made me feel at home. I kept my hands in my pockets, and walked on. Inside the Student Center, I found the post office, the pool hall, the bowling alley. Pinball machines and video games lined one wall. My new backyard, I thought, a long way from the pastures of Pasco County. The games dinged and clanked; billiard balls struck against each other. A group of older students sat four to a table by the snack machines, playing a card game I didn't recognize. They heckled one another, analyzing each hand after it ended. Later I would learn that the game was Hearts, and the crowd consisted of grad students avoiding their dissertations. In my early twenties, I would become one of them, spending hours in that exact spot—playing cards or shooting pool—after classes, on weekends, whenever Shelby and I fought. But seeing the place for the first time, my primary thought was: too many people, too much noise.

I didn't know anyone at Tech when I started. Most of my high school friends stayed in-state. If they went to college at all, it was in Tampa or Tallahassee or Gainesville. Eddie had his heart set on me studying engineering at his alma mater, the University of Illinois. But once I read what winter was like in Champaign-Urbana, I told him he'd lost his freaking mind. Mom didn't care where I went but when I picked Tech, she was thrilled, primarily because Michael was across town at Emory. She worried too much. But Michael's proximity was a comfort to me, too. If he'd gone to Harvard, I would have aimed for MIT. If he'd picked UCLA, I would have wanted Cal Tech. At that point in our lives, though, Atlanta was far enough for both of us.

I went to the bookstore next, and stood in the engineering supply aisle for more than half an hour. I tried dozens of mechanical pencils, drawing integration signs and simple differential equations on little paper pads they had for testing. The aisle was packed with other freshmen like me, more interested in pencils than each other. When I finally made my selection, it felt like a major life commitment. Deep charcoal cartridge with a smooth auto-click advance. It was the geekiest thing I'd ever purchased and it thrilled me. A quick look around the store convinced me I wasn't the biggest nerd on the Tech campus, though. I was one among many.

By the time I got back to my dorm it was after five. The antiseptic smell of my room made me seasick. The terrazzo floors swirled three shades of brown, and the beige cinder block walls were cold to the touch. I lay down on the lumpy twin mattress. Girls laughter filtered under my door.

The next time I looked out the window, the sun was spreading its final rays across the top of the stadium. Foggy from sleep, I couldn't figure out why I was in that dreary

room. The phone was ringing, and it took me a long time to find the damn thing.

"Don't hate me," Michael said. "I'm running late."

I cleared my throat. "What time is it?"

"Almost 7. Don't be mad."

"Are you here? Downstairs?"

He took a deep breath, as if he had to decide. "I have to tell you something."

I stretched my back. "What?"

"I brought someone with me."

My eyes popped open then. "You brought someone to my dorm?"

"I'm sorry. I should have warned you. I'm sorry."

"Uh, yeah."

There was silence on the other end of the line, then a muffled voice in the background.

"Does this someone have a name?" I asked.

"Shelby," he said. "She works at Walgreens with me."

"And she's here. In the lobby of my dorm."

"You're angry."

"You're a genius, Michael."

He flailed around sighing and apologizing and sounding like he was about to have a stroke.

"Just give me a few minutes," I said. "I was asleep. I'll be down soon."

I didn't like meeting new people, especially out of the blue, and Michael knew that. I brushed my hair for longer than it needed, then went to the bathroom at the end of

the hall. I couldn't believe that porcelain cave of sinks and stalls with so many girls showering and banging doors was the only place I could go to pee or brush my teeth.

When I got back to the room I took a deep breath and waited a few more minutes. Then I changed into a polo shirt and clean jeans and went downstairs.

The lobby was empty. Michael's Volvo was parked in the loading zone, just outside the front door. He was leaning against the hood, arms folded across his chest. He wore a black button-down shirt, Converse high-top sneakers that were far cooler than he was, and designer jeans. Designer jeans? I had to look again. Dark denim with visible gold stitching along every seam. The kind we'd always made fun of on the rich kids in Tampa malls. Who the hell told him he looked good in those ridiculous jeans? His hand went to his mouth, and then I noticed the hair on his face, too. Michael with a beard? I needed a minute to gather myself. Was that the boy I grew up beside? He gave his fingernail a nervous bite and scratched the inside of his palm, a familiar gesture that answered my question. It was him, though I could barely believe it.

A form moved inside the car. I pushed the curtains in the lobby window aside, angling my head to see this mysterious Shelby. But Michael spotted me too soon, and waved. I dropped the curtain in front of my face, as if that would make them both disappear.

The lobby door opened, and Michael came in.

"Hey," he said.

I threw my arms around his neck. His shoulders tensed. He was more anxious than I was.

"I'm sorry," he said, again. "I should have called earlier."

The hair on his face was wiry and thick. I tugged a piece of it. "When did this happen?"

He looked confused. Did he not realize how much he'd changed since I last saw him? "Awhile ago," he said. "No big deal."

"I disagree."

He looked me up and down. Then the lobby door opened again, and our moment of examining all the ways in which we'd both changed that summer fell away like a forgotten promise.

Physical attraction.

You stand still in one place. I travel on the curve around you, counterclockwise.

We'll count the number of times.

$$\frac{1}{2\pi i} \oint_C \frac{dz}{z-a}$$

Two entities presenting themselves to the world in entirely different skins.

She was short, at least two inches less than me, and while my walk was always hesitant and reserved, hers was a swagger. My shoulder and arms are slight and thin; hers were broad and muscular, well-defined through her tight black t-shirt. I wasn't heavy but Eddie often teased that I had good "breeding hips," and any extra desserts or potato chips I enjoyed attached themselves to my midsection much faster than I appreciated. Shelby's waist was narrow and her jeans fell loose around her tapered hips. She'd spent plenty of time at the gym, and it showed. Her body was solid, compact and tight, yet her stride was loose, and her posture, relaxed. My face is soft, round; Shelby had a sharp, angular jaw and chin. She cocked her head to one side as she walked; it was hard to imagine her going anywhere unnoticed. I was auburn-haired and freckled; Shelby's skin was pale and

unblemished, a stark contrast against her pitch black hair. My skin had burnt and peeled a hundred times and she looked as if she'd always been sheltered from the sun. My hair was lightly feathered, a short cut but nothing drastic. Meant not to attract attention. Hers was a straight-up barber's buzz. Boldly boyish. Not afraid.

Two entities in different skins. And yet, in an instant, did I already know? What is desire, if not a recognition, a sliver of our soul seen inside a different skin.

The singular moment: Shelby Everett stood in front in me, and with a sweet, slow, Southern twang that ran counter to all the toughness she worked so hard to project, she said, "Hey there, Michael's friend. I'm Shelby. His summer fling."

Michael turned three shades of red, and looked at the floor. And I was undone by the sound of that voice. As soon as I heard it, I knew it was the key. It was everything she didn't want you to know at first glance. But she knew it was an asset, and she knew how to use it. I wanted to tell her: "You should be on the radio. That's a DJ's voice. A late night DJ's voice." But I stood there, like an idiot, staring at her and not saying a word.

Shelby looked back and forth between Michael and me, nudged his arm, and said, "Cute couple."

"Best friends," I said. Those were the first words I said to Shelby. Defensively, declaring Michael and I: "Best friends."

She grinned, and tucked her hands into her back pockets. "If you say so, Darling."

"I'm Allie," I said.

"You like burgers and shakes, Allie?"

"Sure."

She looked at Michael. "Mick's," she said. "Let's save the Varsity for another

time. Allie deserves a high class burger to welcome her to Hot-lanta. Don't you think?"

Michael stared at her, and I sensed a stream of previous conversations between them. When his eyes met mine, he looked apologetic, but he followed Shelby's lead as if the whole thing were predetermined.

"You'll like Mick's," he said, when he opened the car door for me. Then, so Shelby couldn't hear, he whispered, "I'm sorry we were late."

He wasn't sorry for the right thing but I'd ceased to be angry with him. Shelby sauntered around the car and got in the back. I studied the muscles on her arms, the thick vein that ran down to her wrist, her meaty thumbs and fingers. Seeing me study her body, she gave me a sly smile. Then, loud enough for the whole world to hear, she said, "Michael didn't tell me anything about you, Allie, until three days ago. Now I understand why."

I turned around in the front seat, trying not to let Michael see the ridiculous grin on my face.

Mick's was what Eddie would have called a "fancified city folk burger joint." The décor was neon and chrome, a 50s diner gone disco. The prices on the menu made my eyes bug out but Michael put his hands over them and told me to order whatever I wanted.

"When did you win the lottery?" I asked.

"I've been working all summer," he said.

"Me, too, but six bucks for a burger? Seven and a half if you want cheese?"

"Welcome to Hotlanta," Shelby said, exaggerating the drawl.

The waiter was a guy about Michael's age; he wore pink eye shadow and refused

to smile.

"What happened to Southern hospitality?" I said, after he'd grumpily taken our orders and slinked away.

