

EXCERPTS FROM THE EVA CRANE FIELD DIARY: STORIES

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Male or female, young or old, the characters of this collection inhabit a liminal space of trauma and social dislocation in which elements of the real and fabulous coexist in equal measure. The ghosts that populate the stories are as much the ghosts of the living, as they are the ghosts of the dead. They represent individual conscience and an inescapable connection to the past.

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PART I
PREFACE

I knew what it meant whenever I came home from school to find my mother pink-faced and determined, in a frenzy of cleaning: washing curtains, scrubbing baseboards, pilfering indiscriminately from closets, cabinets, and attics alike for a garage sale or Goodwill. Every year, or couple of years, my mother would enlist my brother, my sister, and me in her assault on dirt and clutter, as though she were the officer instead of my father, signaling that we would soon be setting out from whatever hot, dusty military issue housing the Army had deposited us in for new territories. It seemed inevitable that my father's orders would come just when I felt at home in a place. But I had been raised to travel light. I had learned not to hang on to the things that weren't absolutely necessary, things other people might save, like bottles made of pretty colored glass, or infant teeth, or yearbooks. Each of us was allowed to choose what we would save and what we would give up among our own personal store of treasure but we all had to give up something.

The recurring ritual of paring my life down to the essential, throbbing quick made me into a hardy topiary a gardener prunes for optimal growth and strength. The same process that took place in my house and in my room—the gentle packing of my most beloved objects, wrapped carefully in layers of crinkled newspaper, into the boxes I would take with me—also took place inside of me. I sorted through the images, sounds, and smells I would leave behind, and the ones I would keep, the strawberry highlights of a friend's hair, the first love note from a boy, written in self-conscious, tightly cramped script, the smell of wet clay on the shore of the pond where I liked to fish. Still, leaving was never a sad event. On the contrary, each new location allowed me to reinvent myself, to edit the past and the future, like a magician, like a writer. The possibilities

were endless and exciting. In the next place, I would be a cheerleader or class president, or maybe a soccer star. In the next place, I would not be so shy. I would have nicer clothes. My parents would replace our rusty, sensible station wagon with a cool sports car. In the next place, I would be better somehow, happier.

But no matter where I was, something of the past remained with me. Some things stayed the same, the bags under my mother's eyes, the cloying odor of whiskey mingled with sweat that settled into the furniture, the dreams I dreamt at night—it was as though I was being followed by myself. Something always remained of the things we did and the places in which we did them no matter how much stuff we gave away or how many times we moved.

I imagine the past is even harder to outrun for those who stay in one place. The consequences of our actions have far fewer roads to cover to catch up with us. The past cannot be outrun in fiction either, good fiction at least. The consequences of characters' actions and the nuggets of hard-won truth that are the profound yield of human experience must manifest through plot and character development. How does a fiction writer even attempt to write truthfully about life, to render it in any rational, purposeful way, or trickier still, to know what truth is to begin with? The more time spent thinking about Truth, whether as lofty abstraction or tangible thing, the harder it is to pin the word down. Even so, many writers from Balzac to Hemingway commandeered their fictional work as a site for the dramatic excavation of truth.

Countless other writers have bandied the subject of truth about in their ruminations on craft. One such writer, journalist and novelist Francisco Goldman, faced with the horrific atrocities of a dictator's regime in 1979 Guatemala, confronted the

problem of how to write truthfully about reality by turning to Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Goldman asked the question of himself—"How to transform so much violence, tragedy, sadness, anger, and guilt into fiction, and why?" (4)—and realized what García Márquez already knew. Readers required more than lists of facts and observations. A strict adherence to reality was inadequate to a complete depiction of truth:

García Márquez discovered that a child's memories of such a place could seem more convincingly real than its outward reality. Before, Columbian novelists had usually described such places with anthropological or political earnestness, giving the greatest importance to what seemed most obvious: local customs, that hardship of life and so on. García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* narrated phantasmal and radiant inner lives and childhood memories as if they were more concrete than their surroundings, poetically fusing these to the cycles of local and universal history and nature and creating something both biblical-seeming and lavishly new and strange. (Goldman 3)

By drawing from many different sources—childhood, memory, folklore, Surrealism—García Márquez captured what he called an "outsized reality" in the tenuous grasp afforded by the limited medium of language (Nobel Speech 2). Without abandoning the basic building blocks of story-telling, namely, the perceptual experience of reality through the five senses, but not entirely bound by them either, he extended his dramatic reach beyond the traditional tenets of realism, defined as "a determination... to present life as it is... [without] suppression and contempt of what appears to be commonplace"

(Benson 821). In short, García Márquez skillfully wielded every tool at his disposal to relate a mysterious truth that could be described no other way.

One Hundred Years of Solitude is set in the fictional town of Macondo, which noticeably echoes the Columbian town of Aracataca where the author was born and spent the first eight years of his life. Many anecdotes from García Márquez's own childhood, being introduced to ice for the first time by his grandfather, for instance, make their appearance in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, while some of the more fantastic elements of the novel are borrowed from stories told to him by his grandmother. He has noted in interviews that the tone and voice he associated with her storytelling style strongly influenced the narration of the novel. If writers are careful to listen to their instincts and wise enough to use the unique gifts within their possession, then the ways in which writers are told stories as children naturally predispose them to a certain voice later on; in my case, I came to magic realism along a similar route as did García Márquez, by recalling my childhood, my mother's stories in particular.

When I was a Girl, I Once Lived in a Haunted House

By the time my family moved from Fort Bragg, NC, to Fort Leavenworth, KS, when I was nine years old, I had already read *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and so I was very conscious that I was moving through a landscape that had magical possibilities. On the way to our new home, the horizon rolled by the car window like one of those viewfinders that cycle the same set of pictures endlessly, in this case, a flat, dreary line of earth pocked by farmhouses, silos, and rows of corn, and yet there was the merest hint of adventure lurking beneath the placid vista of munching cows.

My experiences in Kansas did not disappoint me in that regard. Fort Leavenworth was a historic, insular village of mostly nineteenth century brick structures. Built in 1827, it was the very first military outpost west of the Mississippi. Born of the last generation of children left to their own devices, I freely roamed a world that felt both contained and infinite. Everything I needed was within walking distance: Eisenhower Elementary School, the PX, where I bought Holloway's corn nuts every weekend without fail, two ponds separated by a footbridge where I fished, and Leavenworth National Cemetery where my friends and I played among the pristinely-kept tombstones and made crayon rubbings of the epitaphs.

My mother had an expansive imagination and an eclectic intellectual curiosity. At bedtime, she told wonderful tall tales weaving figures from her current reading—Native Americans, slaves, queens, doctors, missionaries—with fantasy and stories of our family history that unfurled in complex narratives full of stops, starts, and skips, narratives that were embryonic, pupal, endlessly spawning more grooves and wrinkles with each retelling. Because we were far from relatives and my parents' salt-of-the-earth roots in Minnesota, my mother's bedtime stories provided the strongest link to our past.

One such tale concerned the origin of my sister's name. My mother's father was a French professor and my parents liked French names in general. Traveling through Western Europe while my father was stationed in Germany, they saw a beautiful ship moored in a blue harbor on the Mediterranean called the *Genevieve*. Some time later, when my mother discovered she was pregnant with a girl, my parents were inspired by the ship from their travels to name my sister Genevieve Anne. When my mother's parents visited the new baby for the first time, her father thanked her for naming my

sister after his mother, Anne Genevieve, a woman who had passed away long before my mother was born and of whom he had never spoken until then.

Included in my mother's repertoire were ghost stories. Soon after moving to Fort Leavenworth she took us to a presentation, more entertainment than fact, on the ghosts that lurked in the old houses on base.

"I can feel them sometimes," she would say, shivering. "Can't you?"

This would spark a discussion of whether or not ghosts existed, and if they did, what they were made of, and where they came from. I found the very idea of ghosts both sad and repulsive. On the one hand, I sympathized with human beings trapped in a misty, ineffectual existence. But on the other, I wondered what they thought when they saw us fight, or cry, or hurt each other.

It was not long after this presentation that I awoke to the sound of a piano being played. We had a beautiful Baldwin upright of gleaming maple (my mother and I both played) that maintained an honored place in every living room of every town we lived. It was the middle of the night and there were no lights on in our apartment that occupied an entire floor of a two-story building. I crept out of my bedroom into the darkened hallway and peeked into the living room where I could barely discern the slender, shadowy silhouette of the instrument. There was no one seated at the bench. As I stood transfixed by fear, shivering despite the heat of a summer night with no air-conditioning, the strains of an old-fashioned melody I did not recognize, performed at a level of virtuosity neither my mother nor I possessed, died away into the oppressive, cottony silence.

Yet another time, I was awakened by the violent shaking of my bed underneath me. Wide-eyed, all I could do was clutch my sheets up to my chin and hang on (like all children, knowing instinctively that covers are impervious armor against night terrors). My childish brain attributed this new horror to the ghosts that were obviously haunting us and for the next two years I spent more than one long, harrowing night in that house, paralyzed by sleeplessness.

Whether I dreamed these two incidents or they were fabricated by my imagination through the heady power of suggestion, is irrelevant; likewise, it doesn't matter whether my mother's stories were true in the wholly empirical sense. They neatly encapsulated their own kind of truth. They became a part of my reality, enriched my existence, and opened my mind to a universe beyond my control and understanding. As children, we are the centers of our own safe, isolated worlds; my mother's stories helped me to grow up, to realize that there are other worlds, other centers.

I realized that there were people who, before me, had inhabited the very spot where I now lived, and something of them remained whether I could see and feel them, or not. They were symbolic of the past, their past and my past. In one place, our histories intertwined. And when my family left, part of us would also remain, not just in the physical marks we left on our surroundings, but also in the spiritual marks our surroundings engraved on us. In the past couple of years, magical elements have cropped up in my stories seeming of their own volition. Now, after taking stock of my life's experiences and my current interests, I view this stylistic turn as inevitable, not only a circling back to my past, but a coming into my own as a writer.

Franz Roh first coined the phrase “magic realism”—from the German *magischer Realismus* (literally translated “marvelous reality”)—in his book, *German Art in the 20th Century*, published in 1925, documenting a trend in art that “turned daily life into eerie form” (84). Roh was referring to the counter-movement of post-expressionism in visual art, but when his treatise was translated into Spanish through the *Revista de Occidente*, it profoundly impacted the modern Latin American literary movement (Echevarría 115). In the 1940s, magic realism “came to designate a mode of narrative fiction, originally Latin American but now global, in which magical and realistic elements coexist with equal status” (Warnes 488). Its lineage can be traced back even further to writers such as Shakespeare, Dickens, and Franz Kafka, and beyond that to the oldest of story forms (fables, allegories, legends, myths, parables, and the like). Because of its relation to the fable, magic realism has also been called fabulism.

Magic realism in its recent incarnation, known most famously through the work of García Márquez, evolved as a reaction within the modern art movement against the limitations of the realism espoused by the Great Tradition writers (D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Willa Cather), a rigidity of form and content Flannery O’Connor felt never truly dissipated. She lamented that “today many readers and critics have set up for the novel a kind of orthodoxy. They demand a realism of fact which may, in the end, limit rather than broaden the novel’s scope” (38-39). If that is to be believed, then magic realism can be described as a kind of disciplined liberation from form and content, that is by no means a release from the requirements of storytelling, but rather a hearkening back to “pre-novelistic modes” (Gioia 1). Previous and recent work in magic realism continues to borrow from a

limitless array of sources, among them surrealist, postmodernist, and postcolonial narratives.

For García Márquez, reading Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" was a seminal moment: "I thought to myself that I didn't know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago" ("The Art of Fiction" 868). He noticed the same idiosyncrasies of narration in Kafka's work that he recalled from his childhood in Aracataca, admitting, "that [was] how my grandmother used to tell stories, the wildest things with a completely natural tone of voice" (Bell-Villada 71). It is no coincidence that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and "The Metamorphosis" share other similarities besides complementary inflections of voice.

First of all, both narratives indicate the altered nature of reality right from the get-go. The very first sentence of "The Metamorphosis" succinctly states the incredulous plight of poor Gregor. "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka 89). Likewise, the reader is informed by the third sentence of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that the town of Macondo does not abide by commonly held standards of reality. The present day narrator, Colonel Aureliano Buendía, retells an event from his childhood, describing his town thus: "The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point" (García Márquez 1).

Secondly, the more fantastic events in the story become, the more concise and lucid the prose. In the second sentence of "The Metamorphosis," as though to reassure the reader if we hadn't quite believed the first sentence, Kafka provides all of the sensory evidence necessary to support the claim that the first sentence makes: "He was

lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely” (89). This is a rather long sentence, but syntactically and semiotically crystal clear; at no point is there any confusion about what is going on. García Márquez’s prose describing Remedios the Beauty’s ascension to heaven, while far more lyrical, is also demonstrably free of unnecessary literary circumlocutions:

Ursula, almost blind at the time, was the only person who was sufficiently calm to identify the nature of that determined wind and she left the sheets to the mercy of the light as she watched Remedios the Beauty waving goodbye in the midst of the flapping sheets that rose up with her, abandoning with her the environment of beetles and dahlias and passing through the air with her as four o’clock in the afternoon came to an end, and they were lost forever with her in the upper atmosphere where not even the highest flying birds of memory could reach her.

(One Hundred Years of Solitude 236)

Note the utter grounding of this remarkable experience within human perception of the real. At “four o’clock in the afternoon” on a sunny day, the women are folding sheets in a garden in which “dahlias” grow. Remedios is lifted by a “determined wind” and carried away “forever” along with Fernanda’s “flapping sheets.”

Early textual clues providing a manual on how to interpret the narrative, along with clear prose rooted in the physical realm, make it possible to suspend disbelief of a fabulous morphology that might otherwise come across as unnecessary literary conceit. Both of these techniques are ubiquitous to the crafting of magic realist prose in the work

of García Márquez, and the numerous contemporary authors whose work references his: Isabel Allende, Toni Morrison, Junot Diaz, and Chris Adrian (whom I discuss here), among others.

As a writer, I too have asked Francisco Goldman's question: How to transcribe life into fiction and why? In search of the answer, I too have found realism insufficient to the job of writers—to render the ineffable mystery of life in any realistic way—as Flannery O'Connor challenged, to “make [their] gaze extend beyond the surface, beyond mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets” (45).

One way to measure whether my own magic realist texts (“Remember the Volga” and “Forgotten Young”) have achieved an honest depiction of the “ineffable mystery of life” is to scrutinize them using the same lens through which I have examined the purpose and effect of immediate context clues and vivid, concrete language in the work of Kafka and García Márquez.

In “Remember the Volga,” for instance, it is clear in the very first paragraph that Andréi is homeless, and by the second, that his homelessness may be due in part to a mental illness such as dementia or Alzheimer's. Andréi is “huddled” by a fire, indicating that he is outside. The fire burns in a “washbasin he filched from someone's back stoop” (“Volga” 28). When Andréi first speaks to his brothers, his dialogue occurs in quotation marks while his brothers' responses are recorded in italics, suggesting that they may not exist in the same world that Andréi inhabits, or at least not in the way Andréi does. If there is any doubt about the narrator's reliability, he admits near the beginning of the second page that “He [is] coming apart around the edges” (“Volga” 29). By the time the

ghosts of Andréi's brothers make a visual appearance in subsequent pages, the confirmation comes as no surprise.

I supply the reader with enough detail to convey the reality of "Remember the Volga" as one filtered through an altered consciousness, a voice that is fragmented and deeply troubled. Though Andréi is confused much of the time, the reader is not. Andréi's mind may flit from memory to memory, image to image, in a way that isn't consistent with logic and the flow of time, yet each image and memory grounds the reader in time and place, and presents the right details to render both reality and the fantastic believable.

The dialogue between Andréi and his brothers is presented in a matter-of-fact way and flows naturally as the story progresses. The unveiling of Boris and Vlad for what they are evokes simply one more ineluctable thread in the fabric of Andréi's unraveling mind. Boris is described in plain, precise, and direct language:

Boris smoothed out a crease in his pants leg and watched the thin and serious women walk by on spindly heels, carrying heavy-looking purses. His infantry uniform was recently pressed and his hair was patted down with pomade. The blood dribbling from the small holes punched in his chest by a German Gewehr rifle when the Nazis pushed across the Dnieper River was barely noticeable.
("Volga" 30)

The same is true for Vlad. "[His] face was untouched by the shrapnel that sheared off the top part of his head when Germany's 11th Army overran the Crimea the summer after Boris died" ("Volga" 31). The information is unequivocally declared as one more fact of Andréi's everyday life. There is no suggestion, in the language at least, of the

fantastic. Though there is a seeming dissonance and randomness to the way Andréi's mind works, the choice and placement of each scene, and the details within them, are written purposefully, ever in the service of moving the narrative forward.

Viewed this way, "Remember the Volga" achieves success as a piece of magic realist fiction, inasmuch as it provides immediate context clues and concrete language, where "Forgotten Young" does not. In the latter story, Becky's parents, distracted by marital problems, forget her and so she becomes invisible. The first sentence, "It happened the day Becky's father left" ("Forgotten Young" 86), tells us that *something* has happened, yet her condition is not made clear until a third of the way into the story. The second sentence, intended to provide some insight into what the story is going to do while drawing out suspense, is actually ambiguous and confusing. The "It" of the first sentence is merely described as "The watery vagueness she noticed around the edges of her reflection, as though all of the hair on her body were charged with static electricity, her blond hair floating in a corona around her face that she couldn't tame with a severe brushing and an entire can of Suave mousse" (86). Other than the first two sentences, there is no other indication that the story contains a fabulous element until the seventh page, much too late.

In addition to the lack of context clues, the language is enigmatic and imprecise when dealing with the fantastic particulars of plot. While it is clear seven pages into the story that Becky has become invisible, the reality of the invisible world in which she finds herself, as communicated by the story, leaves the reader with too many questions: What does an invisible boy need with money? Do the townsfolk notice and wonder about the mysterious crime wave caused by invisible children? Why are the children not

only unseen, but unremembered? Why do Becky and Paul disappear at the end of the story? In the next draft, I plan to clear up the confusion with more precise language and a more logically articulated story structure.

In fiction, human beings narrate collective and multiple histories; magic is as natural a part of this narrative as fact and provides an unbreakable link to the past, without which there can be no understanding of the present, and no hope for the future. When magic realism abandons completely the realm of human perception in favor of the fantastic, discarding, for example, the way in which humans conceive of time (i.e. a timeline in which the past occurs first, then the present, then future), then it begins to leave the movement of magic realism for something else: the genre of pure fantasy, for example, whose expressed methods and objectives utterly diverge from those of magic realism. Like any realist text, a magic realist text must evoke at least the possible, if not the actual.

Though magic realist authors may play with time as with any other element of the reality engendered by the text, there is always an overwhelming sense of the inescapability of the past, present, and future. A common magic realist archetype symbolizing the human perception of time within magic realist texts are ghosts. Ghosts, much like narratives, are the evidence and record of human beings who have lived according to the natural laws of time. They act as a universal Memory, and are as intangible and unreliable. Ghosts thickly populate the stories of García Márquez, Allende, Adrian, Dickens, Shakespeare, and my own stories, "Remember the Volga" and "Excerpts From the Eva Crane Field Diary." The invisible children of "Forgotten

Young” share many of the same characteristics as ghosts, even if they are not specifically named as such.

Ghosts are perhaps the most heavily symbol-laden tropes in all of fiction and vast amounts of text have been devoted to thinking about them by the likes of Defoe, Marx, Engels, Freud, Benjamin, and Derrida. Freud in particular toyed with the psychological idea that “it is much easier to get rid of a fear of ghosts intellectually, than to escape it when the occasion arises” (108). Ghosts may operate in a text on many different levels, in many different ways, but are all fundamentally memento mori, portents of the final fate of each character, and catalysts for the actions the characters must perform before they themselves wind up as ghosts.

In the particular case of “Excerpts From the Eva Crane Field Diary,” the ghosts Eva encounters during her excavations of a historical building in Jefferson, TX, serve as both a call to action (one she heeds, though her efforts are futile and misdirected) and a sign of her imminent failure—much like the actions the ghost of Hamlet’s father sets in motion in Shakespeare’s play. “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be/A couch for luxury and damnèd incest... Remember me,” his father beseeches him (941). The ghost of her grandmother spurs Alba to action in Isabel Allende’s *House of the Spirits*, and for the same purpose, to bring the truth to light:

...her grandmother...appeared with the novel idea that the point was not to die, since death came anyway, but to survive, which would be a miracle.... She suggested that she write a testimony that might one day call attention to the terrible secret she was living through, so that the world would know about this horror.... (414)

Eva's attempt to write the ghost stories of one town parallels her quest to discover the truth of her own past and to solve the mystery of Claire Simon's missing children. Referring to Eva's murdered family, Ben, her lover, tells her, "Eva, you're never going to bring them back. You're never going to understand why he did what he did" ("Excerpts" 134). She thinks, "Didn't he know that I knew that? Didn't he know that it didn't matter?" ("Excerpts" 134). She recognizes the impossibility of achieving her desires by defining the term *ghost* for herself at the very end of the story: "the sight of such a thing meant one was no longer fit for life" ("Excerpts" 135). The end of her relationship with Ben is collocated with her rejection of her physical life and the pleasures, responsibilities, and possibilities therein, and is doubly symbolized by the ghosts and the inevitability of death their presence calls to mind; her choice to pursue a misguided quest in Jefferson is at once an affirmation and a negation of her self-interest producing the tragic paradox of the story.

In the story, ghosts are multivalent figures. They not only represent death and act as catalysts, they also personify memory as a remnant of truth. For example, Eva has three different memories, all equally true, and equally significant to the telling of her story, of the last night she spends with Ben before their relationship fizzles out, proving that however unreliable memory is (and by extension the stories she collects from the memories of the Jefferson townspeople), some remnant of truth is preserved. But while stories and memories can illuminate the *actions* of human beings, their *motivations* remain a mystery. There is a missing link that cannot be bridged by the characters no matter how hard they strive. They continually fall short of the understanding that brings human connection. The story is about isolation and missed connections literally and

metaphorically: Ben fails to understand Eva and she cannot help him to understand her, Eva fails to understand the actions of her father and of Reginald Simon, and intuitively, the ghosts of Reginald's and Eva's families are likely just as bewildered.

By preserving memory and chronicling the past, ghosts serve a similar function in "Remember the Volga" and "Excerpts From the Eva Crane Field Diary." In "Remember the Volga," memory creates identity. As Andréi's memory deteriorates, so does his foothold in the world and his understanding of himself. It is the ghosts of his brothers who safeguard the memory of their shared childhood in Russia and act as Andréi's conscience. Through memory, Andréi exorcises the demons of his past, working back through his memories toward earlier events, purging the memories that have caused him so much pain and confusion, leaving him with the ones that bring him joy. The pattern distinctly recalls Scrooge's journey backwards through his past, from experience to innocence, in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. "Remember the Volga" begins in the shadows of amnesia and ends in "memory" as "light" ("Volga" 42-3). The story ends in one, crystal clear image, a memory of his father on a sun-filled day before his family was torn apart:

The planking was rough and corrugated beneath his bare feet, but it was a good feeling. They had just eaten the salted pork and blinis Mama had wrapped in butcher paper for them and his belly was full.... The boat, anchored in the bending shallow of a breakwater, swayed over the slow drumming current beneath.... The river was wide and calm here, disturbed only by the occasional glitter of a dorsal fin breaking the surface. His father reeled in his line, rebaited the hook and cast it over the stern. Andréi heaved up the anchor and set it next

to the meager perch sliding over one another in a pail of water. They trawled further downstream staying close to the green-brown fringe of shoreline. (“Volga” 43)

Ghosts also behave simultaneously as memory and conscience in Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon*. The apparition of Pilate’s father “[leans] in at the window and [says], ‘You just can’t fly on off and leave a body’” (147). His words prick Pilate’s conscience. “She knew he was telling her to go back to Pennsylvania and collect what was left of the man she and Macon had murdered” (147). She finds what she believes are the murdered man’s bones and keeps them with her in a sack, a constant reminder of what she calls her “inheritance”. By novel’s end, Pilate discovers the ghost is actually speaking of his own father who unexpectedly took flight one day never to return, leaving his family behind.

Unlike “Remember the Volga,” “Excerpts From the Eva Crane Field Diary” is less magic realism than it is simply uncanny, though one line in particular stretches its realist boundaries in the final scene, when “The empty cradle [is] rocked by an unseen hand” (134). I had originally intended to write the story as a pure magic realist piece in which the ghosts would be visible, visceral, acting characters, as important as Eva herself. The idea for the story first occurred to me after I had a nightmare so terrible and vivid it woke me up in the middle of the night and left me shaken for days. In the dream, there was a secret, long-lost room in which lived the ghosts of three murdered children much like what I write about in the story. But in my dream, one of the ghosts resented my intrusion into her secret space and history and reacted violently. I wrote several drafts of the story, and each time when I got to the part where the ghosts were supposed to

make their appearance in the story, I found that they no longer fit. Ironically, by writing around the ghosts, I feel I have achieved the gestalt effect that the experience of the dream had on me. It turned out that the story was not actually about the ghosts but what they represented—isolation, loss, memory.

Incidentally, “Remember the Volga” is also based on a rather graphic nightmare, and now little resembles the original. I wrote this story in its first incarnation over a year before “Excerpts From the Eva Crane Field Diary.” By the time I got around to the latter story, I noticed a micronarrative developing within the larger narrative of magic realism; in using material from my subconscious, I was drawing from surrealist conceptions of art. However, whereas faithful surrealists don’t impose any order or sense onto the uncensored stream of their subconscious, the type of fiction I want to write, requires sense and order. Where the subconscious is imagic and alogical, the mind is narrative and logical. Stories are the creation of the conscious mind, and therefore a dream, though it may bloom gorgeously, cannot provide the necessary latticework upon which a story climbs.

A new way of mining the past and experimenting with narrative consciousness has recently manifested itself in my work as a consideration of the question: Who is telling the story and why? I have borrowed from creative nonfiction devices to manage narrative voice and distance on both a structural and character level. By using the metafictional device of a field diary (a story about a writer creating a story), “Excerpts From the Field Diary of Eva Crane” only feigns personal narrative, but even so, there is still a conscious manipulation of narrative voice and distance that guides reader expectations to the story’s advantage. Prompted to analyze the text as an

anthropological field journal, the reader anticipates a faithful presentation of the “truth,” or at least an accurate observation of the physical world and the events taking place. Those expectations are disrupted even as Eva herself grapples with the meaning of truth and the exactitude of memory—Can truth be known? Can it be represented?—resulting in a text that is self-reflexive.

Metafictional conceits are common to modern and postmodern fiction and magic realism is no exception. Robert Scholes shows in *Fabulation and Metafiction* the common denominator between metafiction and magic realism through García Márquez’s predecessor, Borges. The “opposition between language and reality, the unbridgeable gap between them, is fundamental to the Borgesian vision, and to much of modern epistemology and poetic theory” (Scholes 9). Whereas magic realism attempts to fill in the gap between language and reality with a semiotics of fantasy, metafiction does not, and, to varying degrees, calls greater attention to that gap.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz is a notable example of a novel that applies a metafictional framework to an otherwise fabulous story. Throughout the course of the novel, the narrator reveals himself to be one of the characters. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* exploits a similar frame when the narrative parallels prophecy, unfolding coexistent as the character reads the prophecy and the reader reads the novel. Metafiction, as a device, prevents readers from forgetting for a moment that they are reading a work of fiction. Nothing is meant to be taken for granted; the reader is forced, through the very act of reading, to reflect upon the ideas within the work, rather than allowing the experience of reading to wash over without leaving an impression.

In my opinion, “The All-Natural Animal Suppressant” could be strengthened by a reconfiguration of narrative voice and distance. The emotionally fraught tale of shape-shifting and domestic abuse is fashioned with a combination of a close and distant third person, which at times, works counter to the fabulous frame. At certain moments the lens is too close, evoking a reaction that may be uncomfortable or feel manipulated, while at other moments, by contrast, the lens is too far away, conjuring a situation that may seem absurd or parodied. By using a magic realist metaphor as a stand-in for abuse, I had intended to deal with a tricky subject—fictionally-speaking—in an oblique way. I had hoped to create an allegory that would allow readers to view a common trope in a new light in much the same way that magic realism behaves in Chris Adrian’s “A Tiny Feast,” a story portraying the experience of parents coping with the impending death of a child from cancer that transcends cliché.

Admittedly, there is a crucial difference between these two potentially melodramatic subject matters. Writing a fictional account of domestic violence poses an even greater challenge than a story about grief at the loss of a loved one. Though the grieving parents in “A Tiny Feast” happen to be the fairies, Oberon and Titania, who live under a hill in the city park, the array of emotions and behaviors evinced as they watch helplessly while their son declines is entirely believable. In marked contrast, the emotions and behaviors of two people in an abusive relationship are not believable whatsoever, not even to the people in them. Since the fictional form has higher standards for what’s believable, possible, and realistic (in order to cajole readers to suspend disbelief) than what may actually occur in real life, the unbelievable must be

tempered to fit narrative requirements. Life doesn't always make logical sense, but fiction must; it is part and parcel of the form.

That's not to say that there isn't good fiction about domestic dysfunction, because there is a lot of it, but creative non-fiction can get away with more in this regard. In retrospect, I think a more direct approach by a narrator of the material, whether fiction or memoir, would have served "The All-Natural Animal Suppressant" better than a magical device. *Angela's Ashes* and *The Glass Castle* are two examples of successful memoirs that deal with all of the dangerous and unhealthy complexities of intimate human relationships. It is perhaps no coincidence that when Chris Adrian writes about this type of subject matter, as in his short story "High Speeds," he uses a realistic form. Further, the sections of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that deal with family dysfunction are also written in a realistic way devoid of fantastic elements.

The ghosts of this collection are as much the ghosts of ourselves, of the living, as they are the ghosts of the dead. They represent our consciences, our inescapable connections to the past. They are the guides of our present, and the seers of our future. Embracing magic realism in my writing has been a way for me of exploring the past in my work. Like a miner, I have delved into the dark crevices and abyss of my memory and chipped patiently away at the rock in the hopes of uncovering the bright, elusive gems of truth. In order to do this important work, I have had to look beyond the collectively agreed upon narrative of realism toward the liberating, ever-shifting, ever-renewing possibilities of language. Within this dark, primordial ooze from which life emerges, move things that are just outside my vision and comprehension yet cling to me all the same, emerging, in spite of me, within my stories: "...if the writer believes that

our life is and will remain essentially mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself" (O'Connor 41).

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PART II
STORIES

The Longer Stories

Remember the Volga

“What do you suppose we could have gotten for that black horse?” Andréi asked his brothers. He couldn't see them where they lay huddled in the shadows beyond the reach of the firelight. It was dying down, nothing more now than a small pile of embers casting a weak, red pall over the rim of the tin washbasin he filched from someone's back stoop. There wasn't anything left dry enough to burn and it was too cold to sleep.

Before everything went to shit, or after? That winter, I bet we could have gotten 7,000 rubles for him, easy, Boris said.

He was beautiful said Vlad. It was too bad Papa had to kill him—

“You cried like a little girl,” Andréi said. “I saw you behind the barn.”

Fuck you. I don't like horsemeat. Fucking Lenin and Trotsky. I would have taken an axe to their necks if I could have.

Sure, sure. Of course you would. They didn't even let you carry a gun in the war.

Shut your mouth and save us from your foul walrus breath. Anyway, there weren't enough guns. If I'd known, I would have—

What? What would you have done?

I would have done something.

“Nah, Russians don't protest, they just refuse to work.” His brothers laughed bitterly. It was an old joke they had. A spatter of rain blew underneath the overpass and hissed into the fire. Andréi shifted his bones on the thin bed of cardboard that separated his body from the cement, searching restlessly for a comfortable position. His knees caught painfully like rusty hinges as he folded them into his chest for warmth.

He was coming apart around the edges, he knew, a bit of him evaporating every night. When he shut his eyes, there was the familiar sense of falling, as though his body could no longer anchor him to the earth and he was spinning away from himself. He grasped at the loosening strands of his thoughts, trying to recapture them from the suffocating blackness but they were as elusive as the fireflies he and Vlad and Boris used to chase through the wind-hushed tundra. They put them in glass jars, a tiny universe of stars blinking on and off.

Pale blades of light sliced into the corner where Andréi lay dreaming but not sleeping. He dreamt of a warm apartment in a tan brick building with marigolds in the courtyard. Lines of washing flapped between the railings soaking up the brume of sun and dust. He couldn't remember who lived there, but he thought that at one time it had been a happy place. The last time he had gone to look at it, all the windows were boarded up. A sign said it was going to be a nursing home for rich people.

Andréi rose and stamped his feet to get the blood moving. He walked four miles along the busy highway into downtown, the sun reflecting blearily off the windows of the office buildings and the smell of exhaust and wet bark in his nose. He stopped to rest on the steps in front of a deli. A cold puff from the air conditioning brushed the back of his neck every time a customer went in or out and he shivered. His clothes were still damp from the night before.

Andréi yawned and briskly rubbed his eyes, exhausted to his marrow. He stared ahead without seeing the puddles dimpling the street and the thick archway of bare and glistening maples. Where had he slept? Had he slept? The days and nights ran together

until they were one Day and one Night, always the same, his memory like a wall painted over and over again. He must have slept in his own bed at home, with Stasia, the scent of baby powder and diaper rash ointment on her skin from changing Katarina. It was Stasia who had woken him, her voice cool water in his ear, the skillet just beginning to crackle with butter in the kitchen down the hall, wrapped in the fresh sheets of her long, dark hair.