"Midtown is more about the bitchy queens than the Southern belles," Shelby said.

"You'll get used to it."

I remembered Lauren's waiter friends at El Toro in South Tampa, and I was grateful Shelby didn't know anyone at Mick's by name.

"So, Allie, Michael tells me you're a math whiz."

We were in a sparkly red booth. Michael and me on one side. Shelby on the other.

"Did you use that word?" I said. "Whiz?"

"Genius," Michael said. "Pretty sure I said genius."

"Whiz. Geek. Genius. Nerd. Is there a difference?" Shelby asked. It was clear right away that Shelby liked to talk, amusing herself with every word that came out of her mouth.

"Yes," said Michael. "There's a difference." He leaned back against the booth bench. Not amused.

"I like Whiz," Shelby said. "It has a rock star quality to it."

Michael grumbled under his breath, and I knocked his leg with my sneaker.

"So, what are you going to do with all this genius? What does a math major *do* exactly?" Shelby leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. I didn't think she was making fun of me, so I answered her with sincerity.

"I'm double majoring, actually. Math and electrical engineering. I'm not sure what I'll do yet. But I'd like to understand the theory, and see how its used."

"Yikes," said Shelby. "Sounds like a nightmare. I flunked algebra in high school. Well, should have flunked. Didn't understand a bit of it. But nobody flunked in my school, no matter how stupid or lazy you were. Damned teacher gave me a C and made me take Trig the next year. For punishment."

Shelby laughed, and said, "And that sucked."

Michael shifted around beside me in the booth, like a five-year-old antsy for something to do.

"Sounds like you just had a bad teacher," I said. "I bet I could teach you algebra. Like I did Michael."

Shelby unrolled her silverware from the paper napkin. She took the fork and knife one in each hand, held them straight up like cross country skis. It was a little boy kind of gesture and it made me smile. Then she said, "I don't know. If your teaching turns me into a lawyer like Michael, I might have to off myself."

She held the butter knife to her throat, and I laughed.

"Shelby's an artist," Michael said.

"Really?" I looked across the table. "Michael didn't mention that in his letters."

She laid her utensils down. "What did he mention?"

"Not much, actually."

My eyes followed Shelby's thick fingers as they moved, her knobby knuckles.

"Mikey didn't want us to meet," she said. "I'm pretty sure about that."

"I never said that," Michael said.

"No. You never said anything," Shelby said. "That's the point."

The waiter arrived with our burgers. The shakes were hand-dipped and came in

frozen stainless steel blender cups. I'd never tasted a milkshake that good. I sipped mine, and said, "I don't know how much you're paying for this thing, Michael, but whatever it is, it's worth it."

His genuine smile right then told me just how sorry he was that he'd let Shelby come along, that she was with us on my first night in Atlanta.

"What kind of artist are you?" I asked her.

"Painter. Acrylics at the moment. But I want to get into oils."

"Have you painted Michael? Do you do portraits?"

Shelby picked up a French fry, dipped it in ketchup, and ate it slowly. "No, I haven't painted him. But I've done some sketches."

"When?" Michael said.

He looked at me. "I've never seen them."

"They're just doodles really. No biggy," she said.

Michael's toe started tapping the edge of the table. The whole booth shook.

"I'd love to see them," I said.

Michael huffed. "So the fuck would I."

"Don't get testy," Shelby said. "It's not becoming."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he said.

"I doodle everything. It doesn't make you special or anything. Get over yourself."

He grabbed his cheeseburger and took a big bite.

Shelby turned back to me. "Electrical engineering. What does that mean?"

Michael chewed his burger and looked around the restaurant as if Shelby and I weren't there. I didn't understand the dynamics between the two of them, so I just

answered Shelby's questions.

"It's about designing electrical systems, computers, that sort of thing," I said.

"Michael's grandfather, Eddie, was a mechanical engineer. He says double-E...that's what they call it...double-E for Electrical Engineering...he says it's the wave of the future.

Building computers, communications systems, that kind of thing."

"Yikes," Shelby said, shaking her head.

"I thought about computer science. But I already program in Basic and Fortran.

It's not hard."

Michael put his burger down. "Allie doesn't like things that are easy," he said.

"If it's easy, what's the point?" I said, scooting closer to Michael, as if to align myself with him.

Shelby smiled. "For the record: I'm not easy. Michael can vouch for that."

My face flushed, and Shelby slurped down to the bottom of her milkshake.

Michael inched away from me.

"I say we go for a ride around Midtown next," she said.

"Fine," Michael said. "It's dead here tonight, anyway."

Michael's Volvo had not received the same makeover he had. The leather seats were still stained and ripped, the fenders and side panels rusted. In high school the clutch required a near daily dose of transmission fluid to keep it engaged, and there was no evidence that had changed. However, I had a hard time picturing the new Michael, in his designer jeans and spotless sneakers, tending to his car's quirks and leaks on a daily basis. I wondered if Shelby had taken those tasks over for him. I had no trouble imagining her leaning into the engine, wiping grease off her hands. Just the idea of it made me hot, and

thus, embarrassed when caught looking at her mid-fantasy. She smiled, as if she could read my mind.

We resumed our previous spots, me in the passenger seat up front, Shelby in the back. She leaned forward and perched her head in between me and Michael, draping her arm behind my headrest.

"You ever notice Michael drives like a little old lady?" she said.

I laughed. Michael revved the engine, but when the light changed, he pulled out carefully. "He's cautious," I said. "But he was driving when he was twelve."

"Seriously?" Shelby knocked his arm.

"Country boys start everything young," Michael said, mimicking her accent.

"What a crock of shit," she said.

"Country roads," Michael added. "Not Midtown."

Shelby squirmed around in the back, then said, "Pull over. I can't hear shit back here."

I assumed she meant to switch places with me, so when Michael pulled onto a side street and stopped, I started to get out.

"No, you stay," she said. "This car is a tank. We can fit."

I watched as she climbed over me, into the front, sitting herself on the edge of my lap, half her ass hanging over the gear shift. Michael looked down at the stick, then up at her.

"Fair warning. Gonna be feeling all over your ass when I shift," he said.

Shelby slipped her arm behind my neck, and nuzzled closer to me. When she said, "Lucky you," I wasn't sure if she was talking to him, or me.

You smelled like soap and cheeseburgers. My face at your collarbone, I could have kissed you, without moving an inch. How did you do that? How did you make sitting on my lap in the passenger's seat of Michael's car, the very first night we met, feel like the most natural thing in the world?

"Do a couple loops," Shelby said, as Michael pulled away from the curb. "Up to 14th and back around."

"More homosexuals in these few blocks than anywhere else in Dixie," Shelby said, pressing herself closer, her breast against my shoulder.

"Tech is in a charmed spot," she said. "But you knew that. Right?"

"I'm just a math whiz looking for a good education," I said, with a smile and an unwelcome blush.

"Mmm hmm. If you say so." She leaned back, removing some of the delicious pressure points her body was making against mine.

"There are other items of interest about this stretch of road," Michael said, as he stopped at 10th and Peachtree. "Like Margaret Mitchell writing *Gone With the Wind* right here, for example."

An old brick warehouse and a Vietnamese restaurant stood on the corner Michael pointed out.

"No way," I said.

Michael growled at me like a rabid dog, one of our private debate techniques, conjuring up the Clayborne's old German shepherd who used to chase us away from their pastures.

"You doubt my historical information?" he said, through clenched teeth.

"No. I guess this corner has gone through some changes."

"Oh, my, yes," Shelby said. "My city is all about the changes. Burn us down, build us up again."

I looked around, filled with a moment of wonder.

"And let's not forget the hippies getting stoned out of their minds here in the 60s," Shelby said. "The Strip, they called it. *Meet ya on the Peachtree Strip*. Yee-haa." She pressed her fingers to her mouth as if she were toking on a joint. "Head shops all along here back in the day, or so my parents tell me."

"Me, I don't do that shit," she continued. "Couple six packs of beer and I'm cool. Never liked the way my head felt under the wacky weed. What about you, Al? You like to get high?"

She moved her leg against mine. Warm, warmer, hot. Her hand fell against my arm. My muscles were wound up tight as springs; I tried to relax, but she was sitting in my lap, for God's sake. It was beyond flirtation. It was surreal, and Michael wasn't saying a thing.

"Never have," I said.

"Well, hell, you gotta try it once," she said. Then softer, in my ear, "Gotta try everything once. Right?"

Michael screeched away from a red light, accelerating too fast. My head jolted back against Shelby's arm and she bounced against me.

"Sorry," he said.

"No problem," said Shelby, with a chuckle. "I liked it."

I felt sweat under my arms, on my upper lip. I tried to think cool thoughts. Shelby

shifted again, our shoulders touching. I focused my attention out the window. People making their way to clubs, stumbling from one warehouse with black-painted windows to another. A gang of kids with Mohawks and ripped jeans pushed each other around underneath a marquee.

"What's that?" I said.

"The 688," Shelby told me. "Hard-core punk rock. Très cool, or so they all think."

"Looks scary."

"Don't walk over here at night," Michael said. "Don't leave campus. It's not safe."

"I'm not in prison, Michael. I should be able to go for a walk."

"No, he's right," Shelby said. "It can be rough here at night. Stay on campus, unless you're with one of us, or a group of friends or something."

I accepted her admonishment more easily than his, touched that she cared enough to agree with him on something.

We wound through side streets with old houses and small apartment buildings. The street lamps were sparse and dim. We saw a couple of guys in tight pants and high heels.

"Are there gay bars around here?" I asked.

"Sure," Shelby said. "The boy bars play the best music. We'll go sometime."

"It's getting pretty late," Michael said. "You have work-study interviews early in the morning, right?"

When Michael took the next turn, Shelby leaned her body all the way against me.

The hardness of your muscles, the softness of your breast. I could barely breathe.

Then I realized what I should have seen right away. Michael was attracted to the

same exact combination. Shelby's masculinity, and her soft side.

He wanted you, too.

The "summer fling" wasn't a joke. And yet, he brought you to me. Before telling me anything, he brought you to meet me.

Your lips at my ear. That smooth DJ's voice. "Will you show us your room, Allie? I've never been inside a Tech dorm."

Telling Shelby no wasn't a possibility. She could have asked me to walk to Alabama that night, and I would have given it a shot.

"Sure," I said. "We can do that."

We rounded a few more corners, then Michael pulled up to the dorm, and parked.

"No guys allowed after 11pm," I said.

"It's only 10:30," Michael said.

"Sneaking boys into your room on the first night at school," Shelby said. "Such a rebel you are, Allie."

Unfolding out of the car offered a heavenly opportunity for our bodies to press against each other a few more times. I moved slowly, in no hurry for the moment to end. You winked at me as we emerged from the car. Michael lingered behind the wheel, and I wondered how closely he'd watched our untangling.

"Come on, Underwood," Shelby called to him, her hands on her hips, head cocked to one side.

He wouldn't budge until I walked back, and said, "Are you coming? I want you to see the room, too."

Upstairs, I fumbled for my key as Shelby ran her fingers over my fuzzy yellow

nameplate. "Cute," she said. "A bumble bee."

"Yellow jacket," I corrected.

"I've lived here all my life," she said. "Go Jackets. Rambling Wreck. *To Hell With Georgia!* That's my favorite. My parents both went to UGA, so I cheer for Tech just to be a pain in their ass."

Michael walked into the room first, plopped onto the bare mattress on my roommate's side. He looked up at my posters. Joan Jett. Billy Idol. Eurhythmics.

"Just like your room back home," he said.

"Hardly." I went to the window. "I hope I can sleep with the street noise. It's so strange."

Shelby went to my bed, propped herself against my pillow. "Can't say I'm sorry I missed out on the dorm experience. This place is tiny."

"Do you go to Emory?" I said. "Sorry, I didn't ask that before."

"Nah. I went to the Art Institute a couple of semesters but I quit. Just painting now. And stocking the shelves at Walgreens to prove to my parents I'm not a total slug."

"Shelby lives in Buckhead," Michael said. "Her parents are rich."

"Not exactly *rich*," she said.

Michael rolled his eyes. "Allie and I grew up in the sticks. We're talking cow pastures and pig pens. Okay? Your house looks like a castle. Your parents are fucking rich."

"Whatever," Shelby said.

I felt claustrophobic with both of them there, bickering.

"So, this is my room," I said, recognizing my disastrous hostess skills.

Shelby leaned up against the cinder block wall, and said, "It's cool."

Michael moved against the opposite wall. He and Shelby faced each other, creating a strange symmetry across my room. "Tell us about your interviews tomorrow," he said.

"You don't want to hear that. It's boring."

"Tell us," Shelby said.

Both of them looked at me, anxious for something, and I didn't have anything else to offer. So I yammered on for awhile about my work-study options. The two possibilities at the library. Shelving books or doing data entry. Neither of those jobs thrilled me. The job I wanted was with a professor in computer science, programming for a research project.

"I'd have to learn a lot of extra stuff for that one," I said. "Data structures and maybe assembly language. But it won't be boring. And the pay's the best."

"You'll get it," Michael said. "They'd be crazy not to hire you for that."

I didn't know Shelby well enough to read the strange expression on her face. I feared my geek speak had turned her off, or she was bored out of her mind. Finally, she said, "So, you really need a job? Financially, I mean."

"Yes," I said. "I do."

She nodded. "How many classes are you taking?"

"Four. Calculus, Chemistry, History, and English Comp."

"Basically, three," Michael said. He looked at Shelby. "She taught me Calculus two years before she took it in high school."

"Well, I'm taking Calc III. There might be some new stuff in there. I hope so, at

least."

Shelby stood up. "Jesus. I'm feeling stupider by the minute."

"Five after 11," Michael said. "Anyone going to stone me on the way out?"

"Don't worry, little lamb. I'll protect you," Shelby brandished her fists.

We all stood in the center of the room, unsure how to navigate a three-person good night. I was afraid to leave the first move to Shelby, with Michael standing right there, so I said, "It was nice to meet you," and held out my hand to her, hoping it didn't tremble.

She smiled, and pulled me in for half of a hug. "Welcome to Atlanta," she said. "I'm glad Michael didn't keep you a secret forever."

That voice in my ear again. I felt it ripple through my whole body. Under my skin.

Michael was at the door, about to open it and leave without saying a word. I went to him, put my arms around his neck, and whispered, "We have a lot to talk about."

He nodded, but didn't smile.

When we got downstairs Michael told me to go back inside. He didn't want me standing there, alone in the dark. So I said quick good-byes to both of them again, trying to appear more at ease, then went back to my room. From the window, I watched the Volvo's red taillights turn onto North Avenue and disappear across the highway, back into Midtown.

It was almost one o'clock when I finally settled down and got into bed. Twenty-four hours had passed since I left home, and it felt like two lifetimes. As I closed my eyes and nuzzled against my pillow, I wasn't thinking about my mother, or Eddie, or Dunhill

Drive, or my interviews the next day, or my first semester of college. Instead, all I saw was Shelby Everett swaggering toward me. That sliver of recognition. *You stand in one place. I circle around you. I feel your hand on my shoulder, your breath in my ear.* That's all I wanted to focus on. I wanted to make everything else disappear. Even Michael's painful discomfort which still lingered in the air. I wasn't oblivious to it, but I wanted to be. I didn't know then all that it would come to mean but from that very first night, I wanted Shelby to be my singular force.

* π * ∂ * \equiv *

Definition: S is an **open set** if it does not contain any of its boundary points.

Equivalent Definition: S is an **open set** if all the points in S are interior points.

But then, what are boundary points? And what are interior points?

Mathematics can sometimes feel like pulling a thread through a tapestry.

Communicating concepts requires language, and mathematicians like to use common words but give them precise, rigorous definitions. *Open Sets. Closed Curves.* Simple, ordinary words. And yet, what do they mean?

Pull the thread.

A point z_0 of a set S is said to be an **interior point** of the set if there exists an ε -neighborhood of z_0 which is contained in S .

But what is an ε -neighborhood? Definitions within definitions, like Russian nesting dolls.

An **ε -neighborhood** of a point z_0 is the disk $|z - z_0| < \varepsilon$ with center at z_0 and positive radius ε .

Ah, yes, our friend the disk. We've already talked about that. So: if I sit at any point z_0 inside my set S and sweep a disk around me (of radius ε), and the points in the disk are all inside of S , then S is an open set.

But what of those things we called boundary points? Once we've referred to something like that, we must give its definition. Right?

Pull the thread.

A point z_0 is called a **boundary point** of a set S if every ε -neighborhood of z_0 contains at least one point in the set S and at least one point not in the set S .

Who can't relate to that? Boundary points live on the edge. You can't sweep out a disk around a boundary point without hitting something inside your set and also, something outside your set.

The concepts are getting thick now. Much thicker than the two simple words "open" and "set" might initially suggest. A tapestry of language and concept.

Here's another thing mathematicians like to do. Once you have one concept well in hand, use it to define others.

*A **closed set** is a set whose complement is an open set.*

*(The **complement of a set** is everything outside of it.)*

The key here is: once you learn a bag of tricks for proving sets are open, you can use the same bag of tricks to prove sets are closed by simply operating on the complement.

Words. Concepts.

Open. Boundary. Interior. Closed. Complement.

These may sound like tricks of language but they're not. Extreme precision is the mathematician's trade. Not just in calculation, but more importantly, in thought.

When I was talking about the winding number earlier, I used the term "closed curve" repeatedly without defining it. Did you notice? Did it trouble you? (Be careful how you answer; you could find yourself turning into a mathematician.) Now that I've pointed out the omission, are you eager for the definition? Do you want the intuitive answer, or the precise, rigorous one?