What was he supposed to do today? The bathroom sink wasn't draining properly, he had to go the hardware store and get one of those snakes. He wasn't a man to spend his hard earned money on a plumber when he could do a thing himself.

"I'm so damned hungry I could eat cabbage." There was a constant gnawing pain in his abdomen, one he knew very well.

Oh God, the cabbages. If I never see another cabbage... Boris smoothed out a crease in his pants leg and watched the thin and serious women walk by on spindly heels, carrying heavy-looking purses. His infantry uniform was recently pressed and his hair was patted down with pomade. The blood dribbling from the small holes punched in his chest by a German Gewehr rifle when the Nazis pushed across the Dnieper River was barely noticeable.

Now there was a real woman, barefoot in the dirt all day.

Andréi knew Boris was referring to their mother who kept a vegetable garden and some fat little flowers like the procession of clergyman in their purple surplices at Easter in the Cathedral of All Saints Are Resplendent.

I didn't mind the cabbage, Vlad said. You'll eat anything when you're starving—
"Our bones were pushing out of our skins."

The army rations seemed like a feast after that, didn't they?

I hate to think what she put in the schi.

“Squirrel.”

And when there were no more bullets? Rats more like. Vlad's face was untouched by the shrapnel that sheared off the top part of his head when Germany's 11th Army overran the Crimea the summer after Boris died. He no longer had the wiry hair that stuck out from his head like an Amerikanski pompadour.

First the dogs. The poor dogs.

“Better them than us, eh?”

He hadn't meant to yell at Katarina that morning when he found the bruised, overripe bananas she threw in the garbage, but the wasting of food was something he would not tolerate. It bothered him for days, even months. Over the course of the years, he could remember precisely when a casserole had been dropped on the floor and Stasia had thrown it out before he could protest, or when she had found millworms squiggling drunkenly in a box of flour, or whenever they opened a carton of eggs in which one was broken. He could not sleep those nights or if he finally did, he had nightmares of being stranded without a sail or oars, alone in the middle of the Volga in the small handliner vessel he and his father used to fish in. He was drifting further and further from home, the gorse-covered whorls of Saratov Oblast receding into the mist, but he could not force himself to jump into the icy current. He knew he would never make it to shore.

Katarina's eyes, gray like his, as gray and unfathomable as the Volga River which she had never seen, welled with tears of incredulity and betrayal ringed white around her eyes. For her, he could do anything, but he could not undo what he had already done. Growing up was to be betrayed by one's parents over and over again and then to betray them in return.

“What do you think happened to him?” One night, their father didn't return from the State Security in Saratov where he'd been summoned, or the next night either. Their mother went after him, standing for hours in a scrum of the families of the taken, to receive the answer finally, “We do not know that man,” and to pound on the frozen steel door until her fists bled.

Dunno. A labor camp like the others? They'd heard the rumors of the prison camps beyond the Urals, the cold country where nothing grew in the frozen ground. No one ever returned from there.

I suppose it didn't really matter. There was the war and starvation for the rest of us.

Wonder how much he had to eat there.

“Is that all you ever think of, Vlad? Food?”

What else is there?

Boris raised one eyebrow and recommenced his unabashed observation of the female passersby. A young woman ducked by them into the deli and Andréi caught his reflection in the glass door as it swung shut. He hardly recognized the hirsute, old man staring back at him with deepset, haunted eyes. His hair and beard were wild and

tangled and his clothes were filthy. He didn't understand how he had arrived at this dire state and the confusion brought tears to his eyes. How had Stasia let him leave the house looking that way? She usually took so much pride in his appearance. Each morning, he pulled on clothes stiff with starch and once a month she trimmed his hair herself. Stasia was a good wife to him but sometimes he woke in the middle of the night to her muffled sobs. He wondered if he was making her unhappy but he never had the courage to ask. He was happy. Damn him, he was happy.

“I worked extra shifts to buy this piano, young lady, and you will learn how to play it,” Andréi said to Katarina. He had replaced the rusty strings himself, learning how from a friend who worked as a technician in a piano shop, and hammered the pins that were loose into the pin block. The sound board had a slight crack in it, that was how he had got such a good deal, but it still had a rich pelagic tonality which shook the walls and the ceiling of their apartment and exasperated the neighbors. Growing up, the only time he heard music was from the shrilly adolescent boys in the choir above the somber din of the church organ.

“I never wanted a piano,” she replied with an exasperated toss of her liquidy hair, so like her mother's, before Stasia had fallen ill with breast cancer. Katarina's constant annoyance with him was bewildering and altogether too American for his liking. There was no mother now to interpret her moods for him, moods that grew more troubling as the years passed and the hemlines of her skirts rose. Katarina sighed and tried a different tack. “Papa, what I need is braces. Look at my teeth. Everyone gets braces nowadays.”

“When you get a job, you can get braces. Right now, you will learn Tchaikovsky like a good Russian girl,” he said, throwing down the music book onto the piano bench with a bang, effectively ending the conversation.

As he turned to leave the room he heard her murmur, “I’m not Russian.” But afterwards, the discordant tinkling notes of the piano drifted into the kitchen where he pan-seared their lonely supper of beef, potatoes and carrots in a dark gravy, and he thought no more of it.

I don’t believe it, Vlad was saying.

I swear. Had her the night before I left. She said she’d wait for me, Boris said.

Bull. Really? She was such a pale, little mouse—

Shut your mouth. Don’t talk about her that way.

At least you had a girl once. Vlad laughed, Even if she was cross-eyed.

Boris’s face turned as purple as it could with no blood in it.

Andréi pulled open the drawer of his mahogany desk, the balmy wood smell faint in his nostrils. At the very bottom, under a stack of files, he felt the letters from his mother that had grown velvety with time. He moved his fingers over them like a blind man reading Braille and hummed a Tchaikovsky lullaby he used to sing to Katarina when her newborn hair was as downy as these letters.

“What did you say?” a boy asked him.

“What?” Andréi asked.

“You were saying something about your mother.” He narrowed his eyes at Andréi.

“Was I? I lost my train of thought.”

“You were saying she was dead.”

“She’s not dead. I can still bring her here.”

“Oh.” The boy turned to leave.

“Wait,” Andréi said, “Can you tell me how to get home from here?”

“I have to go.”

Andréi grabbed the sleeve of his camouflage sweat shirt. “Please.” The young man yanked his arm away and hurried across the street.

There was no escaping the smoke from the bombs of the Luftwaffe. It mixed with their sweat and clung to their clothes and faces. He never got used to the gutted buildings of the towns and cities with black holes for eyes.

“I swear I never touched their women. I told them not to. That God would judge them.” The men in his unit looked forward to the nights after a town or a bridge had been taken. It was understood they could rape and shoot the German women at will, as long as they weren’t the ones the officers had set aside for themselves. Sometimes the men got so drunk, the girls got away.

We know, Boris said.

“What did I tell you?” a voice boomed in Andréi’s ear. “You can’t sit here. We’ve been getting complaints.”

“That you Polkovnik Gavrilov?”

“Who? Don’t come back or I’ll call the police.”

Andréi shuffled across the street.

Why didn’t you go back for her?

We would’ve gone back, but we couldn’t.

Andréi clutched his ears. “Stop it! I can’t stand it!”

“Excuse me, sir. Are you hungry?” The boy from the deli blocked his way.

“Yes.” Andréi had to wait while a blanket was laid on the passenger seat of the car for him to sit on. Andréi was embarrassed and the boy pretended not to notice. They drove awhile in silence and came eventually to a neighborhood where the houses were beautiful and all the same.

“Wait out back,” the boy said. Andréi bowed his head humbly and went through a gate into a garden with a pool like in a magazine picture. The light off the water hurt his eyes and made him dizzy. He looked for a place to sit down and settled onto the soft cushions of a lounge chair.

He smelled the food before he saw it. Milk. Chicken. Dill pickles. Then it was in his mouth and the fullness of him was such that his extremities tingled pleasantly. All of a sudden he was very sleepy. He struggled to keep his eyes open under lids that felt like wooden blocks.

He had to push her in a wheelchair down the white halls streaked with black where shoes and gurneys and carts bearing anemic hospital fare bumped into them. He wanted to cover his nose from the pungent effluvium of anesthetic and urin but instead he talked to her in a ghastly voice he hoped sounded soothing and cheerful. When the

doctor who was younger than she was told her nothing could be done and to prepare herself, she laughed and said, “I have a five year old. I don’t have time to be sick. Besides, I feel fine.” It happened so fast that she was nearly right. There was no time. The only thing she asked of him at the end when they both knew and she lay very frail in the hospital bed and every moment was precious and he wanted to kill all those polite, ineffectual nurses in ridiculous scrubs—printed with teddy bears, rainbows, hearts, shooting stars—who disturbed his wife, was that he take care of their daughter. He couldn’t even do that.

Andréi was startled awake when the boy took the tray of dishes from his lap. “Young man,” he asked, feeling sheepish, “do you have any vodka?”

“I’m not supposed to drink it.” The boy looked uncertain. “Well, they won’t notice if there’s just a little gone.” He brought the tray into the house and came back with a bottle and two glasses. He poured them both a drink.

The young man grimaced as he took a sip, then lit a cigarette. “Didn’t you say you were in a war?”

“World War II. 175th Rifle Regiment.”

“What was it like? To kill people, I mean?”

Andréi drank deeply, belched and then leaned back into the spongy chair. He smiled with satisfaction, holding the bottle between his knees and crossing his arms over his chest. He should go, but the day had warmed considerably and he felt very relaxed. “It was not like anything. It was either you or them. You shouldn’t think of such things.”

The young man studied him while his cigarette shrank, the orange coal flaring with each breath in. Andréi closed his eyes. A match popped into life. He jerked awake, he must have fallen asleep again, the hazard of a full belly.

“You sound foreign. Where are you from?”

“Russia.”

“How did you get here?”

“Back before that damned wall was built, we were occupying East Berlin and the Americans and the other allies were set up in the west. I rode the train to the other side of the city. It was that easy then. One minute you were in socialism and the next you were in capitalism.”

“Weird. I guess it was a different world, then.”

“Different. And not so different.”

Andréi poured himself another glass of vodka. The young man lit another match. He should go. He had imposed on this nice young man long enough. He reached into his pocket for his wallet, to offer some payment for the food and drink. It still had a leathery smell. Katarina gave it to him one year for Christmas. She had saved up for it by walking the dogs of the people who lived in their apartment building. “Hurry up, Papa,” she said as he unwrapped it slowly so that the paper didn’t tear. Behind the thin stack of dollar bills in his wallet was a folded piece of notebook paper. Curious, Andréi took it out and read it.

Papa—

Don't worry about me. The goodbye would have been too hard—it's better this way. We both know I couldn't be happy here.

I'll call you.

Love,

Kat

A hot tear slid from the corner of his eye and rolled down his nose. He brushed it aside roughly with the back of his hand. The last time he saw her she was eighteen and beautiful and he worried about her all the time. She hung around the drama kids at school, they dressed all in black, wore berets and quoted Jack Kerouac or some such nonsense. She was always rehearsing for one show or another and at every opening, he sat in the front row and clapped the loudest, but that was where he drew the line. Once she graduated, he thought she should turn her head toward more serious things, get a job, take some classes at the local college.

She'd come home late one night after a rehearsal, smelling of booze and cigarettes. She said she was moving to New York. He wanted to hit her right in her smart mouth. He controlled the urge, but she saw it in his eyes.

She packed a bag and left. He was too ashamed of himself to stop her.

Burning. He felt and smelled the burning. He slapped at his arm the way he would slap a mosquito. He was face to face with the young man. A realization. Why hadn't he seen it before, the face of his enemy? It was too late now.

“Hey man, I’m so sorry. It was an accident. You fell into my cigarette. Here, let me see your arm.” The boy talked softly to him, the way his father talked to the horses. Andréi didn’t believe him. The boy stood between him and the gate in the fence. Andréi rushed him, hoping to catch him off guard. He didn’t stand a chance in an open fight.

“Just settle down, man.” They swiped and parried in a taut comical dance next to the pool. “Shit, dude.” The boy grunted and shoved and Andréi was knocked into the pool.

“What’s going on?” A sleepy girl came out, rubbing her eyes.

“I don’t know. The guy went crazy. I was just trying to help him.”

“Isn’t that the man from the deli? He’s probably just scared.” They fanned out along the edges of the pool, whistling and calling to him as though to a misbehaving dog.

Andréi searched for an escape, but his thoughts were sea glass rubbed smooth. The chlorinated water pushed into his mouth like fear. He could not see Vlad and Boris.

The girl was the weakest. He went for her where she stood alone by the steps. He got his pocketknife to her throat before the other one could reach her. She screamed. Her terror was matched by his own. He looked down at the struggling girl in his arms and it was Katarina, her fervid dark hair half covering her face in wet rivulets, frightened. He threw the knife away and hugged her to him.

“Where have you been? I would never hurt you. I’ve missed you so much.”

Hands on him. Katarina ran from him without looking back.

“Jenny, get something to tie him up with!” They hurt a rope around his wrists.

“I’ll call the police,” the girl said.

“Wait. Don't.”

“Why? He's deranged. He attacked me.”

“What if we get into trouble for having him here? What if they think we were messing with him?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I—I accidentally hurt him.”

“What did you do, Parker?”

“I set him on fire. But he tripped over me.”

“Oh my God!”

“It was an accident. My cigarette.”

“We need to call the police. Maybe he needs a doctor.”

“It was an accident. I don't think he's hurt. I'm supposed to start school in the fall. What if they won't let me because of this? I was trying to do a good thing.”

“What else can we do?”

“What if I just take him back to the deli? No harm, no foul.”

“I don't know.”

“Look, Mom and Dad are going to be home soon, so you better decide quick. Do you really want to ruin the rest of my life?”

“You're going to take him back to the deli?”

“Don't worry, he'll be fine, or at least as fine as he was before.”

“Shit, shit shit,” said the boy who brought Andréi to his house and set him on fire. He pounded the steering wheel and the car swerved on the road.

Andréi jolted back and forth on the blanket in the backseat, shivering, his skin coated with the slime of his fear. It dripped down his back, behind his knees. His brothers sat next to him. “I never touched those women,” he told Vlad and Boris, “I swear it, I begged them to stop, but they wouldn’t. I will never forget the screaming. All through the night sometimes. And in the morning, bleeding to death, their bodies nailed to trees and to the wooden walls of buildings, like white puppets. But I never touched them. I never touched them.”

“Shut up! You’re crazy! Why did this have to happen to me?” the boy moaned. “I was just trying to help you.”

There were rocks, jagged teeth in an open bowl of a mouth. A granite quarry. Andréi knew it was over for him but he never quite believed he would die, not even during the war. He supposed no one did. He considered what it would be like to die. It seemed blank and dark. A great endness to him.

“Look, Fayetteville is back that way,” the boy pointed. Night was falling fast.

Andréi could not stand and he slumped onto the ground. The car door slammed and the sound of the engine faded into the distance. He remembered and memory was light. His wife in the white cotton dress he liked that revealed the delicate round bones of her shoulders, looking up at him expectantly, “Will you say grace?” Katarina in her high chair already covered in her spaghetti dinner. He closed his eyes and smiled. Oh, to have seen Katarina again!

The planking was rough and corrugated beneath his bare feet, but it was a good feeling. They had just eaten the salted pork and blinis Mama had wrapped in butcher

paper for them and his belly was full. He tried not to doze so he watched the sun instead, tracing its imperceptible path through the sky. It hung completely still as though from an invisible string, the day seeming endless. The boat, anchored in the bending shallow of a breakwater, swayed over the slow drumming current beneath. Their lines, thrown from opposite ends, faded into the black water. The river was wide and calm here, disturbed only by the occasional glitter of a dorsal fin breaking the surface. His father reeled in his line, rebaited the hook and cast it over the stern. Andréi heaved up the anchor and set it next to the meager perch sliding over one another in a pail of water. They trawled further downstream staying close to the green-brown fringe of shoreline.

Black Diamond

Ingrid fell in love with Liam the first time they touched. They collided in the hallway at school in front of about a dozen other students when Ingrid turned abruptly, realizing she'd left her geometry homework in her locker. Liam had been backing around the corner, calling out a greeting to some friends down the hall and he pivoted just in time to meet her head on.

She was aware of several things simultaneously. His thighs through his khaki pants were surprisingly soft against her own, not what she thought a boy's thighs ought to feel like. She had imagined that when and if she ever had occasion to feel a boy's thighs, they would be tough and lean like dried venison. He was tall and the lines of his body were graceful, almost androgynous. His face on the other hand was masculine and plain, nearly ugly, with its too-large nose that was slightly out of joint and a small, thin mouth. What held her a moment too long against his chest was not his fingers gripping her upper arms so that she wouldn't fall backwards, but his eyes which searched her own. They were pale blue and made a very pleasant contrast against his skin, which was the faded bronze color of a potato.