Pull the thread, if you dare.

* x * ∞ * ↔ *

Words

Summer, 1977. After I confessed to Michael about my brain static, it took me awhile to work up to telling Mom. Her knee was busted up bad from the fall and my grandmother came to stay with us for over a month, to "help around the house" and "take proper care of us." Grandma was a tall, proud woman with a rich Virginia drawl. She didn't like our trailer, or the taste of our well water, or the lizards that scurried across our window screens.

"This is no way to live," she grumbled.

Mom tried not to let me see her agitation, but I could feel it under her strained smile, as Grandma asked, "What's wrong with the comforts of suburbia again?"

It didn't feel like the right time to tell Mom I thought something was wrong with my brain.

Mom preferred action over stillness and she did not enjoy sitting quietly on the couch with her leg propped on piles of pillows. Normally, if she was home during the day, she'd be tidying or planting or sewing something. But the pain was harsh those first few weeks, and just making her way to the bathroom on crutches wore her out. The one thing she did seem to enjoy during that time was music. We had a big brown console stereo system in the living room, a hand-me-down from a great Aunt in Richmond. The speakers on each side were as wide as TVs and the middle compartment slid open to reveal Mom's collection of albums and 45s. I'd ask her which record she wanted to hear, holding my breath for Peter Paul and Mary, and she'd pick James Taylor or The Beatles

or Carole King. When I put an album on for her, she'd sit horribly still while the music played, as my grandmother made grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup in the kitchen, or hung our laundry out to dry on the clothesline. In the late afternoons, Mom would grow tired from the pain and take naps. Sometimes Grandma would play cards with me, or help me with a puzzle, but sometimes, if there was a breeze blowing, she'd say, "I think I'll step outside for a minute, Peanut. For a little fresh air."

Grandma nicknamed me "Peanut" before I was even born. The name didn't feel like it had anything to do with me but I liked the way her voice softened when she said it, and the warm feeling it produced in Mom as well.

"It's what we called you before you were you," Mom told me once, which made me feel strange, but also, powerful. To exist before existing.

On those afternoons, when Mom napped and Grandma needed a few minutes without me leaning up against her, asking if Mom was going to be okay, that's when I became obsessed with *Leaving On a Jet Plane*. I thought Peter Paul and Mary's music was soft enough to soothe Mom, even as she slept. So I pulled *Album 1700* out of its sleeve, put the record on the turntable, and carefully placed the needle on the groove just before the second song. *Leaving On a Jet Plane* was the first song I ever called my favorite. As soon as it finished playing, I wanted to hear it again. I picked the needle up and put it back where it started. The soft crackle and pop off the vinyl, the slow strum of guitar, Mary's buttery voice, Peter and Paul's easy harmonies. A lover reluctantly saying goodbye. I was just ten years old; I played that song over and over again.

Kiss me and smile for me.

Tell me that you'll wait for me.

I must have listened to that song a thousand times that summer, until the words and the music imprinted themselves so deeply into my soul that for the rest of my life, every time I hear that song, I am back in our trailer, my bare toes digging into our shag carpet, my ten-year-old hands resting gently on our big brown console stereo, waiting to pick up the needle, and play it again.

I knew Mom was starting to feel better the day she opened her eyes from a nap, and said, "Sweetie, that is such a sad, grown-up song. Why do you like it so much?"

I couldn't explain it. I was too young to identify with the lyrics and smart enough to recognize that. Yet even at tens years old, something in that song was already a part of me. The same way a prophetic dream can prepare your subconscious for a future you have no way of anticipating. That song spoke to my soul. Was I the one with my bags packed, ready to go? Or was I the lover, asleep on the other side of the door, unaware of your agonized departure.

Oh Babe, I hate to go.

Once Mom could make it down the three steps from our trailer to the front yard, and she could stand in front of the stove long enough to boil water, and she was strong enough to drive again, Grandma packed up her bags, hugged us both with all her strength, and tearfully, returned to Virginia. I'd gotten used to having her around, and I cried for an hour after she left. Mom had been on edge most of the time Grandma stayed with us, but when she wrapped her arms around me, and said, "We'll see her again soon. I promise," I could feel the need in her voice, too.

It was August. The new school year was looming on the horizon, and Michael

said I couldn't wait any longer. I had to tell Mom about the static. After her surgery, I'd had a few terrifying just-before-sleep episodes. During one, I was certain my soul disconnected from my body and fell over a cliff into a vast ravine, dark and damp, thick with a swampy stench. No human voices. Just crickets and alligator grunts and the rattles of snakes. In another episode, after the disconnect, my bones caught fire against driftwood on a sandy beach. As my spirit watched, helpless, from beyond, waves crashed in and carried the empty shell of me out to drown in the ocean. I convinced myself these were nightmares. Vivid and terrifying but just nightmares, my guilt still strong for causing Mom's fall.

"She's not 100%," I told Michael.

"There's never going to be a good time," he said. "You just have to do it."

I wanted him to sit by my side while I told her. "It would be easier that way," I said. "Please."

"She's not going to be mad. She loves you," he said. "You can do this."

I wasn't afraid she would be angry. I just didn't want her to start looking at me with that worried-anxious concern that Michael had, ever since I told him.

I did it the day before school started. Sunday night, dinner time. Mom made a meatloaf, so happy to be cooking again. She had me put the special tablecloth on, the white one with the little red roses. She was down to using one crutch, and she barely needed it.

"Why don't you put a record on," she said, pouring our iced teas into plastic tumblers.

I went straight for Peter Paul and Mary. *Album 1700*. I stopped to look at the

cover for a minute, the three of them standing in front of that old-timey car, looking anything but remorseful. I put the record on from the beginning of Side One. The first song played as we settled at the table, filling our plates and buttering our bread. I don't know why I thought playing that record was a good idea. As soon as I heard the strum of guitar at the start of *Leaving On a Jet Plane*, I began to cry, and I couldn't stop. Mom asked me what was wrong, and I couldn't answer.

Taxi's waiting. He's blowing his horn.

I pushed away from the table, pulled my knees up to my chest, and sobbed downward.

"Allie, you're scaring me," she said. "What is going on with you and this song?"

She hobbled to the stereo, clutching her crutch, and picked the needle up. When the music stopped, the dizziness came, swift and spiraling. I grabbed hold of my chair, eased myself onto the floor. Our small dining space straddled the kitchen and living room, and my butt landed on the seam, one foot on the smooth kitchen tile, the other on the rough shag carpet.

"There's something wrong with me," I finally told her. "Michael thinks I need to see a doctor."

"Michael thinks?"

I spilled out the details as fast as I could, hoping she'd pass over the part where I told Michael my problems long before I told her. When I was finished, the expression on her face was like nothing I'd ever seen. But my dizziness had passed, and I was sitting calmly on the carpet, legs folded. I focused on breathing. In and Out.

Mom sat in the chair, steadying herself with the crutch she'd never put down.

"And this has something to do with math?" she said.

"Late at night. The vibrations come sometimes when I do math late at night."

Her eyes filled with tears and she reached for me, hugged me tight, kissed the top of my head. "You didn't want to tell me?" she said.

I shook my head into her chest.

It was too quiet and I didn't have any tears left, but Peter Paul and Mary were still singing, somewhere.

I'm standing here outside your door...

Temporal Lobe Epilepsy. After an endless stream of doctors and hospitals and tests and a million questions about what I saw, felt, heard, and smelt—awake and asleep—those were the words the experts finally produced when I was eleven years old to explain the peculiarity of my brain.

Temporal Lobe Epilepsy.

When I first heard those words I had a mathematician's instinct already, and I wanted to understand what they meant. Unfortunately, it was 1978 and not exactly the height of the information age. Mom wrote down everything the doctors said in a little spiral-bound notebook, and after each appointment, we'd read through it together again, trying to make sense of the words. Eddie brought us his whole set of encyclopedias so we could look up anything we needed. I read the entry on epilepsy a hundred times. The doctors kept using the word "seizure" but when I looked that up, I didn't see how it applied to me. I'd never fallen to the ground, shook uncontrollably, or lost consciousness the way the book described. And when they did the first sleep test with the electrodes

plastered to my head using that goeey goop that took hours to get out of my hair, they didn't capture any "seizure activity" on the little strips of paper they pulled off the machine. There was no earthquake in my brain that day; the test came back perfectly normal.

The doctors passed us around, one expert to another, all of them determined to take away the mystery surrounding my vibrations. Even though he spent the most time with us, Dr. Kingston was the one I hated the most. He was a round-faced neurologist with wiry black hair growing backwards up his neck and sticking out of his ears without a single strand appearing on the top of his head. His office was close to the University, where he was a professor as well as a doctor. The first time I went to see him, the air conditioning was cranked up so high in the exam room that I nearly froze in that paper gown, waiting. When my teeth started to chatter, Mom put her arms around me and laid my shirt and jeans on top of my bare legs.

After my exam, the nurse led Mom and me into Dr. Kingston's private office, where pictures of four round-faced kids with dark hair and thick eyebrows lined the top of his credenza, next to a bronze statue of a golfer taking a swing. He asked the same set of ridiculous questions every other doctor asked, but he recorded all my answers with a cassette deck and a hand-held microphone. I couldn't imagine he was going to listen to it all again later, but he wouldn't let me say anything without pointing that damn microphone up my nose.

"Do you smell things other people don't smell, Allie?"

"What kind of things?" I asked. "Like rotten eggs or Old Spice cologne?"

Kingston made notes on his yellow pad, taking me seriously. I tried not to look at

Mom. This was my favorite neurological exam question, and it had become a running joke for us. Is it a seizure or a phantom farter? Is it a seizure or the ghost of a cheap old man?

Kingston stopped the recording to flip the tape over, and I gave him an honest answer. "No," I said. "I don't smell things that aren't there."

He furrowed his brow, dual-pressed 'play' and 'record' on his tape deck, and pointed the microphone back at me. "Can you repeat that, please," he said.

Mom made all the doctors explain things as slowly and carefully as they could, so she could write it down, and I could try to understand. Dr. Kingston looked annoyed with this request, as if his time were too valuable to speak clearly to a child. Nevertheless, he leaned across his desk and folded his big, hairy hands together.

"You say your spirit rises out of your body."

"Yes," I said. "That's how it feels."

I wanted to tell him it was the most magical thing anyone could ever experience. To be weightless and completely aware. Pure intellect untethered to flesh. To feel yourself slip between the cracks of the world, to trip into an alternate reality. But all I managed to say out loud was: "It's hard to describe."

He laid the microphone on his desk, and said, "The out-of-body sensation is a common illusion among epileptics. This doesn't have anything to do with spirits or souls. Your brain is misfiring. You're having 'simple partial seizures'."

My jaw clenched and I could feel my teeth grinding together, bone against bone. My spirit wanted to crush Dr. Kingston in that moment. My soul wanted to fight back.

Mom's voice was calm, measured. "My daughter is very smart," she said, putting

her hand on my arm. "Please explain what those words mean."

Dr. Kingston looked skeptical, but continued.

Simple partial seizures affect only a small portion of the brain, usually the temporal lobe. They often precede larger, more destructive seizures, such as "complex partial" (affecting more parts of the brain) and "grand mal" (affecting all of the brain, and often indicated by convulsions, loss of body control). Temporal lobe seizures may also be called "auras."

Out of all the medical jargon the doctors offered, *aura* was the one word that sounded right to me. More mysterious than clinical.

"Auras," I repeated.

Dr. Kingston nodded.

Unlike the encyclopedia seizures, my auras were invisible. He said they created the static in my brain, the vibrations under my skin, my propensity for déjà vu, the sensation of floating out of my body, even the nightmarish terror that sometimes rattled my skull just before sleep.

"But no one else can see them," I said. "Not even your tests."

"Apparently not," he agreed.

As it turned out, I probably could have kept them a secret forever, and I often wish I had.

It didn't take long for me to loathe all of the doctors and their words. They didn't help me, and they scared the hell out of Mom. There was probably a tiny scar somewhere in my brain, Dr. Kingston said. He ordered more tests—CAT scans (and later, MRIs)—but none of them ever found it.

Michael always came to the hospital with us. Every time a doctor wanted to fill my veins with dye and slide me into those claustrophobic tubes to scan my brain from every angle, Michael would sit in the waiting room with me and Mom, and when we'd get nervous, he'd jabber about the Russian Revolution or British colonialism, whatever piece of history he'd just finished learning. And Mom would put her arm around him, rustle his hair, and without saying a word, we all knew she was grateful for his ability to distract us, too.

When even the most sophisticated tests came back with no hard evidence to confirm the doctors' theories, all Dr. Kingston had to say was: "Believe it or not, no news is good news."

He wouldn't say the rest in front of me, but in private, he told Mom: "When something shows up on a CAT scan, it's usually a tumor, and that's never good."

"I don't know why that man thought I could handle that information better than you could," Mom told me later.

As far as I know, she told me everything the doctors told her when I wasn't in earshot. "We both need to understand this," she said. "No more secrets. Okay?"

I didn't exactly agree, and I didn't exactly argue. I was eleven years old. If Mom wanted to tell me everything, I was fine with that. But me never keeping a secret again? That felt like a tall order as soon as she said it.

After all those tests and way too much waiting for new information that never came, in the end, all the doctors had to go on were my words to describe my altered states of consciousness, however indescribable they were. Thankfully, my condition wasn't serious enough for them to ever talk of cracking open my skull and poking around in

there. Instead, they gave me pills. First this kind, then another, and back again. The auras still came whenever they felt like it, or whenever I got carried away with geometric proofs or trigonometric identities after midnight.

Kingston said it was impossible for me to control the seizures myself. "The type of auras you have do not occur reflexively," he said. "They cannot be willed to arrive, or to leave."

Then he gave me a list of triggers to avoid, just in case. Things like strobe lights, repetitive, hypnotic activities, and over-stimulation before sleep.

"So, if someone did everything on this list, they might get pretty good at *willing* a seizure to arrive. Right?" I said.

Doctors didn't like me much either.

They said my brain scar was probably in the right hemisphere, which would explain the dreamy, hallucinatory nature of my auras, and the "over-development of left-hemisphere brain functions."

Over-development? Eleven years old and my analytic reasoning skills were already deemed threatening to men with advanced degrees.

I believed their diagnosis and I didn't believe it. In classical logic, this is an impossibility. Aristotle's law of non-contradiction says that the two propositions "A is B" and "A is not B" are mutually exclusive. But no matter what the doctors said, I knew the vibrations under my skin did not live in a world of binary logic. When chronicling his own life's "crack-up", F. Scott Fitzgerald said that the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still be able to function. He also said genius was the ability to put into effect what is in your mind. I like

the word "genius" about as much as I like "epilepsy." Neither of them are words a mathematician wants to grapple with because there are no definitions that will ever characterize the complexities of their full expression. In common usage, they are reductive categories I do not believe in.

Through all of my medical trials and tribulations, Michael was there to listen, and to keep me calm. And he kept my confidence about all of it. Mom told the school nurse and my teachers about my diagnosis, in case of emergency, but I never told any other friends or classmates. They didn't need to know, and I didn't want to be the freak with the crazy illness at school if I didn't have to be.

And once the doctors determined I didn't have some horrible tumor that was going to kill me in a month's time, Michael stopped worrying and became intellectually curious about my condition. For months he asked about my dreams nearly every day, whether the vibrations had been present, or not; whether it was scary, or pleasurable. He wanted me to give full, detailed reports of every déjà vu, every strange sense of light-headedness, every night terror. He became a pest, and one day, I got so angry with him, I told him to knock it the hell off.

"I'm not a lab rat," I said. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. Got it?"

He sulked, but he got the message.

Before I heard the words "temporal lobe epilepsy," I was a girl who could fly to the moon. After the doctors got through with me, I became someone else. I was a kid with a disease, and talking about it wasn't the same.

I took the stupid pills the doctors prescribed but they didn't do anything but make me sleepy. After a year had passed since I sobbed to Peter Paul and Mary and told my

mother about the vibrations under my skin, I realized I couldn't think about my brain or my body or my spirit the same way, ever again. All the medical words had changed my experience, and the only thing I had left was defiance. If I couldn't control my condition myself, I could at least refuse to be compliant with others who tried.

So I quit the pills, and I stopped telling people when the sensations flooded through me. I wanted to reclaim it. I wanted to feel the mystery again. No one had ever witnessed one of my auras, and I was convinced no one ever would. The doctors had armed all of us with the information we needed. If my epilepsy escalated in severity, I would know. If it became visible, everyone would know.

So I pretended to take the medicine in front of my Mom, then flushed the pills down the toilet, or stuck them deep into the trash. But of course, I got careless, and she caught me. I was standing in the kitchen, my fingers pushing a pill inside a banana peel, getting ready to throw it away.

Mom wrinkled her brow and tilted her head to the side.

I didn't even try to make an excuse. I opened the banana peel and showed her the pill. "They don't do anything," I said. "I was going to tell you. I was working up to it."

"Working up to it, huh?"

I smiled, tentatively, hoping I could worm my way to forgiveness. "I'm a liar and a secret keeper and a bad daughter," I said.

"How long?" she asked.

"About a month."

"And the auras?"

"The pills don't make any difference. They really don't."

She took the banana and the pill out of my hand and tossed them in the trash.

"Okay, then. No more pills."

"Are you mad?" I asked.

"Nope." She went to the freezer and pulled out a package of ground beef. "I was thinking of meatloaf for dinner. Why don't you put a record on."