The sounds of life proceeding obliviously around them—thronging footsteps and the harsh metallic clang of locker doors—traveled more slowly than usual from her ear canal through the auditory nerves, to burst suddenly in her temporal lobe like a small explosion. She was aware that the accidental embrace had lasted longer than politely necessary though she couldn't be sure how long. Liam seemed to reach the same conclusion in the instant she did and they shot apart from each other with as much force as they had been thrust together.

Her face and neck stung from the heat of her blush as she ducked down to gather her things from the floor where they had fallen.

“Are you alright? I’m really sorry about that,” Liam said, picking up Ingrid’s bookbag. He hefted it up and down a couple of times, grinning at how heavy it was before handing it back to her. She blushed even more, as though all of the advanced classes she was taking were a bad thing. She’d never been embarrassed about how smart she was until now. She wondered why.

Ingrid grabbed her bag from his hand and stuffed some stray papers into it. “Yeah, fine. Don’t worry about it. It was my fault, too.” She didn’t meet his eyes again.

“Okay. See you around,” he said.

“See you,” she rasped. It felt like she was coming down with strep throat. He rushed off to class, tripping a little over his own feet as he rounded the corner. That made her feel a little better for some reason. She was going to be late for geometry. It was not a class you wanted to be late for, but she didn’t hurry. She was out of sorts and needed time to think. She had never really noticed Liam before. She found herself lingering over the feel of his body against hers, not so much pressed, like the two halves of Rubin’s vase/profile optical illusion, as mingling. She hadn’t known you could get so close to someone that it changed you, like a chemical reaction between two substances, in which touch was the catalyst. It was just a random accident. It shouldn’t have felt as good as it had. She wanted to do it again, like it was the best ride at the state fair.

When she arrived late to class, the only available seat was in the front row and Mrs. Banner gave her a significant glance of disapproval. When she failed to turn in her

homework because she had forgotten to go back to her locker, Mrs. Banner's eyebrows arched in disbelief, almost up to her thinning hair, at the severe lapse in discipline of her star pupil. Ingrid didn't notice because she was thinking of Liam. This wasn't the sort of thing that happened to her. She had never had a boyfriend, or even been on a date, and not just because she wasn't allowed to date until she was sixteen, which would not be for another year. There had never been the occasion or the desire to disobey that particular prohibition.

That night after choir practice, Ingrid walked home alone as usual. The sun had already set but a low, sepia light still burned from the west, glinting dully off the thick buildup of ice that covered the roads and the few lone trees spaced evenly over the dead grass. She slipped once coming up the driveway and turned around instinctively to see if anyone had seen, but there was no one. The street was empty and the windows of the small, ranch style houses were still dark. The houses were almost identical; each had a light dusting of white on the roof and dripping icicles hung from the eaves.

Ingrid let herself into the darkened house turning on lights as she made her way to the kitchen. Dolittle, their arthritic and half-blind Shepard mutt stood with his nose pressed against the kitchen door, which led into the backyard. She let him out, watching him shuffle carefully to the same spot he always went to, next to a dying holly bush, killed by the ammonia from his faithful urination. Her mother wouldn't be home from her shift at County General Hospital until ten that night and her father wouldn't be back from the restaurant until much later. Ingrid wasn't lonely. On the contrary, she preferred the house when it was quiet, almost like she lived alone now that her brother was away at State. She flung her bag onto the formica countertop, mottled by old stains and knife-

scars, and grabbed the phone from the wall. She retrieved a TV dinner from the freezer and tossed it into the microwave before she dialed.

Though Ingrid went to a small, rural high school where everyone knew everyone, she wasn't really a part of any social group herself. She tended to make easy, transitory friendships from among whatever after school activity she found herself in during a particular season. In the fall, it had been soccer and after the winter semester began, she joined the choir. So it was with an ulterior motive that she called Caroline, her friend from choir.

"Hello?"

"Hey Caroline, it's Ingrid."

"Hi, what's up?"

"Oh, nothing. Um, I don't know if you heard that I ran into Liam in the hall today. Literally."

"Oh, yeah. I did actually. Are you okay?" Nothing ever happened without everyone knowing about it, no matter how insignificant.

"It wasn't as bad as it looked. Liam's a junior, right?"

"Yeah, why? Do you like him?"

"No. I never really noticed him until today. I was just curious."

"A girl from my Algebra class thinks he's cute but I don't personally find him attractive."

"Do you know him? What's he like?" Gathering information was always the first step in achieving any goal, Ingrid knew, and she was nothing if not goal-oriented.

“He’s always been nice to me. He lives in my neighborhood. I see him all the time in the park playing with his little sister.”

“That’s sweet,” Ingrid said. Her own brother never hung out with her unless he was forced to.

“You do like him, don’t you?” Caroline said. Ingrid could hear the smirk in her voice.

“I think I hear my mom getting home. See you tomorrow at choir.” Heart thudding, Ingrid hung up the phone. Her ears and her palms itched. It was an uncomfortable sensation she was not familiar with. If Caroline told anyone that she liked Liam she would kill her and that was all there was to it.

It was hard for her to focus on homework and her TV dinner, shaking as she was with rage and embarrassment at Caroline’s audacious claim. She gave up and got ready for bed. After she brushed her teeth and washed her face, she stared at herself in the mirror, wondering what Liam saw when he looked at her. She had thin, strawberry blonde hair down to her shoulders, an unusual color she inherited from her dad’s Irish side of the family, and she guessed her face was sort of pretty in a soft, round way. Not supermodel pretty or anything, more like television actress pretty. She leaned in to the mirror and examined her pores. Sighing, Ingrid turned out all the lights, got into bed, and burrowed under the two blankets and comforter she’d taken to using at night since the heater broke Christmas morning, moving around until she could no longer feel any cold seeping into the pocket of warm air she’d created. It took her a long time to fall asleep. She thought of Liam until the color of his eyes and the feel of him merged into one strange, continuous impression.

The next day at lunch, Ingrid scanned the cafeteria for Caroline to reiterate the fact that she did not like Liam and to make sure Caroline hadn't told anyone she did. Ingrid spotted her sitting with a group of mostly freshman girls at one end of a long table. At the other end sat Liam with his friends. He was sitting with his legs sprawled outward, one elbow on the table and torso turned sideways, as though he were waiting for someone to sit on his lap. She was about to turn around and walk out, when Liam caught her eye and smiled. It felt like she was wearing a mask of wet concrete. By the time she was able to return his smile, he had already looked away.

She couldn't remember closing the distance between her and Caroline. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Sure. Will you scoot over, Lucy?" Caroline asked the petite, dark-haired girl sitting next to her. Ingrid slid in between them. She had a hard time concentrating on what they were saying with Liam only a few feet away. He was so close that she could hear his voice. It was deep and rough, with a negligible lisp that added to his charm. When he joked about the school being so small they didn't have enough players to make up a basketball team this season, his friends laughed and Ingrid smiled to herself. They talked about a ski trip they were all going on the next weekend and she imagined herself shooshing down the slopes with Liam in a cute, ski bunny outfit, her cheeks pink with cold. Of course, she didn't ski. She had never skied. That was a rich person's pass time.

"Hell yeah, I skied a double black," Liam was saying, "last month in Vail. You should have seen the moguls, they were huge—"

“We’ll see who gets down the mountain first,” another guy, a senior named Mark, was saying. “It sure as shit ain’t gonna be you.”

“You wanna put some money on that?” Liam asked, inclining his head as though he thought Mark would be smarter not to.

Lucy must have been eavesdropping too, because she asked them, “Are any of you guys going on that ski trip?”

“What ski trip?” Caroline asked.

“If you played a sport,” Lucy explained, “you’re eligible to go on the school ski trip.” Ingrid could feel her heartbeat in her tongue. She was no good at sports, but she’d forced herself to play soccer because she knew that colleges liked well-rounded applicants and she needed a scholarship if she hoped to get as far away from Laurel, Kansas, as possible. Soccer had been sheer torture for her. She was by far the worst player on the team and at the end of the season, her teammates voted her Most Improved. She was always winning awards, but they were usually for being the best at something, not the worst. She hadn’t expected to be voted MVP or anything but Most Improved felt like an insult.

“That sounds like fun,” Caroline said. “How much is it?”

“Three hundred dollars, I think. It includes food and rentals and everything.” Ingrid’s breath congealed in her chest. She hadn’t realized how much she had already been counting on going. There was no way she could come up with three hundred dollars by next weekend unless she asked her parents. She couldn’t do that. Besides they would never give her that kind of money, especially not for something as frivolous as a ski trip.

On the other hand, school trips meant a bus ride. Deer Mountain was six hours away. When would she ever get another chance to spend two bus rides and a whole entire weekend with Liam?

“I was thinking about going on that trip, actually,” Ingrid said.

“Why don’t we all go?” Caroline agreed, flicking a glance towards the older boys sitting around Liam. Slowly, she ran her fingers through her wavy, auburn hair. It sparkled under the industrial fluorescent lighting as she pulled it into a complicated twist, securing it in place with an alligator clip. A few loose strands strategically framed her oval face. Ingrid watched Mark watch Caroline and she wished she could do that, make a boy look at her that way. Caroline pursed her lips into a small, oblique smile, directed ever so slightly at Mark.

When Ingrid got home, her mother was in her robe starching her white uniform. The iron exhaled gray billows of steam as she pushed it rhythmically back and forth across the fabric. Because the air in the house was so cold, the steam shrouded her mother’s face and shoulders in a heavy cloud of moisture as though clinging to a mountain top.

“I thought you had the day off,” Ingrid said.

“I was supposed to.” Her mother paused in her ironing and the steam dissipated, leaving a sheen of residue on her skin. “But Sherrey called in sick. Again. I don’t know why they don’t fire her. If they weren’t so short-handed already, I’m sure they would.”

“You’re working the night shift?” Ingrid asked, dismayed. There was no way she could talk to her mother about the ski trip now. It wouldn’t be fair to stress her out right

before she had to go to work. It was a bad idea, anyway. She decided to forget about the whole thing.

“What’s wrong?” her mother asked.

“Nothing.” Ingrid sighed. “You have to go to work. It’s not important.”

Her mother set the hissing iron upright on the ironing board and sat next to Ingrid on the couch.

“I have time,” she said, though Ingrid knew there never was enough time in the day for all the things her mother did. The skin under her eyes was puffy, as dark as ripe plums. Several inches of wiry, gray hair protruded from her scalp, the rest of her bob a cheerful, dyed-at-home blonde. Ingrid felt terrible for even thinking of asking her mother for the money. “I can tell that something’s wrong.” her mother prodded when Ingrid didn’t immediately speak.

“It’s just this stupid school trip. But I don’t even want to go anymore.”

“What kind of trip?” her mother asked, not fooled.

“It’s a ski trip.”

“So it’s not academic then.”

“No.” For some reason Ingrid was annoyed at her mother’s response. She hadn’t been planning to ask to go on the trip but now she found herself doing just that. “But it’s like a reward for people who play sports and remember that horrible season of soccer I played. And I won that award...” She knew that was her mother’s weak spot. She was inordinately proud of all the awards her daughter won, no matter how dumb Ingrid thought they were.

“How much is it?”

“Three hundred dollars—but I have fifty saved from babysitting—” Ingrid rushed on to say.

Her mother sighed and rubbed her temples. “That’s a lot of money, Ingrid, and I’m not sure you really need to go on this trip. We’re not poor but—”

“I know, I know. We need to save our money for the important things. It’s okay, mom. Like I said, I don’t even want to go now. It was stupid of me to even say anything about it.” Ingrid’s mother put her arm around her. It felt warm and pillowy against Ingrid’s back, but the comforting gesture only irritated her even more.

“I would love to be able to send you on this trip,” her mother said, “but I can’t. That’s why you need to focus on school and then maybe someday, you can do these things for yourself.”

Ingrid didn’t care about some day. Some day didn’t exist. All that existed was right now. She knew she was being selfish but she didn’t care. She wiped her wet cheeks with the back of her hand, and realized she was crying. She was ashamed of herself for caring so much about the trip, but she was also angry at her mother.

“It’s fine,” Ingrid said. “I’m used to being the only one who can’t do things. I’m used to having you cut my hair and wearing the same pair of jeans every day of the week—” Ingrid regretted her words instantly. The truth was, she hadn’t ever paid those things much attention until this afternoon. She watched her mother’s face crumple, then harden, and finally sag into defeat and exhaustion.

“I’m tired, Ingrid. I’m so tired I can’t think straight. I can’t see straight. I forget where I am half the time. I don’t think I can work any harder. Don’t you think I’d rather take it easy? I would love to go on a ski trip but I’m working for you. Do you think your

Dad cares whether there's any money for college left over at the end of the month?
What do you think I'm saving money for?"

Ingrid was stunned. She was the most rotten, ungrateful child in the universe. The empty space between her and her mother hardened visibly. Lifting her arm and reaching out to her mother seemed like the most impossible thing in the world. After a moment, she whispered, "I'm sorry, Mom," and went upstairs. She peered down at her mother over the railing. She was still on the couch, her head in her hands, staring at the ironing board.

The next night, when Ingrid got home from school, her mother was making dinner.

"I thought you had to work today."

"They found someone else to come in."

"That's great," Ingrid said. Dinner was almost ready so she grabbed a couple of plates and placemats and set them on the table. She poured some Crystal Lite into two glasses from a pitcher in the fridge.

"I wanted to talk to you about something," her mother said.

"What is it?" Ingrid asked. She hoped it didn't have anything to do with the night before.

"I spoke to your father and we've decided to let you go on this trip."

"What? But I thought—"

"Your father's decided he can afford to pay for it." Her mother wiped her hands on a dishtowel, a small, close-mouthed smile on her lips.

“Oh,” was all she could say, she was so surprised. This was very unlike her father who would splurge on things for Ingrid that she didn’t need, a set of wind chimes or a pair of ballet slippers when they couldn’t afford the lessons, but there was never enough money when she actually asked for something.

“We think you should go,” her mother said, handing her three crisp one hundred dollar bills. Ingrid had never even seen a hundred dollar bill. She only knew about their existence in theory. She had thought that there could be no more excruciating feeling than when she had asked her mother for the money but actually getting it was far worse. She looked around their clean, but bare home and wondered what they would go without because of her. The heater would not be fixed this winter and her mother’s prolonged coughs, she had asthma which made it difficult for her to get over them, would be worse. Instead of going to the doctor, her mother would shrug and wait it out.

“I can’t take this,” Ingrid said, holding the money out to her mother.

“Just keep working hard,” her mother said, folding her hand around Ingrid’s.

“I hate to bring this up,” Ingrid groaned, “but what am I going to ski in?”

“I thought of that,” her mother winked and pointed to a can of Scotch Guard on the counter. “You’ll have to make do with what you’ve got.”

After dinner, Ingrid pulled out an old windsuit she’d used during the soccer season when it started to get colder. She sprayed the jacket and the pants and laid them out to dry.

The bus ride to Deer Mountain was long and boring. While Liam sat at the back of the bus with his friends, she was forced to sit near the front with Lucy who couldn’t take a hint and talked incessantly of her extensive travels. The furthest Ingrid had ever

been from Laurel was the outlet mall on the highway outside of Topeka. The flat brown plains of Kansas and Nebraska, parceled into precise squares of fields and pastures, as if Mrs. Banner had drawn the landscape according to a sheet of graphing paper, rolled by all too slowly. But by the time the sun crouched over the western horizon, the recumbent farmland had puckered imperceptibly into the Black Hills of South Dakota. The waning light reflected orangish pink on the underbelly of the heavy snow clouds hanging so low they brushed the tops of the spindly pines. The giant trees drooped under their heavy loads of ice and were themselves dwarfed by the vast spires of stone, receding into the dense cloud cover. Ingrid had never seen hills in real life, let alone mountains and she was caught off guard. She didn't have a poetic soul and she found herself struggling for the right words to describe them. Immense, ageless, mysterious. She gave up. They weren't enough. The bus curved along a precarious corkscrew of a road taking them higher into the mountains, and at last they came to a stop among a cluster of cabins at the fringe of the ski resort.

The trip was for the most part, a disappointment. She supposed she had expected it to be magical. She had pictured herself skimming down the slope by Liam's side, graceful and athletic. Instead, she was slow and clumsy and no one would ski with her. She twisted her knee on the very first day trying to keep up with Caroline and spent the remainder of the weekend in the lodge by the fire, reading. By the last morning, she was more than ready to go home. She was the first one up, showered, and packed while the other girls were still yawning and whining to the chaperone that the trip had gone by way too fast and couldn't they ski in the morning and leave later on that day? To her intense relief, this request was denied. She found that she missed home. The

sheets on the cabin bed were not as worn and soft as hers and the pillow was too fluffy if that was possible. It left her neck feeling sore in the morning.

Ingrid climbed into one of the empty seats on the bus, praying that Lucy wouldn't sit next to her again and gush over how awesome the weekend had been. When Liam sat down next to her she wondered why and scanned the other seats on the bus to see if they were all full. There were still some seats left including in the back, obviously his favorite location.