"I'll tell you if anything bad happens," I said. "I promise."

"I know you will." She nudged my shoulder, softly. "Go. Pick out a record."

I went to the stereo and slid open the center compartment and there was *Album 1700* right in front. I pulled the album out of the sleeve and stared at Side One for a long time. I could hear every note of *Leaving On a Jet Plane*; I could feel it pulsing inside my body. I could have played it. I wasn't going to get dizzy, or cry. But I thought I'd save it for later, after Mom went to bed. It was something I'd been doing for awhile. Sneaking out to the stereo and putting the headphones on, playing *Leaving On a Jet Plane* ten or twenty times, almost every night. I would save it. Just for me.

So I flipped the album to Side Two, and Mom and I made meatloaf, singing along with Peter Paul and Mary and *I Dig Rock and Roll Music*. And I never took another anticonvulsant ever again.

$$* \div * \chi * \notin *$$

Definition: A *closed curve* is a curve with no endpoints. Or, a curve which begins and ends at the same point.

To live on a closed curve means always returning to where you began. But there is no guarantee of taking a direct path. You could wind yourself around and around a great number of times before closing the loop, and returning home.

Definition: A *simple closed curve* is a closed curve which does not intersect itself.

Example? A regular old circle is a simple closed curve. So is an ellipse. The winding number of a simple closed curve around any point is always 1. Not very interesting. Not a good model for the messiness of life.

Example of a closed curve that's not simple? A figure eight. An infinity symbol. The most elegant curve of them all, but not simple.

Sometimes the threads in a mathematical definition are long, their paths treacherous. And sometimes, they're not. Sometimes the concepts are so clear they do not require an infinite regress of words, words, and more words. Sometimes things are simple. And sometimes they are not.

$$* \infty * + * \infty *$$

Unspeakable

September, 1981. I was fourteen and a sophomore at Zephyrhills High. Michael was a senior, just turned seventeen. We were in his car, on the way to school. His shaggy dark hair brushed the collar of his plaid button-down shirt. He was at the point where he'd have a few weeks of clear, unblemished skin before another splotch of red pimples would appear on his chin or forehead. When he looked over at me, the sun reflected off his glasses and I couldn't see his eyes. The radio was up pretty loud. REO Speedwagon, singing *Take It On The Run*.

When the song faded out, he turned the volume down, and said, "There's a new guy in band this year. Just moved here."

We didn't get many new kids at Zephyrhills High, so this perked me up.

"Where from?"

"Maine, if you can believe it."

"Wow," I said.

"He plays the flute."

I expected Michael to look at me, or say something else, but he kept his eyes on the road, his grip tightening on the wheel.

"He's taking a lot of shit for that," he finally said.

"I bet."

Michael had been in the band since elementary school and he was damn good on the sax, but he barely tolerated marching. He wanted to play jazz; he loved going to old record stores, searching the cut-outs for hard-to-find gems by Sonny Rollins or Charlie

Parker. He told me the new kid's name was Kurt and he was a good flute player. He'd been playing music, and competing since he was a little kid, just like Michael.

Michael looked like he had more to say but he stopped talking, and stared down the straight, country road.

"I should join the band and play the tuba," I said, holding my arms out as if I were weighted down by the oversized instrument.

"I'd pay money to see that."

"How much?"

He gave me a deflective smile, the one that meant he was already thinking of something else. As we pulled into the school parking lot, our conversation turned to quizzes and term papers and not wanting to be late for class. It was a couple of days, maybe a week later, when I met Kurt for the first time. He was a junior, barely sixteen, didn't have a car, so he'd been riding the bus to school. He lived about halfway between Zephyrhills and St. Leo, where his father was a new professor at the same college where my mom worked. The bus kids had been giving Kurt a hard time about his flute, so Michael asked if he wanted to ride with us. It was almost on our way, and I said I didn't care. My tomboy phase had lasted longer than anyone thought "normal," and country kids were vicious about that sort of thing. I couldn't imagine being a boy playing the flute in Pasco County.

School had just let out and I was standing at Michael's car, waiting for the two of them, watching the sky cloud into a deep, dark thunderstorm grey. I didn't have a car key and my umbrella was locked in the backseat. The first clap of thunder made me jump and got me walking back toward the school. I kicked into a run when the heavy drops began

to fall. I saw Michael and Kurt round the corner of the walkway, just as the rain turned to sheets. By the time I reached the awning's shelter, I was drenched.

"Uh oh," I heard Michael say.

My hair fell across my face in wet, dripping clumps. "I don't have a key," I said.

"Sorry."

I brushed my wet hair behind my ears.

Michael looked toward the car.

"Your umbrella in there, too?" I said.

He nodded.

A puddle formed around my tennis shoes. Michael and Kurt stood there, under the covered walkway, completely dry. I dripped and dripped, and Michael introduced me to Kurt. He wore a yellow polo shirt and black corduroy pants that were far too hot for Florida, and penny loafers. I'd never seen a boy wear penny loafers before and so I stared at them, mesmerized. Other kids rounded the corner and stopped beside us to wait out the rain. Kurt's hair was blond, feathered and shaped into a bouncy cut, like a boy Farrah Fawcett. His hands were thin, his fingernails as clean and well-trimmed as my mother's. I imagined all the names he'd been called, and wondered which was worse: Pasco County or Maine? A few jocks in letter jackets looked at the three of us, then edged away, snickering.

The rain stopped as abruptly as it began and the sun re-emerged from behind a fast-moving cloud.

"Strange," Kurt said.

We headed across the parking lot, steam rising off the hot, wet asphalt.

"Rain comes and goes here faster than anything else," I said.

"In Maine it can rain for two days straight."

"That would be weird," Michael said.

I climbed into the backseat next to my dry umbrella, and let Kurt ride in the front with Michael. We drove out of town on the narrow two-lane road that led north through hilly farms dotted with shady oaks, cows sleeping underneath. Michael and Kurt talked about band and the music they were learning and kids I didn't know. I strained to hear for awhile but then I got bored and told Michael to turn up the radio. John Cougar was singing *Ain't Even Done With the Night*, which was one of my favorite songs that year.

Michael and I weren't complete outcasts in school but we lived so far away from town that it was hard to keep up with social clubs or outings. Both Mom and Eddie went through phases of encouraging us to branch out and make more friends, and occasionally, we did. I had a group of almost-friends in my honors classes, and Michael had the kids in band. But no matter how many new people we met, we'd always been more comfortable with each other than anyone else.

As I watched Michael with Kurt that first day, I wasn't entirely surprised by the thoughts that came into my mind. Michael was seventeen and he'd never had a steady girlfriend. Mom used to tease that he was in love with me, and just too well-mannered to put the moves on until I was older. But my connection to Michael was never as simplistic as unrequited or repressed romantic love. I couldn't have explained the extent of it then and I'm not sure I can now. It's like trying to describe the inside of an aura. You can try to pull that thread but there just aren't enough words.

At fourteen what I knew was that no matter how much I loved Michael, I'd never

be drawn to him physically. I'd tried to conjure those feelings a thousand times and they just wouldn't come. I also knew that I felt a horrible awkwardness around girls, the way I was supposed to feel with boys but never did. Sometimes I would catch Mom and Eddie looking at Michael and me in a peculiar way, and I could see them trying to calculate the limits of who we were, recognizing that we intertwined completely yet never took that extra step beyond friendship. When puberty raged our hormones, it didn't change anything between us. We shifted from childhood talk to teenage concerns without much effort at all. Our favorite subjects were intellectual, but we didn't shy away from physical matters. I'd shared every detail of my epilepsy with him and we could talk about our bodies with an easy frankness. I never thought we were keeping secrets, but there were plenty of things we'd never said.

Then Kurt came along, and from the start, I could see the nervousness between them, the edgy tension. And I understood what it meant right away. But I didn't know how to talk about it. Even with Michael, the words for this did not come easily.

Kurt lived in a two-story house next to an open field full of rolled hay. A green mold stained the vinyl siding and a dented red truck stood in the driveway. A slew of plastic toys littered the front yard. It didn't look anything like a professor's house.

"My sister's five and a bit wild," Kurt said, gesturing toward the toys.

"Allie was too, at that age," Michael said, smirking.

"I was not. What the hell are you talking about?"

Kurt looked back and forth between us, appearing confused. "How long have you known each other?"

"He's not my brother, if that's what you're thinking," I said.

"I was just teasing, Al."

"Since I was five," I told Kurt. "And apparently, a hellion."

"Wow," Kurt said, looking down at his lap, in a distracted sort of haze. Then an awkward smile passed between him and Michael while the car sat idling in the driveway.

I looked for signs of the sister, or one of his parents, in the yard. A big yellow tabby cat, dusty and old, walked slowly across the grass.

"We can pick you up in the morning," Michael said. "If you want."

"That would be great," said Kurt. "You're both really nice."