"Is it okay if I sit with you?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, trying not to smile too widely. Six hours with Liam. She was suddenly very much aware of each individual atom of her body, as though every tiny particle had its own nerve ending, humming expectantly, all attuned to the warm body sitting a foot away from her.

Now that he was close and they could actually talk, she had no idea what to say. She knew it was much too soon to tell him that all she'd thought about since the moment they touched was finding a way to touch him again, so she waited for him to speak. He seemed outgoing enough with his friends but with her he was shy.

"How long have you been skiing?" she asked him.

He smiled at her gratefully, relieved that she had come up with something to talk about. "Ever since I was little. My family goes to Colorado once a season. Was this your first time skiing?"

"Was it that obvious?"

"No," he laughed. "You did really well."

“Yeah, right. I really wish I could have seen you guys ski down that black diamond, though.”

“Maybe next time.”

“Maybe,” she echoed, though she didn’t think another ski trip was in her near future.

“Caroline says you have a little sister?” Ingrid asked him, conversationally, then bit her lip. She’d pretty much just admitted that she’d been asking Caroline about him.

“Yeah,” he smiled at her. “She’s five. It’s a pretty big age difference—she’s from my mom’s second marriage. But I always wanted a sibling and she’s the coolest five year old on the planet. What about you?”

“I have an older brother at State. He’s barely tolerable.”

They talked awhile longer about their families and then Liam said, “When we get back, do you maybe want to get together sometime?”

“Yeah,” Ingrid said. “I’d love to.”

They lapsed into silence. Liam’s eyelids drooped and his body tilted toward hers. The entire bus had lulled into a sleepy coma after the strenuous weekend and the only noise was the clumsy drone of the engine and the whir of air outside the windows. It was warm and comfortable and Liam drifted off to sleep next to her, his head nuzzling into the soft place between her neck and shoulder. Ingrid didn’t sleep. Even if she’d skied all weekend, she still wouldn’t have been tired, not with Liam where she felt he belonged. He slept the rest of the way like that, curled against her, she wasn’t sure how many hours. It passed too quickly, full as she was of his warmth and the smell of him,

and the quiet sound of his breathing against her heart that betrayed her with each of its peaceful beats, echoing the abiding movement of time.

When they arrived back in town there was confusion with goodbyes to friends and greetings to parents. Briefly, his hand was on the small of her back, their fingers touched and then she was in her mother's dented Chevy coupe.

"How was it?" her mother asked, expectantly.

"Great," Ingrid said, too full of the experience to say any more.

Disappointed, her mother pressed her for details but Ingrid found she couldn't talk about it. She wanted to keep it safe inside her. It was real as long as she didn't talk about it.

That week at school, Ingrid kept expecting Liam to approach her at any moment and ask her out but he never did. She tried to talk to him a few times but he always had to rush off somewhere else. Every day, her joy at her discovery of him ebbed. She began to suspect that he was avoiding her, that he didn't feel the same way about her that she felt about him.

One day after school, she saw Liam walking on his own to the parking lot and she managed to catch up to him before he got to his car, an old VW Bug that must have been lime green once.

"Hey, Liam," she said.

"Hi." He didn't seem happy to see her. "Um, how've you been?" she faltered and nearly lost her nerve.

"Fine. You?"

“Good. Well, I guess I was wondering if you were going to the Valentine’s dance. I’m going and maybe I’ll see you there—”

“We’re moving,” he interrupted her, looking away.

“What?”

“We’re moving to Chicago for my fucking step dad’s job.”

“Oh.” This was the last thing Ingrid expected. She had prepared for rejection and knew she had to go through with confronting Liam anyway for the sake of her sanity, but she never imagined that he would vanish from her life altogether. It was she who would some day move to a city, not Liam. He couldn’t go to Chicago and leave her behind in Laurel.

“When?” She choked on the word.

“After school’s out.”

“But that’s months away. We could still—”

“I wish I’d met you sooner,” he interrupted her again, “but I guess that would have just made it harder. I wish I wasn’t moving. Goddammit.” He got into his car and drove off. Those were the last words he ever spoke to her.

It was her mother’s birthday, and that night Ingrid cooked dinner for her parents. She had to pause while she was mashing the potatoes and again after she put the chicken into the oven to soak up her tears with a damp, smelly dishtowel. Ingrid had used her babysitting money to buy her mother a rhinestone pin in the shape of a hummingbird. “It’s beautiful,” her mother cooed and fastened it immediately to her blouse. She opened the present from Ingrid’s father, as he sat in his armchair, the fabric along the bottom chewed by Dolittle when he was a puppy. He glanced away from the

TV as her mother pulled the Victoria's Secret nightgown out of the pink box, his t-shirt running up over his paunch.

"This isn't going to make me look like Heidi Klum, you know," her mother said.

"You look better than she does," he replied.

"Uh huh. Yeah. Thanks for my gifts you two. This was a great birthday."

After she served the cake, Ingrid excused herself and went to her room. A little while later, there was a knock on her door and her mom peeked her head in.

"Everything alright?"

"Yeah," Ingrid said, but the tears spilled down her face in spite of the lie.

Her mother sat on the end of her bed. "What is it?"

Ingrid sniffled loudly. "It's nothing. Just a boy."

"Is he the reason you wanted to go on that ski trip so bad?"

Ingrid sucked in a big gulp of air to protest, and then let it all out again. "Yeah."

Her mother smiled sadly. "I thought so."

"The skiing part was awful. But then I got to talk to him and it seemed like he felt the same way but now he's moving to Chicago."

"I'm sorry, honey."

"Would it sound stupid if I said I loved him?" All along, Ingrid had been afraid to say the words out loud, as though what he meant to her would evaporate with exposure.

"Ingrid, I know it seems like real love to you and it is in a way. But after awhile, you get over these things. In a year, you won't even remember this boy's name or what he looks like. I know it's hard right now, but you have to trust me on this."

"You're wrong," Ingrid said.

Her mother only patted her cheek and closed the door behind her on the way out. For awhile, Ingrid thought that she would apply to colleges in Chicago, that she would find him and they would pick up where they left off. But it was a private school on the East Coast that offered her a full scholarship and she couldn't turn it down. Sometime during college, between papers and dates, waitressing at the local diner, she did forget about him. She couldn't say exactly when it happened. After she graduated, she moved to DC and became an actuary. It was after she was married and had a baby that she remembered Liam again, the moment they collided, and the six hours on the ride back from Deer Mountain.

Her husband was a good man and she thought that at the beginning it must have been like it was with Liam, but she could no longer remember. It was all muddled by fights and diapers and bills. Those few moments with Liam were still perfectly clear, as clear as the air on the mountain that day when all she had wished for in life was to be able to ski a black diamond.

She had in fact become quite a good skier over the years. She could look back now and realize that her mother had been wrong. She had loved Liam. As she held her baby in the same place where Laim's head had rested years ago, smelled the milk and babypowder smell of her skin, felt her heart beating, fast and fragile, when she thought of her husband and the life they built daily, brick by careful brick, she could not regret that that other life had not come to pass. And yet, there were those moments, like when she flew down a black diamond, no longer afraid, but free, with the clean, cold air in her lungs, the mountains spread at her feet and the old twinge in her knee, she couldn't help but pull out Liam's image. It was as hard, cold and unchanging as the mountain.

But even now, she could still feel his body against hers, for that split second, the warmth of his soft thighs against her own.

The All-Natural Animal Suppressant

A great purple-black mushroom cloud had exploded under her skin from the edge of her shoulder blade all the way down to her tailbone. Her wrist hurt like hell, too, but it wasn't broken, it was just a sprain. Technically, it wasn't Stuart's fault. It wasn't as though he had pushed her down the stairs. No, that stepping back into nothingness, and the wrenching realization that her feet were not going to find any solid purchase, had been an unfortunate accident.

There was perhaps a split second during the fall when she had drifted, pendulous, like a leaf, or a tuft of dandelion seeds. She had had plenty of time to think, but not enough time to be afraid. She marveled at the capacity of her brain to rummage through images and memories with a speed and clarity it had never possessed before, making unfamiliar connections and offering up shimmering little epiphanies. This is what it is to understand the idea of infinity, she thought. Immediately after that came the horrifying certainty that she'd made a terrible mistake. Then, before she was ready for it, her back whammed against the stairs with a seismic shifting of bones, akin to the nauseating effect produced by nails on a chalkboard. Her chest contracted from the force of the impact and all of the air sucked out of her lungs in one powerful oof. For several panicked seconds, she asphyxiated silently before they reinflated, and she was able to gobble great miraculous breaths of air and cry confused, indignant tears.

On the way to the emergency room, Stuart was completely out of sorts. His hands shook as he gripped the steering wheel. He shouted at red lights and honked at cars going the speed limit. He kept telling her how awful he felt about the whole thing, his eyes wet and bloodshot, and she felt sorrier for him than she did for herself.

When a nurse asked Stuart to step outside the room where Annabelle was being examined, under the pretext of filling out some insurance paperwork, she knew what was coming and coached her face into some semblance of innocence. She was innocent and so was Stuart. So why was a sliver of guilt nibbling away at her insides like a slimy, little goldfish?

“So how was it you sustained your injuries, Mrs. Bloom?” the doctor asked her when it was just the two of them.

Annabelle winced under the pressure of his cold, imperious fingers as they explored the nooks and crannies of her spinal cord. “I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going and fell down the stairs,” she explained for what must have been the third or fourth time. The story did sound improbable, she knew, but it was true, though she was wisely leaving out the part about the nasty fight, and the fact that her husband had sprouted fur and hooves right before her eyes, changing into what could only be described as a furiously stamping, snorting bull.

These were things a wife kept to herself.

It was after three a.m. when they finally got home. Exhausted and full of drugs, Annabelle fell asleep immediately. Stuart called in sick for the both of them and when she woke up later that morning, he made her favorite breakfast, grilled cheese with egg, bacon, and tomato. When she finished eating, he crawled into bed with her, slipping into the form of a golden retriever, which nuzzled against her belly. It stared up at her with Stuart’s green, repentant eyes, wordlessly questioning whether she had stopped loving him. She knew she hadn’t. That wasn’t possible.

Annabelle wondered though, if she had known what Stuart was, would she still have married him? She didn't think so. But it was too late now; the deed was done. She sighed and rubbed the velvety fur behind Stuart's ears with her good hand. His eyelids fluttered, exposing that alien extra white lid dogs had underneath, and he began to snore, but the throbbing in her wrist and back, and a persistent ache in some other less discernable place, kept her awake a long time.

Everything had happened quickly between them, too quickly when she really thought about it, and there was a time before the wedding when she had had her doubts about marrying Stuart. She and her mother were sipping coffee in the late morning shade of the back porch one weekend when her parents were visiting from back east. Stuart had taken her father to play golf at his country club. The leaves hadn't changed yet, and there was a feeling of stillness, of things poised on the brink; the air smelled overwhelmingly of mud and wet bark.

The sun was hot where scattered fiery pools managed to slip beneath the eaves. Annabelle reclined lazily on the cushioned loveseat, her bare feet tucked under her, and a coffee mug balanced precariously on her knee while her mother perched more stiffly at a diminutive wrought iron table, staring absently in the direction of the creek, gorged and noisy with the recent rain.

"What do you think?" Annabelle asked. It wasn't necessary to clarify. They had always known each other's minds.

Her mother seemed reluctant to come back from whatever place she had been. She was somehow smaller and more fragile lately, and Annabelle worried about her.

“Doesn’t matter what I think,” she said, and looked questioningly at Annabelle with the same striking gray eyes, the luminous color of chickadee feathers. “Do you love him?”

“Yes. Dearly.”

“Then you don’t have anything to worry about.” When Annabelle didn’t respond, only lightly rubbed the rim of her coffee cup as though she could make it sing like a champagne glass, her mother added, “He’s not like your father.”

“You’re right. He’s nothing like Dad. No offense.”

“None taken. I wish I’d married someone more like Stuart.”

“You love Dad,” Annabelle said. “You always have.”

“I know. But I love you and your sister more.”

“No you don’t,” Annabelle said, recalling the terrible year her parents had left them with Grammy and Pops and disappeared.

“I do Annabelle. I really do. I would do anything for you and Meg. You have to know that.”

Annabelle had cried every single night her mother was away, imagining in her childish mind all of the ways in which her mother could be hurt or dying, calling out to Annabelle who could not hear her, could not reach her, wondering what she had done to make her mother leave. She wasn’t capable of understanding that it had to do with the teeth marks on the back of her neck.

Her mother seemed to sense what Annabelle was thinking and didn’t press her point further. Instead, she said, “You and Stuart are going to be really happy.” It was a kind, motherly lie. Nothing she said would have changed Annabelle’s mind anyway.

She must have slept. When she woke later that afternoon, sourceless light slatted in through the open shutters, ribbing the far wall of their bedroom with brilliant, white thorns. Stuart, she noticed, was human again, and had drifted to the other side of the bed, on his back now, one arm slung protectively over his forehead. But for the fleecy yellow clumps of fur stuck to the sheets and her skin, moist with sleep, there was no sign he had ever been a dog.

Annabelle got up and showered. The warm water felt good on her sore body. Stuart came in while she was toweling off, vigorously rubbing his eyes with his knuckles. She felt suddenly exposed and quickly slipped on a robe as he undressed and turned the water on. A chill grazed the hairs on the back of her neck making her shiver.

He sighed and sat down on the edge of the bathtub, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. His hair was sticking straight up in waxy, dawn-colored clumps. She wanted to touch it, but she couldn't move from where she stood leaning against the sink, clutching her robe tightly closed.

"Can we talk?" he asked, his voice muffled by the fleshy cavern of his arms and knees.

"Yeah," she said, hoping he wouldn't hear the tremor in her voice.

"I know I can't do that," he said.

She didn't speak. She felt frozen, as if she were someone else, watching other people suffer. She couldn't feel anything except the cold pebbles that prickled at the back of her throat.

"It won't happen again."

"It can't happen again." The force of her own voice surprised her.

“I know.”

It didn't for a while and Annabelle quite forgot about her predicament till one Saturday morning when they were cleaning out the garage. Stuart was lifting boxes off of the shelves and Annabelle was going through them making assorted piles for Good Will, the garbage, and putting what was left into some kind of order.

“This one can go back up now,” Annabelle said, wiping her hair off of her sweaty forehead. She was squatting on the cement floor. “It's all the Halloween decorations.”

“We have Halloween decorations?”

“Yes, we have Halloween decorations. Could you hand me that other one by the leaf blower? I think it's a mixture of the garden tools we never use, old towels, and thousands of extension cords.”

Stuart gave her the box and started gathering up one of the piles into a trash bag.

“Wait! That's my keep pile. The trash pile is that other one.”

“You're throwing out my mother's trunk?”

“The wood is disintegrating. Look.” Annabelle pointed to the once-sharp corners, now worn down to flaking nubs. The nails that were left were wiggling loose from the joints. “Besides, we don't have space for it.”

“Fine. Throw it away.” Stuart sighed.

“You're mad. If you want to keep the trunk, keep it. We'll find a place for it.”

“It's fine.” Stuart heaved it up into the back of their SUV.

Annabelle, feeling suddenly awful about having her way, tried to change the subject. "Where did all this stuff even come from?" she asked, rhetorically. "It seems like someone else cleaned out their garage and threw it all in here."

Stuart nudged a dead cockroach from a pile of dust and web filaments and papery shreds of leaves with the toe of his shoe. "I can't believe you won't let me keep my mother's trunk. Her father made it for her when she was young. She wanted us to have it." He was looking at her, but it was as though he was speaking to someone else, someone he didn't like very much. "You're really selfish, you know that?" He narrowed his eyes and jutted out his chin, daring her to challenge him. She had never noticed how large his forehead was until that moment; it was pink and glistening with his exertion. She thought of the crabs she used to capture in her pail during summers spent on the Atlantic that advanced sideways and snapped their claws at anything within reach.

Annabelle opened her mouth to speak and then thought better of it. She stood up slowly. "I think I need to be alone," she said and walked into the house.

"Well, that's just great!" he shouted. "What am I supposed to do with all this shit?" he waved his hand in the direction of the boxes and piles of debris littering the floor of the garage.

"You figure it out. I thought I told you to leave me alone," she said as he followed on her heels.

"This is my house."

"*Our* house," she corrected him.

"Oh really? Is your name on the title? Do you pay the mortgage?" Spit flew out of his mouth.

“How dare you.” She walked calmly into their bedroom and locked the door behind her. She pulled out her suitcase from under their bed and began shoving clothes into it.

“What are you doing?” he shook the doorknob.

“Packing.”

“If you leave, don’t ever come back.”

“That’s sort of the whole point of leaving.”

He started banging on the door. “Open the door! You can’t lock me out of my own bedroom in my own fucking house!” His voice changed, deepening into a throaty growl. The sharp pounding on the door became a heavy thudding, accompanied by the scraping of hard nails.

“Stop it!” Annabelle screamed. “You’re scaring me! Just leave me alone!”

“Open the fucking door.” He panted in between in each word as though it were costing him a lot of effort to speak.

“No,” she said. “I don’t know what you are. Not until you calm down.”

There was a harsh ripping sound and the wooden door imploded.

Annabelle screamed and things moved quickly then. Her instincts took over and she crumpled into a ball in the corner of the room her arms over her head, as though she were back in elementary school during a bomb drill. She shuddered with silent sobs, snot dripping from her nose onto the floor. All she could think was it’s just like before. It’s just like before. The old scars on the inside of her arms stung as though sounding an alarm. Stuart had asked about them the first time he saw her naked. Long

thin white scars. Five of them on each arm. Like something sharpening its claws on tree bark. He said she would never have to go through that again.

She heard his heavy breath, low to the ground, as he padded towards her on four legs. He approached her slowly and sniffed the top of her head. His breath was hot and damp and ruffled her hair. He licked her shoulder and she whimpered. After a minute, he left. She heard the echo of the stairs beneath his oddly altered gait, his stomping and smashing around upstairs, and then the sound of the television in the media room.

Slowly, she let out her breath. Her stomach unclenched. She unfolded herself and got up tentatively, afraid to make any noise. She continued packing as silently and quickly as she could. If Stuart heard her, he made no acknowledgement.

Annabelle ended up in a cheap hotel across town with stained carpets and flickering fluorescent lights. A wall of cold, mildewy air slammed into her as she opened the door to her room and she didn't bother undressing before she got underneath the stiff, heavy sheets. She would be an idiot not to leave him after this, she knew, but it felt as though someone's cold, icy fist was squeezing her heart.

In the morning when she checked her cell phone, there were three messages from Stuart, each more desperate and stricken than the last, and several more missed calls.

"I'll do whatever you want," he said. "I know I can control myself. It will never, ever happen again."

The truth was, she did not want to be without him. Her condition for going home, aside from the obvious, was that they seek professional help.

Therapy did not go well. It only made Stuart angrier with her. The first therapist was a thin, blond woman in her forties who blushed and played with her hair and seemed to have a crush on him. She didn't believe that Stuart was a carrier of a dwindling and undesirable genetic quirk left over from the Stone Age, thought to be a defensive mutation like saber teeth or a spiky tail, and implied that it was all in Annabelle's head, that the year she had spent away from her parents had damaged her, and skewed her perception of Stuart. This was no doubt true, Annabelle explained patiently, but Stuart was indeed a vestigial shifter. Aren't you? she asked him point blank in their third session. Yes, Stuart agreed. And so ended the crush—and their sessions. The second therapist suggested Annabelle try to avoid making Stuart angry, and so perhaps keep him from shifting as often. He also gave Annabelle a book called *Vestigial Shifting and Genetic Discrimination: A Handbook for Modern Day Shifters and Their Families*. Annabelle was pretty sure the therapist was a shifter, himself. The third therapist they saw was a nice, elderly gentleman and wanted to work with Stuart on his own, to try to discover the connection between his emotions and the shifting, but by that time, Stuart had lost interest in therapy.

After the third therapist failed to help them, Stuart was shifting more and more frequently. Annabelle found herself living in fear of his moods, which ultimately predicted the shifts. She was careful of what she said and did around him for fear of setting him off, but the more careful she was, the more he shifted.

"I think I made a horrible mistake," she said to her mother on the phone one day. "I don't know how, but things have gotten so bad. I'm miserable."

"What do you mean?"

“Stuart is a shifter.”

“Stuart? Oh, honey. I didn’t know that. I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry.”

“I’ve tried everything. We’ve tried everything. Nothing is doing any good. I don’t know what to do.”

“Have you tried picking your battles? When your father’s in a bad mood, and I can tell when he’s getting ready to change, I leave the house and do something on my own.”

“That sounds so depressing, Mom. I’m so depressed and exhausted all the time. I’m not sleeping. It’s affecting my work. I don’t call my friends anymore because I’m sick of pretending that everything is perfect.” I don’t want to end up like you, Annabelle wanted to say, but held back.

“I’m sorry, honey. I don’t know what to tell you. This might sound harsh but you either need to accept him the way he is, or go.”

“I can’t. I’m not sure if I can do either.” Annabelle heard the garage door opening and felt her heart thudding violently in response. “Mom, I have to go. Stuart just got home.”

That night, Stuart wanted to have sex and Annabelle did not. She was hardly ever attracted to him any more and she made an excuse.

“We never have sex,” he complained and even though it was dark, she could tell that he was shifting. “Don’t you want me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m just tired right now. I don’t feel well.”

He rolled over onto her and his skin was cold and slippery. His mouth thinned out and lengthened absurdly while his cheeks puffed out. He resembled some slimy

amphibian thing found in the scummy shoals of a marsh. "Please," he croaked, "just let me stick it in you for a second. I'll be quick, I promise."

"I don't want to," she said. "Maybe tomorrow."

But he held her down and spread her legs anyway.

Annabelle refused to believe that anything really terrible had happened. Stuart had not hit her or left any bruises that she could see. If she thought about it too much than she couldn't get up in the morning and brush her teeth and take out the garbage and go to work and come home and pay the bills and see Stuart. She also refused to listen to her mother's advice. Instead, she researched. She took an internet quiz called, "Are you walking on eggshells in your relationship with a shifter?" She read what Dr. Phil had to say about shifting on his website. She bought a few books, *Inside the Minds of Shifters: What Makes Them Tick?*, *How to Love a Shifter Without Getting Hurt*, and *Love Without Shifting*. The books didn't tell her anything she hadn't already experienced firsthand. Stuart was, in fact, a shifter, and furthermore, he was always going to be a shifter. It felt as though she were reading about the progression of her relationship from an outsider's perspective. It described the humiliation, the isolation she felt, in ways that made her feel sick to her stomach. Still, she could not leave Stuart, and she didn't know why. Neither did the experts.

Since she could not leave him, she would force him to stop shifting.

Annabelle didn't expect the pills to actually work. At this point, she knew she was grasping at straws. She couldn't sleep at night and when she did, she had terrible nightmares in which Stuart did horrible things to her, or had affairs with other women

who enjoyed having sex with him in his animal form. She took to watching late night television as he snored obliviously in bed next to her. That was when she saw the commercial for Ani-rase, the “All-natural animal suppressant!”. She watched as actors playing husbands and wives with big human, toothy grins, gave their testimonials about the drug’s power to stop shifting “in it’s tracks!”. She knew it was likely bogus, a way to part desperate losers from their money, but she was willing to try anything.

The day the Ani-rase came in the mail, Annabelle and Stuart had dinner plans with his parents.

During the meal, Annabelle felt trapped inside herself, as though she were looking up at everyone from a deep declivity in the rubble that was all that was left of her life. She wanted to claw her way out, jump up and scream, do something, anything, anything but sit at the table smiling and nodding on cue like a pathetic kewpie doll. She was so obviously distressed she wondered that Stuart and his parents could appear so blithe and nonchalant, so blissfully unaware of how unhappy she was.

“No, that’s not where the wine was from, Mathilda,” Stuart’s father, Gene, was saying. “If you don’t know what you’re talking about, than maybe you shouldn’t open your mouth.”

“Gene, I clearly remember the waiter saying—”

Yellow and black feathers sprouted from Gene’s sparsely-haired scalp, giving him the illusion of a festively colored Mowhawk. His nose and mouth converged and elongated into a keritinous, sword-like beak. “I kept the cork Mathilda. It was *not* from Sonoma. It was from the Russian River Valley. What does the waiter know? That’s why

he waits tables.” Gene pecked at Mathilda’s neck between words for emphasis, leaving coruscated, red welts on her skin.

She pretended not to notice. “The Russian River Valley is *in* Sonoma, Gene.”

“Dad,” Stuart said. “Can you keep your voice down? I don’t want the waiter to spit in our food.”

Gene shuddered and the feathers and beak disappeared.

“Excuse me,” Annabelle said, and got up to go to the bathroom. In the stall, she couldn’t hold it in any longer and sobbed with abandon, screaming silently into a wad of toilet paper. Stuart had deliberately kept from her the fact that he was a shifter. If she stayed with him, in thirty years she would be Mathilda, trying to eat dinner in a restaurant as her bird-husband pecked openly at her. She couldn’t take it any more. She would not stand for it.

She was in the bathroom for at least twenty minutes before she could get herself under control. When she finally returned to the table, no one remarked on her absence. It felt as though nothing she did mattered. She didn’t matter.

In the car on the way home, Stuart asked, “Are you okay? You were in the bathroom a long time.”

“Fine. I wasn’t feeling well.”

Stuart didn’t reply.

“It didn’t seem like I was missed anyway.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t think anyone noticed I was gone.”

“We noticed.”

“Well, no one said anything.”

“We were just trying to be polite. I’m sure my parents thought you had some embarrassing stomach issues or something.”

“Hmm-hmm. Whatever.”

“Well, what did you want us to say? ‘So Annabelle, how did your crap go?’ Sometimes I think you *want* to be miserable.”

“That’s a mean thing to say.”

“I’m tired of fighting. I just don’t want to fight anymore. Can we please salvage whatever’s left of the evening?”

“Fine.” They drove in silence for several minutes until Stuart flipped on the radio to an eighties hair-band station he knew she didn’t like.

“I can’t believe your father shifted right there at the table in a restaurant.”

Stuart didn’t respond. Warily, Annabelle watched his silvery profile, embossed coin-like against the moon outside the car window, and for the first time wondered what her life would be like if she had never met him.

At home, Annabelle braced herself for the battle she knew was coming. “I got this stuff in the mail today. Maybe it will help,” she said, and set the little cardboard box on the nightstand next to him as he lay in bed watching a taped basketball game.

“What is it?” Stuart asked without looking away from the screen. “Another book?” He sounded skeptical.

“No, it’s that Ani-rase stuff. Have you seen the commercial for it? They’re pills that are supposed to make you stop shifting.”

“That doesn’t work, Annabelle. There is no treatment for vestigial shifting. It’s in my DNA. Besides, I can control it myself.”

“Really? It doesn’t seem like it. It’s not getting any better, Stuart. It’s getting worse. I don’t want to leave you but you’re going to force me to if you don’t stop.”

“Oh, so now you’re bringing up leaving again? I thought we’d moved past that. You have to give me a chance, Annabelle. You won’t even give me a chance. If you’re not going to trust me, you might as well just leave right now.”

“Are you serious? It’s the middle of the night.”

“If you’re going to leave me anyway now seems like as good a time as any. What are you waiting for?”

Annabelle got up. “You know what, I *should* go. I should have gone a long time ago.”

He sat up, “Well, why haven’t you then? I know you’ve wanted to.”

“Why do you think?” she screamed, tears streaming down her face. “Because I *love* you! Why else would I be trying so hard in this shitty marriage?”

“Well, why do you love me? If I’m so awful? It doesn’t seem like there’s anything about me to love.”

She sat down on the bed. “I don’t know. I just do.”

“You know, I get tired of being the one in the wrong all the time. You’re not any better. You need to take a long, hard look in the mirror.”

Annabelle put her head in her hands. “What do you want from me? I’ve tried everything.”

“Just go look in the mirror.”

“What? Why do you keep saying that? What does that mean?”

“Look in the mirror, Annabelle. Literally. You shift, too. Not like me, not all the way. But you do it—when you get really upset. Go look at yourself.”

“What? You’re lying.”

“If you think I’m a liar, then you *should* leave.”

“Well, you didn’t tell me that you were a shifter to begin with. So how are you not a liar?”

“Annabelle, I thought you *knew*. Because *you’re* one and your Dad’s one. I didn’t think you would judge me the way other people do. I thought we were on the same page.”

Annabelle laughed nervously. “You’re crazy. And you’re trying to drive me crazy with you. I’m not going to let you do it.”

He spread his hands. “Prove me wrong. Go look.”

Annabelle got up and looked in the mirror and screamed. She had never seen anything so ugly as her own reflection. Her hair and ears had simply vanished and her face was covered in filmy, diamond-patterned scales.

“You did this to me,” Annabelle spat at Stuart. She could see the pink forked ribbon of her tongue. “That’s it! You’re right! How could I possibly still love you?”

Annabelle grabbed her purse and her keys.

“So that’s it then?” Stuart asked. “Well, I guess it’s been coming to this for awhile. I’ll have our lawyer start working on a separation agreement tomorrow.”

Annabelle screamed in frustration and turned on him. Her face and neck got hot and she felt dizzy as though she were riding a roller coaster even though she was standing very still. At least she thought she was but her head seemed to be getting closer to the ground. Her blood buzzed and bubbled through her veins, not unpleasantly, and it felt as though something in her that had been pent up for quite awhile had suddenly been released. It felt good and terrible at the same time, like a razor blade laced with heroin slicing through her brain.

She pulled up to her full height, which was suddenly very high, and looked down at Stuart. His face was very white and his eyes were wide. She could smell the fear escaping from his pores in sour waves. She wondered vaguely if that was how she appeared to him when he changed. In that moment, she hated him and she hated herself with an intensity that her animal brain did not question. Her body reacted instinctively and without thought. She lunged at him and tasted something warm, sticky, and very good in her mouth. He struggled beneath her constricting weight like a wriggling fish that she couldn't quite keep her grip on and seemed to grow and lengthen until she could no longer hold on. A jagged pain glanced her temple and then she felt nothing.

When Annabelle woke up, she wasn't sure where she was. She was lying on a thin, hard mattress draped in cool, white sheets. There were various tubes and wires connecting her to machines that thrummed and beeped rhythmically. When she tried to sit up and couldn't, she began to panic.

"Shh. Don't try to move," Stuart said.

Annabelle saw him in a vomit-colored plastic chair in the corner. He looked as though he had just woken up.

“What happened?” she asked. Her throat felt dry and uncooperative. The words came out in a whisper.

“You’re hurt pretty bad.”

The memory of their fight came flooding back. She had tried to kill Stuart. She didn’t realize it as she was doing it, but she knew it now.

“I—I think I tried to kill you.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. You didn’t, obviously. You’re the one in the hospital bed.”

“Did I hurt you?”

He rolled up his sleeves. Both of his forearms were clumsily bandaged with washcloths and duct tape.

“I’m so sorry.” Annabelle emitted a hoarse sob, which ended in a scorching cough.

“Don’t be,” he said. “I deserved it. And I’m the one who’s sorry. You have two broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a broken foot.”

“That sounds pretty bad when you say it like that, doesn’t it?”

“It is bad. That’s why we can’t stay together anymore. We can’t do this. I don’t want to hurt you anymore. I don’t want to be hurt anymore.”

“Don’t say that,” Annabelle said.

“I thought you wanted a divorce.”

“I don’t. Please don’t leave me.” The day her mother left, she and Meg had stood out on the curb, as her mother counted her suitcases and checked the contents of her purse. The sun was a bright orb high in the sky and everything was wrapped in a halo of filmy light. Her mother fished her sunglasses out of her purse and put them on. Their father was already in the driver’s seat and the car was running. It was cold and she and Meg didn’t have their jackets on. “You girls behave yourselves,” her mother had said as Annabelle covered her eyes with her hand and squinted up at her.

“But it’s clearly not working,” Stuart said. “What are we going to do? We’re going to end up killing each other.”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. Please just don’t leave me.”

Annabelle asked her mother, “When will you be back?”

“It won’t be long. Just a few weeks. Your dad and I need to figure some things out and then we’ll be back to get you.” She thought if she could hold onto her mother long enough, she would not be able to leave. After a few minutes, her mother gently pried Annabelle’s arms from around her waist. Meg was crying silently, her thumb in her mouth.

There was a gentle knock on the door and a nurse in neon pink scrubs with an elaborately tattooed neck came in.

“Oh, hi there,” she said to Annabelle. “You’re awake. How are you feeling?” She took Annabelle’s pulse and looked at her pupils with a penlight.

“I’ve been better,” Annabelle said.

“I bet. I’ll send the doctor in to talk to you.”

The nurse gave Stuart a dirty look before she closed the door behind her.

The doctor came in a few minutes later. A security guard and a woman in a gray silk suit whose thighs looked as though they were pooling above her knees came in with him. The doctor pulled up a chair next to Annabelle's bed and crossed his legs. "Hi Annabelle, how are you doing?" he asked in the excessively mild tones of an adult speaking to a child. "I'm Dr. Raeford."

"I'm okay," she said.

"I'm glad to see you're awake now. Well, the bad news is that you have a concussion and some broken bones—two of your ribs and several small fractures in one of the metatarsals of your left foot. Your right lung was also punctured when your ribs were broken. The good news is that we've patched you up and you're going to be fine." The doctor paused and looked down before going on as though searching for the right words. "From looking at your records, I see this hasn't been the first time you've been in here to see us. You came to the ER a year ago with a wrist sprain and a back injury? Is that right?"

"Yes," Annabelle said. She looked at Stuart. His face was unreadable.

"And what happened?"

"I fell down the stairs," Annabelle said.

"Were you by yourself or was someone else with you?" the doctor asked.