He and Michael stared at each other, far longer than I'd ever seen two boys look directly into one another's eyes. Then Kurt gathered up his things and got out of the car. After he was all the way inside the house, I climbed into the front seat, and said, "Are we going to sit here all day, or what?"

"Hot date waiting for you back at the ranch?" Michael said, putting the car in reverse.

"Screw you. I have a history test tomorrow and I need to study."

We had a good fifteen minutes alone in the car as we drove the rest of the way home, and I sat there trying to figure out what the hell to say to him. It was perfectly clear that he and Kurt had crushes on each other. The question was: had *they* talked about it? Had they done anything about it? I was desperate to know, but couldn't find the words to ask.

I watched cows graze in the pastures; I listened to the songs on the radio; and I thought about the two and half years Michael had on me, how he got to every new stage of life first, and how much that pissed me off. I wondered if he was confused, or not. I

could second guess myself on nearly everything but the way I felt around girls, I had no question about that. It wasn't something I was going to grow out of, and just like my auras, it could frighten and thrill me, in the same breath.

The next morning Michael insisted we leave twenty minutes early, to go the extra distance to pick up Kurt. Still half-asleep, I grumbled about the time as a thick soup of fog hovered above the patchwork of lawn and dirt in Michael and Eddie's front yard.

"You haven't had to ride the bus since eighth grade, thanks to me," Michael said. "Can you imagine moving so far away and starting a new school when you're a junior?"

I folded my arms across my chest, and yawned. "Sure," I said. "I get it."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You're being a jerk. Kurt's a nice guy. This is the least we can do."

"He's swell, Michael. Okay? He's a swell, great guy. And I'm willing to get up twenty minutes early for him, for as long as you'd like. Okay? But don't expect me to be cheerful before I'm awake. Jesus."

His jaw was tight and his lips were turning sort of blue. "We don't have time to fight right now," he said.

He held the steering wheel with both hands, in the official ten-o'clock-two-o'clock position, like an old, serious person driving their grumpy grandma to the grocery store.

"I'm not mad," I said. "I just have to get used to the new time."

For a minute I was afraid he might cry. I didn't recognize this Michael. His usual sarcasm and deflective comebacks were gone. He was vulnerable and afraid, and I was sorry I'd complained but still agitated enough not to offer an apology.

Kurt stood in front of the house, holding his flute case and eating a PopTart.

When Michael stopped, I got out of the car, but Kurt shook his head.

"No," he said. "You take the front this time. I'm fine in the back."

When he got in and closed the door, he pushed a PopTart in between Michael and me, and said, "Brown Sugar Cinnamon. What do you say?"

Michael knew it was my favorite kind so he pushed it towards me.

I took the darn PopTart and ate the whole thing. And every day that week, it was the same. Smiling at Michael every morning, Kurt would get in the backseat and hand me his second PopTart. And in the afternoon, I'd ride in the back and the two of them would sit in the front and talk about band and music and juniors and seniors I didn't know.

Sometimes Michael and I went to the movies on Saturdays, or drove to the outskirts of Tampa, to a record store or someplace to eat. But when I called him at noon that weekend to make plans he said he wanted to go for a walk. "To talk," he said.

Walking in our neighborhood was a special kind of adventure. If we kept to the dirt and gravel roads lined with tire-tread driveways, our companions were usually just lizards, insects, and barking dogs. Though box turtles liked to make occasional appearances, and black racer snakes were fond of slipping in front of us without warning. But if we veered into patches of palmetto on an empty lot, or at the edge of a neighbor's tree line, there was no telling what might find us. A wild boar, a skunk, a bull escaped from the Clayborne Ranch. Michael and I had seen a lot in the nine years we'd wandered those acres together. We never dared to think we'd seen it all.

I picked up a long branch as we entered the trail at the end of Powell Road, stripped the stray twigs off, and tapped the ground in front of me.

"I don't want to see a rattler today," I said.

"He doesn't want to see you either. You scared the beejezus out of him last time."

There'd been an old camper parked on that lot for awhile and the guy in it never came around to meet the neighbors. We only glimpsed him a few times; he was a gray-bearded, crusty old fellow who never made any effort to clear the land or build anything on it. Then the camper pulled out a few months after it arrived and the plot sat empty. Michael and I visited regularly, as if it were ours to watch over.

We walked to the first clearing under a canopy of tall pines. Listening for rattles, I tapped the stick to the ground around the patch of dirt where we sometimes sat.

"Seems okay," I said.

Michael leaned against a pine tree, kicked a root beside it.

"You want to sit, or keep walking?"

He shrugged.

I looked across the field of green fronds. Palmetto is a nasty sort of shrub. It grows about waist high and the palm fans are lined with tiny, sharp teeth that can slice deep into skin. I'd torn blue jeans and bloodied my arms plenty of times when I wasn't careful around them.

I thought about the way Michael had always been there for me, how carefully he'd listened to me when I was so scared and angry, realizing my prized abilities to leave my body or see across time were actually little lightning storms in my temporal lobe. I thought about the way he breezily accepted my tomboyishness and never teased me, even when I was forced to wear a dress or skirt for a special event and so filled with embarrassment a single word could have shattered me to tears.

Michael stood there, propped against the tree, silent.

I sat down on a patch of grass, far enough away from the tree so that I wasn't right on top of the sharp, stabbing roots growing in every direction.

"You said we needed to talk," I said.

He rubbed his eyes, paced a little back and forth.

"You remember when I took that girl, Sherry, to the Homecoming dance last year," he said.

"Sure. You sulked afterwards, for weeks."

"I never told you what happened that night."

"You said you had a good time at the dance, and then she dumped you out of the blue."

He walked around the edge of the clearing, facing away from me. "I lied to you," he said. "It's the only time I've ever lied to you."

I folded my legs, looked at the dirt between them. I felt a hollowness in the center of my chest, but I didn't say anything. I could hear in his voice that he was sorry.

"She wanted to go all the way that night. Said it was no big deal. Just something to do after the dance."

He kicked at the trunk of the tree. "I barely knew her. She was just some girl in my Spanish class. I don't know why I wanted to go to that stupid dance and then there I was, with my hand up her skirt, and she was pushing my face into her chest. She was horny as hell and I just freaked out. I didn't want to do it. I'm not a guy who can just screw some random girl. I'm a freak. I mean, what guy doesn't want that?"

"You could have told me," I said. "You didn't have to freak out alone."

He sat down beside me, facing the palmetto. "I felt like a fool."

"You can tell me anything, Michael. I'm your best friend."

He pulled his legs up to his chest. "I know."

Michael and I were the smartest kids in our school. We read a lot of books, and we knew the words for these things. But talking about it for the first time, out loud, to anyone, is not something you rush into. You double-check all your calculations. You have to be sure.

I went first, so he didn't have to. "You remember Kelly, the catcher on the softball team last year? The one who wore that Chicago Cubs hat backwards all through seventh grade? I couldn't be around her for more than ten minutes without feeling dizzy. I thought I was having a seizure every time she cracked her knuckles, or said my name. I had a crush on her. A serious crush. If I'd had the chance to make out with her, even for just a few minutes, I would have. I swear to God. I still can't believe she and David Rodriguez are engaged. They're sixteen for God's sake. And they're getting married. It's insane."

Michael's eyes were wide. He'd inched himself back, hands clasped together across his knees.

"You and Kurt," I said. "That's what you're going to tell me. I get it."

He took a deep breath. "Did anything ever happen with you and Kelly?"

"No," I said. "I told you. She and David Rodriguez--"

"Anyone else? Other girls?"

"Girls I like? Sure. Lots of them. But I haven't done anything, if that's what you're asking."

He looked genuinely surprised, which confused me. I thought we'd had a silent

understanding about this for a long time. I thought we were just moving into a more open phase.

"It's weird we've never talked about this," I said. "Right?"

"Yeah," he said. He squirmed around beside me, propped himself up, his head tilted against his shoulder.

"And you and Kurt?" I said.

I could see his chest rising and falling with his breath. Finally, he said, "I don't know what it means."

"Have you talked about it with him?"

"He came out to me."

"Like I just did," I said.

I expected him to smile, but he just nodded.

"So we're a couple of queers. Why do you look like I just stabbed your mother?"

This wasn't a surprise to you. Right?"

He stood up, went back to the tree. "No, I'm not surprised. I knew--"

"Of course you did. And I know you like Kurt. Every time you look at him, I can see it."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Does my crush on Kelly the Catcher bother you?"

"No," he said. "Of course not."

"What, then?"

The afternoon sun streaked a shadow across his face, and he said, "Just because I couldn't screw Sherry on a whim, and just because I like Kurt---I just---I don't know what

it means. I don't know--"

This wasn't a place for binary logic either. One direction, or the other. Michael wasn't sure. He would never be sure.

Something rustled in the palmetto nearby.

"What the hell was that?" I said, jumping to my feet. I grabbed the long stick and brandished it, as if a wild animal would be remotely intimidated by it, or me.