"I was by myself," she said. "I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

"I see. Do you remember what happened last night? Do you remember how you were injured?"

Annabelle looked at Stuart. "No," she said in a small voice. He came and stood beside her and put his hand on hers.

“Were you with her when she was injured, Mr. Bloom?” the woman in the suit spoke up. She had a smoker’s voice.

“Yes, I was,” he said.

“Can you please tell us what happened?”

“I already told them in the ER,” Stuart’s voice was eerily calm. “We were riding our bikes and some crazy—probably drunk—driver nearly hit her. She swerved to avoid him and ran into a tree.”

“In her bathrobe? At eleven o’clock at night?” the woman said.

“Make them leave,” Annabelle said to Stuart. “Get out,” she said to the woman, as loud as she was able.

“You heard her,” Stuart said. “She needs to rest now.”

Forgotten Young

It happened the day Becky's father left. The watery vagueness she noticed around the edges of her reflection, as though all of the hair on her body were charged with static electricity, her blond hair floating in a corona around her face that she couldn't tame with a severe brushing and an entire can of Suave mousse.

The murmuring of her parents' voices downstairs had woken her that morning when the light outside of the window was still a dim orange ribbon threaded with frost along the bottom edge of the windowpane. She hadn't wanted to get out of bed. The radiator in her room was broken and she dreaded the shock of emerging from the blissful pocket of warm air trapped beneath her blankets. The cast-iron monstrosity next to her bed was merely a prop now for holding books and a scraggly potted ivy. She missed the hissing and clanking sound the radiator made as hot steam offended cold metal; it was much harder to fall asleep without it.

Mornings had traditionally been a time when the three of them could be together. Her mom usually made cream of wheat, stirring in spoonfuls of brown sugar and raisins, and they sat together at the table while they ate, her parents trading sections of the newspaper and Becky finishing up her homework. The table was plain and unfinished, built of a soft, knotty pine that recorded all of the marks and indentations of their daily life, sanded down over time by palms and elbows. The two side-leaves they kept folded down to make more room in the cramped kitchen, and lately, Becky's knees had begun to bump against them whenever she crossed her legs. There wasn't much talking, but it was a nice way to start the day, with all of them in one room. It was the only time during the week when they were all in the same room. Most nights Becky fell asleep before her

parents got home, or on the rare occasions they made it home early they fell into an exhausted sleep in their separate favorite chairs in the den, snoring, lightly in her mother's case, loudly in her father's, the news on or an open book splayed across their chests. Becky wondered if either of them had ever actually finished a book, or if they only used them as a security blanket while they slept.

Even though she couldn't hear what they were saying, she could tell they were fighting by the irregular cadence of their mumbling, the long caesuras in which one or the other must have inserted a sigh, and the frequent crescendos in which a voice was raised and then quickly lowered so that she could catch snatches of words but not enough to stitch together their meaning. ...*no more* (her dad) ...*alone* (her mom) ...*unforgiveable* (her dad) ... *so damn tired* (her mom) She listened as hard as she could as though by listening, she could hold things together, as though if she stopped hearing them, her parents might disappear.

For the past few months, mornings had been this way. Silences at the table were no longer pleasant and comfortable and sometimes her mother was gone before Becky even came down. On those days she didn't see her mother at all. Her father would offer to fry her up eggs and bacon as though all were right with the world but Becky felt her mother's absence as a lump growing bigger and bigger in her stomach, making the sight and smell of food repulsive to her.

When she heard the front door slam, Becky got up, pulled a sweater on over her t-shirt and crept downstairs. Her mother was already dressed in her crisp, white uniform, a nametag pinned over the place where Becky imagined her heart was beating as quickly and nervously as a bird's though outwardly she appeared calm. She sat at the

table reading the newspaper, upright and rigidly still, a coffee mug with bright red lipstick on the rim at her elbow, as though she had carefully staged herself for a heroic display of calm and it would only take a word or two to bring the façade down around her ears. She didn't look up when Becky came into the room. The front door opened and her father bent down to grab a box that was sitting on the floor. In it, Becky could see a pile of unfolded clothes, a can of shaving cream, and a bag of razors lying on top. He glanced at her and then his eyes twitched away again almost immediately. He didn't smile or say, "Morning, Sunshine," the way he sometimes did, which she pretended to hate. Instead, the muscles around his mouth were tense, giving him the suggestion of a befuddled, zombie-like grimace.

"Where are you going?"

"To Gram and Gramps for a bit."

"Why?"

"You'd better ask your Mom that."

"You tell me."

Her dad looked at the ceiling fan for guidance and ran his fingers through his wavy blond hair, the same color and texture as her own. Becky noticed he needed a haircut; his bangs kept tumbling over his wayward eyes.

"Sometimes, when parents fight, they need time apart."

"I'm not five, Dad. You can be more specific than that. Do you need time away from me?"

"No, sweetie. I'm not mad at—I don't want to be away from you."

"Are you coming back?"

“I’ll just be a few miles away. I’m not going anywhere.” He squeezed her shoulder awkwardly. He hadn’t hugged her since puberty. “You’d better get ready for school. You’re going to be late.”

Becky followed him out to his truck, an old, gray Japanese clunker. It was relatively small for a truck. If the truck had feelings, she imagined it would be envious of the newer, gargantuan trucks that took up more than one lane on the highway. She hated those big trucks. Her father tossed the box onto the passenger seat and sat down behind the wheel.

“Please don’t go,” Becky said, tears plowing stinging furrows down her cheeks in the icy wind. She stood blocking the car door so that he couldn’t close it.

He was quiet for a long time, examining a spidery crack that had opened up along the driveway after the last thaw. “Need to fix that” he mumbled to some unknown point above her head, his voice breaking. If it was anything like the radiator in her room, Becky imagined the crack would be left to its own devices inching wider through the seasons until it yawned into a black hole that swallowed their entire house. She realized then that her feet were bare on the frigid ground. She hadn’t noticed them passing from excruciating pain into numbness and hobbled in defeat toward the house on clumsy, cement soles. At some point her father must have driven off because when she shut the door and looked out of the front window, the driveway was empty.

Becky wasn’t prepared for the shrill fury of her own voice, a harsh, deafening register she hadn’t known she possessed until that moment. It was not a nice discovery. “What did you do?!” she screamed. Her throat felt raw and scratchy from the effort, but she didn’t feel any better. Her back was to her mother. She couldn’t bear to look away

from the window and the deserted street, the image of her father fading in her mind like the burning after-image behind her eyelids when she looked too hard at a bright light. She heard the newspaper shudder, so she knew her mother understood what she meant.

Becky turned reluctantly from the window. Her mother stood up, folded the newspaper, and put her coffee mug in the sink. "I'm going to be late for work. You need to get ready for school. We'll talk about this tonight."

"What did you do?" Becky repeated.

"Nothing, honey. Everything's going to be alright," she said, more to herself than Becky. A tear spilled down her placid, niveous cheek, carving a silky line, like the statues of the Madonna that were said to weep mysteriously. Becky had seen a show about it on television; the statues were always in hot, far-off villages draped in dusty garlands of wilting exotic flowers, crowds of sweaty worshippers thronging whatever candle-lit chapel happened to be the site of the miracle. Some scientist or news reporter or Vatican official who rode in on a donkey always proved the weeping was a hoax. Becky wondered what it would be like to believe it was real. Her mother wiped the tear away matter-of-factly. "Married couples have problems sometimes."

"Are you going to work it out?"

Her mother sighed and rubbed her eyes with her palms, smearing her mascara. "I don't know."

Becky's teeth were chattering and she wrapped her arms around herself. "When are you getting home tonight?"

"Nine or ten."

“You have to work late again?”

Her mother didn't meet Becky's eye. “We're still short staffed since Linda had her baby.” She looked at her reflection in the microwave glass and dabbed under her eyes with a tissue.

Becky lingered in the shower until the hot water ran out. It wasn't until after she dried her hair that she noticed the bluishness of her skin that blended chameleon-like into the room the closer she examined it. She blinked her eyes a few times wondering if there was a problem with her vision though she'd never needed glasses. There was something wrong with her hair, too. The strands drifted free from gravity, waving around her head as though she were under water. Becky sighed. It was going to be one of those days. She wished she hadn't gotten out of bed that morning. The odd jellyfish quality of her skin wasn't as noticeable once she was dressed, but there was nothing to be done about her hair which continued to look as if she'd stuck her finger in an electrical socket even after she tried tamping it down with water and mousse. She couldn't go to school like this. She grabbed a nail scissors and cut off her long hair in tiny chunks until she was left with a boyish mess that exploded from her scalp in every direction. It was still an improvement. The violence of the hair cut, seeing the mass of hair flutter to the sink and the floor in fragile shreds, made her feel a little bit better.

The walk to school was windy and cold making her hunch forward until a sharp pain sliced between her shoulder blades. A feathery crust of ice covered everything, the roads, the dead blades of grass and the branches of the few trees. The streets were empty except for the serried rows of identical bungalows. Becky thought they were

much prettier in the winter with icicles hanging from the eaves and snow crusting the roofs than in summer when crowds of dandelions poked their shaggy yellow heads up from the lawns and the windows were coated in a brown film from the wind that blew relentlessly over the plains. She was hurrying because she was late and she slipped on a black patch of ice on the crosswalk in front of Dwight D. Eisenhower High School spilling her books across the narrow, gritty road. She could see a car turning around the bend as she bent to pick up her books. Figuring that it would slow down and wait, she went for the last textbook, which had flown into the lane of oncoming traffic and lay on its spine, opened up to Pythagoras' Theorem. The car kept on coming. Becky scuttled out of the way at the last second, cursing as the vehicle crunched over her book. The driver, a young woman wearing dark sunglasses either hadn't seen her or was a psychopath. Becky gathered the remains of the grimy, broken book and headed into the office where she would have to sign in, since she'd missed homeroom.

Becky stamped the wet off her boots and stood at a counter behind which the secretary sat typing at a desk, the chill clinging to her stubbornly in a thin membrane she could feel in her hair and clothes. Becky watched her bland profile, framed by overprocessed brown hair and waited to be noticed. She couldn't imagine going back to high school voluntarily to work. It took a certain type of person, gifted with a deluded cheerfulness. By the time Becky had warmed, the secretary still had not addressed her.

“Excuse me.”

The secretary continued typing.

“Excuse me, ma'am. I need to be signed in,” she said, more loudly.

The secretary continued typing.

Becky waited.

Becky lost her temper. It had been an awful morning.

“For Pete's sake, could you get off your ass and sign me in?” Becky yelled.

Unbelievably, she continued typing as though Becky were not there. Becky walked behind the counter and stuck her hand in between her face and the computer screen.

The secretary paused, scratched her head, and then continued typing. Becky glanced over at the window, which looked out onto the school parking lot. It reflected the scene of the office back to her: a long fake wood counter, the door to the principal's office, a clock on the wall with a cracked face, the secretary at her desk. Becky was not in the reflection. She ran to the girl's bathroom and looked in the mirror. Nothing but the empty stalls. It was like she didn't exist. She turned the water faucets on and off just to make sure she really was there. She could still see her own hand, bluish and transparent, blurred around the edges but she had no reflection.

Becky had heard of something called hysterical blindness, a condition where a person could temporarily lose their eyesight after a trauma. She had never heard of anything like hysterical invisibility. A bitter smile spread across her face as the possibilities occurred to her. If no one could see her than she didn't need to be in school. Then another thought occurred. She ran out of the bathroom. She ran all the way to Tate's Diner where her father worked as the manager, a mile down the road from the school. She sat down at one of the stools along the counter and watched her father take the drink order of an elderly married couple sitting at the end of the counter. He was wearing a Grateful Dead T-shirt today under an open flannel shirt. There was a

hole beginning to show on one knee of his jeans. She watched him bring them the burgers and French fries he'd cooked at the grill. She watched him bring them a piece of apple pie and a piece of rhubarb pie and the check. She watched them leave and heard him say, "Come again, soon."

"Thanks, Neil, we will," the old man said.

Never once as he passed back and forth in front of her did her father glance her way.

Becky held her breath and tried not to cry.

Her father set a plate with a cheeseburger and french fries in front of her along with a glass of coke.

"Dad, can you see me?!"

It was what he usually did when she came to the diner after school to do homework. He knew what her favorites were, apple pie and cheese danish when they had it, cheeseburgers and once in a while a tuna melt with a tomato on it. He left them at her elbow like offerings, without disturbing her concentration.

Her father shook his head and blinked as if trying to keep himself awake. His eyebrows creased. He took the plate and scraped it into the trash and poured the coke down the sink.

Becky put her head on her arms.

"Dad, I'm right here. You have to see me."

A teenage boy with long black hair swimming around his head like the tentacles of a squid and multiple piercings went behind the counter and opened up the cash register. Her dad didn't appear to notice him, though he stepped around him several

times as he wiped down the counter, and appeared to wait with a check in his hand while the boy helped himself to the cash.

“Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing?” Becky demanded.

The boy glanced at her, annoyed. “What does it matter? We can do what we want. We're not going to get caught.”

“That's my dad. He could get into big trouble.”

“Whatever. They don't care about you, you know. That's why they can't see you anymore. They don't remember you either. It's like you never existed.”

“What is this? Does it ever go away?”

“Nah. Who wants it to? It's great.”

“There are more... of us?”

“Yeah. We meet down by the river at night. At the end of Custer Road follow the path to the north. You should come.”

Becky looked at him disdainfully. “I don't think so.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, shrugging and walked through the middle of the crowded restaurant with a fistful of cash in his hand. He stopped at one of the tables, rummaged through a woman's purse, and retrieved some car keys. He jiggled them at her in a mock wave and left.

Her father opened up the register to make change for a customer and froze. He pulled the drawer out and looked under it then banged the register closed. He took a deep breath and Becky saw the muscles in his jaw clench. He looked around him at the two servers and a busboy who labored busily around him, carrying trays of food and clearing off empty tables, as though speculating which one might be the thief.

“I'm sorry, Dad,” Becky said, though she knew he couldn't hear her. She got up and left, wandering around for awhile until she noticed she was heading in the general direction of home. She had the urge suddenly to get into her bed and hide under the covers, hoping that when she woke up in the morning, today would prove just a horrible, but temporary hallucination.

The rumbling of a car engine drifted closer and she wouldn't have bothered to look except that the car slowed as it neared her. A rusted skeleton of a VW Bug, lime green showing through patches of rust, pulled up to the curb where she stood. The driver reached across the passenger seat and rolled the window down by hand.

“Want a ride?” Paul asked. He was two years ahead of her in school and hung out on the fringe of the popular group. She often saw him smoking with his friends in the baseball dugout nearest the woods as she walked home from school.

“Do you have any idea what's going on?” she asked.

“Get in.”

Becky climbed gratefully into the warm car.

He grinned at her, showing all of his straight, white teeth. It reminded her of a saying her mom had about crocodiles, or was it alligators, smiling with too many teeth. She had never really noticed Paul before. He wasn't handsome. His nose was too large and his mouth was too thin. But there was something pleasant in the way his dusty blue eyes contrasted against his bluish-bronze skin, a color that reminded her of potato peels under water.

It startled her when he reached across her lap to roll the window back up. She tensed as his arm brushed her shoulder. The car smelled overwhelmingly of stale

smoke and the minty air freshener in the shape of a pine tree dangling from the rearview mirror.

“It’s the left up there,” she said, cracking the window a few inches to let in some fresh air.

He put the car in gear with a loud grinding she could feel through the floor under her feet. Several layers of duct tape kept the rearview mirror from falling onto the dashboard.

“I see you walking home every day,” he said, his eyes trained on the road.

This surprised her. As a general rule, she kept to herself and mostly others returned the favor.

“Oh,” was all she said, embarrassed at the thought of being watched when she had been so certain of her invisibility. Then she laughed. She should have been more careful what she wished for.

“What’s so funny?” Paul asked. He had the slight lisp that some children never grew out of. It made him endearing in the way that three-legged dogs are endearing.

“I was just thinking about how absurd this all is. I met this boy today. He said there are others like us. Whatever that means. It was kind of creepy.”

“I saw a kid at the gas station pull beer out of the case and walk out. Nobody did anything.”

“He said it’s permanent. Why do you think this is happening to us?” At the stop sign Paul kept going. “You missed my turn,” she said, pointing over her shoulder, “but you can loop around on Emerson.”

“I want to show you something. It might help explain things.” He continued past Emerson and then out between two threadbare coveys of cypresses marking the entrance to Becky’s neighborhood.

It occurred to Becky that if she disappeared, no one would ever know. She wouldn’t even have the satisfaction of knowing that her parents looked for her and mourned her loss, since they no longer knew she existed. A frisson of fear settled around the base of her spine. They passed the fast food restaurants, a pawn shop and the high school. At the exit for I-70, Paul put his blinker on and merged onto the highway.

“Where are we going?”