Michael peered into the bush. The rustling grew louder.

"God, I hope that's not a rattler," I said.

He pushed one of the palmetto fronds to the side, and a grey-shelled armadillo darted across the clearing. My heart raced as I jumped out of its way.

"Jesus," I said. "Never saw one of those things move that damn fast."

"He was scared of you," Michael said. "You and that big stick."

Then he laughed.

I punched him in the arm, on the back, grateful to see him smile. We wrestled a few minutes until he grabbed me with both hands, draped his arm across my shoulder.

"You still want to see a movie?" he asked.

"If you want to," I said.

He nodded. "A comedy. I could use a comedy." And then we walked back down the trail, holding hands, tighter than we ever had before.

Over the next several days, Michael grew quiet and withdrawn; he didn't want to talk about Kurt. And the longer we went without continuing our discussion, the more uncomfortable I became. And then I was sitting at the kitchen table one morning, and Mom turned around from the refrigerator, and said, "What are you thinking about,

Sweetie?" It wasn't déjà vu; it wasn't an aura; but the weight of the whole thing dizzied me with the same kind of electric jolt to the brain. She was holding a loaf of bread and a stick of butter and wearing her green chenille robe, and I had no idea how I was ever going to tell her what I'd told Michael. Whether she could figure it out for herself, or not, it didn't matter. Someday I was going to have to tell her, and the thought seized me, almost literally.

"Nothing," I said. "My mind is a total blank."

She shook her head and went on making eggs and toast, but something changed in me, right then. For weeks after, I floated around in a daze, looking at everyone through different eyes, wondering what they would think if they knew who I was, and what I desired. Michael was older than me, and I realized, he'd been walking around with these same thoughts for years. The longer you know, and don't tell, the worse the anxiety grows. Every minute of your day starts to fill with fear of being discovered.

After I made a B- on an English quiz, I cornered Michael in the car, and said, "You have to talk to me. You can't leave me hanging like this. Now that we started to talk about it, we have to keep going."

We had just dropped Kurt at his house and we had fifteen more minutes alone in the car. "Please," I said. "I can't be alone with this. Tell me what you're thinking."

Without taking his eyes off the road, he started spouting a stream of words I'd never heard him say before.

"Faggot. Dyke. Fairy. Bull-dagger. Fudge-packer. Carpet-munger. Cocksucker."

"Okay--" I said.

"You want to know what I'm thinking," he said. "That's it. There's a constant loop

of those words playing in my head all the time. I can't shut it off."

I leaned back, let my head roll against the headrest. It was a bright sunny day in October. Warm enough to feel like summer. I shielded my eyes against the glare.

"Even the words we're supposed to embrace scare me," Michael continued. "Gay? Lesbian? When you say those words, do you feel good about yourself?"

I took a deep breath. "I don't think I've ever said either one of them."

We were at a four-way stop. Michael turned and looked at me. "Say one of them now."

I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

"I'm not trying to be a jerk," he said.

"I know. This sucks. I get it."

He drove slowly, and I stared into the orange groves, down the perfectly straight rows of trees.

"Fruit," I said. "You forgot that one."

"Oh, I left out a ton. You could fill an entire book with the words used to describe this one simple thing."

"It is simple, isn't it? Why does something so simple have to be so complicated?"

"Bugger," he said. "That's a British one. I like it, don't you?"

"It suits you," I said.

A smile slowly formed at the corner of his mouth.

"I'm going to say it now."

He cut his eyes toward me.

"Lesbian," I said. The word stayed in the air, present and foul, like a germ. "I

really hate that word. It sounds like a disease, doesn't it?"

"It's not appealing, no."

"Epileptic. Lesbian. Cut from the same mold."

Michael grinned.

"Queer is better. Queer I can say out loud and not want to vomit," I said.

"It gets abused pretty badly at school, though."

"Still. Aesthetically speaking, it's the best we've got."

We were quiet for a few minutes, then Michael said, "You need to say Gay now. For completeness."

I grimaced, and said, "Gay, Gay, Gay."

He pet my knee as if I were an animal in need of soothing, and said, "Good girl."

We were on West Drive by then, nearly home. When he drove up the long driveway toward his house, Eddie came around the side, pulling a garden hose. Michael's posture shifted, and our frank conversation was over.

"Hello, young scholars," Eddie yelled to us. He dropped the end of the hose in a plastic bucket next to his car and squirted dish soap on a sponge. "Nice day for a car wash, don't you think?"

"You can do mine next," Michael said.

"In your dreams, Buddy." Eddie brushed the side of Michael's hair as we walked past, then squirted the hose at our feet, barely missing, bringing back memories of childhood summer soakings, me and Michael running through sprinklers in our cut off shorts and t-shirts. Simpler times.

Michael and I settled into an immediate but unspoken understanding that we

would never say those words we shared in the car when someone else could overhear. It was just between us, the same way we treated my epilepsy.

Two weeks later, again we were alone in the car, and Michael told me that he and Kurt had "done something."

"Something?" I said.

He nodded.

"Do I have to guess?"

"You're too young. I can't tell you."

"Jesus Fucking Christ, Michael. Grow a pair of balls and tell me what you did."

"Such language!"

I punched him on the arm, repeatedly, lighted smacked his pimply face.

"I'm driving here!"

"Where were you when you did this thing?"

"His house. I'd gone over to practice a new marching piece."

"Marching," I said. "Nice euphemism."

"You're not helping!"

"Quit shrieking, Mikey. Tell me what you did."

"Can we play charades?" he grinned.

"You're going to re-enact it for me? I'm not sure you should be driving while doing such a thing."

He pointed at his crotch. "His hands. His mouth. You know."

"I believe the words you are looking for are: hand job and blow job. Correct?"

"I'm going to hell," he said.

"For doing it? Or for telling me?"

"Both."

I put my hand on his arm and squeezed. "Congratulations, Michael. I'm proud of you. For both."

He wore a ridiculous grin for several minutes, and then he opened up. He talked and talked and talked. Not about the sexual stuff. He told me how he felt when Kurt smiled at him, how sweet Kurt's laugh sounded to him, the way the two of them felt when they played music together, alone in one of their rooms. And I was happy, deeply happy for him.

I sometimes liken my love for Michael to swimming in the shallow end of a pool. There is no danger in the shallow end. Your feet can touch the bottom at any time; there is no fear of drowning. My love for Michael never involved anxiety, tension, or fear. Those feelings are reserved for the deep end of love, the never-ending fall. Michael and Kurt flirted with the deep end in 1981. I didn't go there myself until I met Shelby, and then I was pulled under, and never came back up.

Michael and Kurt taught me that when you're willing to go to the deep end with someone, words lose their meaning. The words you say, the words you're called, none of it matters. You can't hear words when you're swimming in the deep end.

And two months later, when Kurt's father decided the small college in the Florida cow pastures wasn't the place for him, and Kurt's family moved back to Maine, there were no words to console Michael. I tried. Every day I swam in the shallows with him, and we talked and talked and talked. About Kurt and not about Kurt. About love and sex and all the variations on those themes. By the end of 1981, after Kurt was long gone,

there were no words left that Michael and I could not share. We spoke them all, freely, at least to each other. Most days, this was a comfort. Most days, it was enough.

$$*z_j^* e^{\pi} * \partial y *$$

Mathematics is a much simpler place to live. There are no hidden motives in a theorem. No secrets, no hard feelings, no heartbreak. Mathematics can generate its fair share of misunderstandings but not the kind that require apologies. To misunderstand mathematics requires corrective action but the path is usually straightforward: go back and master the prerequisite material. If you're on the cutting edge of new mathematics, you might have to invent the prerequisite material. But you will not have broken anyone's heart but your own.

I took a philosophy class once and I was astounded when the professor proclaimed that you did not have to master anything in order to be a philosopher. Yes, there were prior philosophies to read but he, the professor, and by extension, the discipline of philosophy, was more interested in our own original thoughts than in our ability to master someone else's. I was still an undergraduate but I recoiled from this notion so profoundly that I've never forgotten it.

Every piece of mathematics is built through a mastery of what came before it. There is no way I can ever have an original thought about the function theory of several complex variables until I have mastered single complex variable analysis, harmonic analysis, differential geometry, and a large part of algebraic topology. And every one of those subjects has its own set of prerequisites. And so on, and so on.

Mastery. I live in a world that requires you know your subject inside and out, as well as everything it is built on. Sure, you can get rusty on certain things over time, if you don't use your skills often enough. But you can't possibly be a mathematician without

thoroughly mastering the foundation your theories are built on.

Michael would say, mathematics is a human endeavor, and thus, has its own history. Each new advance in theory built on top of a human story. A mathematician with her own desires, needs, regrets, betrayals.

Phooey, I respond. You can keep the history. I prefer the math.

$$*\sqrt{-u} * \prod * \therefore *$$