“Just up there,” Paul nodded to his right at a long, low structure, built of pink-painted cinderblocks and exited off the highway. He pulled into the parking lot of the Sunset Pines Motel, a seedy place that rented rooms by the hour. Night and day, different cars rotated in and out of the parking lot and Becky knew things happened there she didn’t want to think about.

“We go to the same church. That’s how I recognized her.”

“Who?”

“Your mom.”

“What are you talking about?”

Becky remembered Paul with his parents at St. Patrick’s on Sundays. They always sat in the front row, his father beside him in the pew, his mother in her wheelchair on the aisle, a bright scarf wrapped tightly around her scalp, like the plumage of some frail, exotic bird. She had multiple sclerosis. Paul’s father was a doctor

at the hospital where Becky's mother worked as a nurse's assistant. She complained to Becky about him being "something of a ladies man." On the rare occasions Becky's family made it to church, they were usually late and sat in the back. After church, they used to eat brunch at her dad's restaurant, she and her mother sitting at the counter watching him fry eggs and bacon on the grill, a clean white towel over his shoulder. They hadn't done that in awhile, she realized.

Paul's mouth pressed into a grim line making his thin lips disappear and he pointed to a couple emerging from one of the rooms. It was Paul's dad and one of his arms was wrapped around the woman at his side, his height blocking her from view. When she turned and briefly folded her body against his before they parted, their fingers clasping until the last second, Becky could make out her mother's smooth, russet hair, like blood, or rust, a stark erosion of color against her white skin. From where she sat, Becky couldn't see the dark circles and wrinkles she knew embroidered her mother's pretty face. The movements of her short and slightly plump body were more lithe, the urgency of her embrace and the swift flow of her steps made her seem younger, a stranger.

All she could think was *I thought Mom didn't like him.*

"I'm so sorry, Paul," Becky said. It made sense now. *Unforgiveable*, her father had said that morning. She wondered how he found out. Probably diner gossip. It couldn't have been as horrible as what she was seeing now with her own eyes. Her mother was smiling in a way Becky hadn't seen her smile for some time. She was jealous of that smile.

"Why are *you* sorry? It's my dad who's the asshole."

“Why did you bring me here? I wish you hadn't.”

“I thought you'd want to know.”

“Well, I don't.”

“We could help each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“Get our parents back together. Don't you want that? Maybe then they they'll be able to see us or whatever. Things will go back to the way they were before.”

“Did you ever think that maybe it's better this way? Your dad and my mom. Maybe they deserve each other.”

“What about my mom?”

“Oh, I see.” Becky pictured her sitting next to Paul in church holding his hand in her lap, her shoulders sloping down as though she didn't have the strength to hold herself upright. She remembered noticing Paul's mother by herself in the corners of rooms at school and church gatherings, long peasant skirts billowing over her useless legs, her grateful, kind smile when people did talk to her, her voice so low they had to lean in to hear, Paul's handsome dad, always at the center of a group of admirers, on the opposite side of the room. Laurel didn't boast many doctors. It made her sick to think of it.

“You'll help me?”

“Okay. But what if we're stuck? I suppose you can get used to anything, if you have to.”

“That's depressing.”

“I was going to be the first one in my family to go to college, you know. I was going to get a scholarship.”

“I wasn't sure I wanted to go to college. I think I would have for my parents. Now I guess it doesn't matter. Did that guy say anything else helpful?”

“Not really. Just that they all meet down by the river at night.”

“Then I guess we should go, too.”

Becky dressed warmly for their excursion in a sweater and her thickest coat, plus two layers of socks under her hiking boots. She was glad that Paul was going with her. She had no idea what to expect and she wouldn't have gone by herself. The night was clear and new when he picked her up. She could see all of the stars, a handful of glittering sand scattered across the dark mirror of sky. They followed Custer Road to where it ended at a black wall of pine trees. There were several other cars parked along the edge of the woods and they walked north down the path, the mud and soggy underbrush sucking under their heels. An owl was protesting somewhere, the trees shivered in the bitter wind, and small things scurried by on unseen errands. Becky held onto Paul's arm and he seemed to stand a little taller at her touch.

They could see the lights of the fires pulsing brokenly through the trees, and hear music and shouting and laughter before they reached the river. Abruptly, the trees thinned and before them was the wildest party Becky had ever seen. The revelers perched at the base of the great rushing vein of the Missouri River, sparkling darkly in the light from the fires. A radio was playing loudly, kids were dancing or stood talking in

loose clumps, the dangling ends of cigarettes glowing in their shadowy hands like animal eyes caught in the beam of a flashlight.

Becky didn't recognize any of them, except for the boy she saw in the diner who was sitting on his own against a tree stump, a large bottle of something between his knees. She supposed that she didn't recognize anyone because they'd all been forgotten. Maybe she had once been in school with them, or had lived on the same street. Maybe they all knew her and Paul already.

"Hey Paul," a boy's voice said, affirming her unspoken thought. A large hand clapped him on the back startling him. He whirled around. "You don't remember me, of course. But I was on the baseball team with you last season. None of the new ones remember any of us. I'm Steve." He had the large, clumsy body of an adolescent jock.

"Hey," Paul responded awkwardly. He seemed to find it disconcerting that Steve seemed to know him quite well though he couldn't remember Steve.

"Want a beer?" Steve asked. "I know its strange at first, but it gets easier. If you ask me, this is the best thing that ever happened to me. No school. No work. Life's just a party now."

"Thanks," Paul said, accepting the beer.

Steve handed Becky a beer, too. "Hey, I see you at Tate's all the time. Your dad makes the best cheeseburgers. It's Becky, right? Come over here and meet everyone."

There was a tarp lying over the ground next to one of the fires and Steve led them to where some people sat huddled against one another trying to stay warm.

The flickering fire shone through their skin, like the sun shining through blue sea glass. It was a very pretty effect and Becky wondered if her own skin looked that way, too.

“This is Molly and Sam and Jarvis,” Steve pointed at each one of them in succession. “Paul and Becky.”

“Hi,” Becky said, bashfully. Meeting new people had never been easy for her and even given the strange circumstances, she felt her usual shyness.

“Did we already know you from somewhere?” Paul asked them.

“I was in ninth grade with you when I disappeared,” Molly said. “Sam and Jarvis are brothers and they've been around the longest. Their parents forgot them back in the sixties.”

“But you don't look any older!” Becky said.

“We don't ever get any older,” the boy who was Jarvis said.

“So what? We're like vampires? Peter Pan?”

“Yup. Except we don't suck blood. Although I think I could make an exception in your case.” He looked her up and down in a way she didn't like. She felt the muscles in Paul's arm tense, she was still holding on to him, and he moved closer to her.

Molly giggled. “Be nice, Jarvis. C'mon, sit down. Have some beers. You'll see it isn't so bad. At least we don't have to worry about getting wrinkles,” Molly said to Becky.

Paul and Becky sat on the tarp and someone brought out a deck of cards. They played a game which required Becky to drink at regular intervals. Becky wondered why the boy named Sam never spoke. He was leaning back against a cooler and one of his sleeves was pushed up to the elbow. There was a needle hanging out of the crook of

his elbow, some blood crusted around the puncture point and she guessed he was flying high. She tried not to stare. When her beer disappeared, someone gave her another. That one went quickly, too and Becky found that she was drunk. She had never been drunk before and it was a pleasant feeling. She stretched out on the tarp with her head in Paul's lap, listening to the buzz of voices which seemed to float somewhere above her not quite ever sinking down to her eardrums. She thought she heard Paul asking about things they could and couldn't do in their new physical conditions. Jarvis made some joke about Becky and Paul told him to shut up. Becky fell asleep.

When she woke, her body was stiff and Paul was pulling her off the cold ground, which was covered now in a damp residue which had soaked through her jacket and pants. She was too tired to shiver or feel cold. He walked her to his car with his arm around her waist and her head on his shoulder and she slept again until they reached her house. She made no effort to be quiet as she unlocked the door knowing that her mom couldn't or wouldn't hear. Paul said softly, before she shut the door, "I'll see you tomorrow." She had no idea how he would get in touch with her. She wondered if she could even use the phone. She was too tired to worry about it as she dragged herself into bed and she fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

The smell of coffee brewing woke Becky in the morning and at first she had no memory of the previous day. She showered and dressed and went downstairs as though it were any other morning.

"Morning, Mom," she said.

There was no answer. Her mother was poring over a stack of papers. They appeared to be bills and she had her check book open next to them. She typed some numbers into a calculator and bit her bottom lip. The skin between her eyebrows contracted in worry.

“Is everything okay?” Becky asked her. Still no answer. Then she remembered.

“Of course not. You're fucking Paul's dad and now no one can see me. You stupid, selfish cow.”

Her mother's fingers drummed along the table and then she pinched the highest part of her nose. After a minute, she took the phone from the counter and dialed.

“Hi, I would like to put my house up for sale.”

“Yes, 372 Praire Grass Boulevard. 10 am?” She glanced at her watch. “That's fine.”

“As soon as possible.”

“Thanks.”

She hung up the phone, sat down, and put her head on her arms. Her shoulders shook soundlessly and Becky realized she was crying. She put her hands on her mothers shoulders and rested her face against her back. “It's okay, Mom. Everything's going to be okay.”

The phone started ringing. Her mother acted as though she didn't hear it and so Becky picked it up on the fourth ring. Her mother didn't notice, of course.

“Hello?”

“Its me.”

“Hey Paul.”

"I'll meet you in front of your house in ten minutes."

When Becky saw him pull into the driveway, she ran out and climbed into the passenger seat. As she buckled herself in, she wondered aloud, "Can we be hurt? I mean, do I even need to wear my seat belt?"

"Jarvis said, we can't get hurt, but sometimes we disappear. He doesn't know why."

"Weird. Haven't we already disappeared? Where do we go to next?"

"They don't know."

"Does anyone ever undisappear?"

"He's never seen it happen."

"Well, then what's the point in anything? It's over. Our lives are over. My old life has fallen apart anyway. My mom's selling our house. My dad's living with my grandparents. There's nothing for me to go back to, I guess."

"I need to look after my mom. Especially if my dad's going to leave her for your mom."

"Is he leaving your mom?"

"He told her last night."

"Why is my mom so sad then? You'd think she'd be happy."

Paul was silent as they drove.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet."

They didn't speak until they pulled into the visitor's parking lot of Midwestern Methodist Hospital. The few times she'd been there, once when she'd broken her arm ice skating as a child and later with her dad when they'd come to visit Grandpa Mack, her mother's father, who had had a heart attack, it had seemed a severe and formal place, quiet as a library, as tightly run as the prison over in Leavenworth. The doctors and nurses were formidable behind their desks and clipboards speaking a language of life and death Becky didn't understand. The thought of entering this pristine, fragile world and disrupting it, seemed wrong to Becky, evil.

She followed him up to the third floor, the SICU, where both of their parents were on staff. As they walked down the floor, she noticed two more kids like them, a teenage girl and boy, they all seemed to be teenagers, Becky realized, the forgotten young. It brought new meaning to the phrase *the lost generation*. She had never felt more lost than she did at this moment, possibly about to help Paul do something really terrible, get someone killed even. She wondered if she could do that for him. She thought maybe she could. The girl pulled some pills off a nurse's tray who was walking into the room of someone who probably needed them a lot more than she did. The boy goosed the young nurse in the behind. Luckily, she didn't seem to notice. The girl smacked him on the arm and then downed the pills, chasing them with a swig from a forty of strawberry Boone's Farm.

They checked the nurse's station, and all of the rooms one by one but Paul's dad wasn't in any of them, only the critically ill, lying prone and painted various shades unsuitable for human skin as if by some giant four year old, green, blue, yellow, red, and smelling wrong, too, foul, sharp smells that made Helen's stomach turn. Paul was

mumbling, "Maybe, if the great doctor loses his license, he won't seem so great to your mom, anymore." His father was nowhere to be found, probably at the motel with some other nurse besides Becky's mom. Maybe that was why she had been crying. They were about to check the lab and then the cafeteria when an annoying but innocuous-sounding bell began to ring like someone's cell phone, only over the loudspeakers.

"The code bell," Paul said. "He'll have to come."

There was a commotion of doctors and nurses at the end of the hall. Paul grabbed Becky's hand and they ran toward it. The room was so full of staff, it was hard for them to squeeze inside, but they managed to push and shove their way to the bedside of a badly mangled woman. She was missing a leg and one side of her face and neck were covered with oozing burns. Tubes were sticking out of her in every imaginable place, her nose, her arm, and some places that weren't imaginable. One seemed to run directly into her stomach. The part of her face that wasn't burned was a greenish white and the skin was very dark under the one eye remaining to her.

Paul's dad appeared and a pathway was made through the bodies. He barked out orders. Things were added to her I.V., hands pumped at her chest, and then paddles shocked her. More things were added to her I.V. Paul's dad shouted at an intern until she cried. A syringe was plunged forcefully into the woman's heart. All to no avail. There was nothing Paul and Becky could do. This woman was going to die anyway.

They faded out of the room and slumped down against the wall. They sat there until the woman was wheeled out on a stretcher, a white sheet draped over her. One perfect hand dangled over the edge. The fingers were slender and manicured, Becky

thought maybe she was a musician. She wanted to think of her that way, playing a piano or a guitar, happy, whole.

Paul put his head in his hands. "This was a bad idea. I don't know what I was thinking. You're right. It's over. We can't do anything. We can't do anything ever again. He's going to put her in a nursing home and there's not a damn thing I can do about it."

"I'm sorry, Paul." Becky put her hand on his shoulder. "I was wrong, though. I bet there are things we can do. We won't be like them." She was referring to the lost girls and boys down by the river but she could also have been referring to their parents. Paul seemed to understand.

His head shot up hopefully. "I'll go with her. I'll take care of her."

"She's not going to know you're there," Becky said gently.

"Doesn't matter. I'll know I'm there."

"I'll go with you. There's nothing I want here."

Paul looked at Becky as if seeing her for the first time. She suddenly felt how close their bodies were, then there was no space between them. She closed her eyes and felt Paul's mouth on hers, it was smoky and minty like his car. His shirt was warm and damp under her arms, his hands brushed her face, and curled into her hair like small burrowing animals. By the time she felt their atoms crashing against one another, like the river cleaving to its banks, disappearing into the dust and clay, it was too late to stop it and she didn't want to.

The Shorter Stories

The Effects of Magnetism on the Growth Rate of Plants

It rained all winter and the ice covered everything over, the roads, the dead blades of grass and the branches of the few trees. Every day, Ingrid walked to and from the high school to her empty house. She remembered very little about the walks, only the overpowering smell of mud, hunching her shoulders to keep the cold out of her bones until a sharp pain sliced between her shoulder blades from the effort, and keeping her eyes down on the ice patches so she wouldn't fall. At home was Dolittle, her old Shepard mutt, a TV dinner, and homework. Sometimes she fell asleep reading a novel before her parents got home, her mother from the County General Hospital where she worked as an LPN and her father from the only restaurant in town, a steak house he managed for the owner.

Ingrid was focused and goal-oriented. She constantly won awards, first place at the science fair, she studied the effect of magnetism on the growth rate and development of plants, she was top of her class, and even though she was the worst player on her soccer team, she won Most Improved. Winning awards was a fact of her life and it was a necessary preparation for winning a college scholarship and getting the hell out of Laurel, Kansas. She imagined it was her focus on that single goal, making her what some of the kids might call a nerd, that kept her from having really close friendships. But she never felt lonely at school or at home. She preferred it when she had the house to herself. The quiet helped her focus. It was as though her life hadn't begun yet, that she was in training for some future life that would occur in a more interesting place than Laurel.

She had never really noticed Liam before. He was a junior, sort of the funny guy who hangs out on the fringe of the popular group. Every school had a Liam. But when they collided in the hallway by accident, she noticed several things simultaneously. His thighs through his khaki pants were surprisingly soft against her own, not what she thought a boy's thighs ought to feel like. She had imagined that when and if she ever had occasion to feel a boy's thighs, they would be tough and lean like dried venison. He was tall and the lines of his body were graceful, almost androgynous. His face on the other hand was masculine and plain, nearly ugly, with its too-large nose that was slightly out of joint and a small, thin mouth. What held her a moment too long against his chest was not his fingers gripping her upper arms so that she wouldn't fall backwards, but his pale blue eyes that made a very pleasant contrast against his skin, which was the faded bronze color of potato peels.

The sounds of life proceeding obliviously around them—thronging footsteps and the harsh metallic clang of locker doors—traveled more slowly than usual from her ear canal through the auditory nerves, to burst suddenly in her temporal lobe like a small explosion. She was aware that the accidental embrace had lasted longer than politely necessary though she couldn't be sure how long. Liam seemed to reach the same conclusion in the instant she did and they shot apart.

That was it. Ingrid went on with her day as though nothing had happened, to class and then home to let out Dolittle. She watched him shuffle carefully to the same spot he always went to, next to a dying holly bush, killed by his faithful urination. Perhaps next year she would test the levels of ammonia necessary to inhibit plant growth or study the formation of behavioral habits in animals. For a minute she

visualized a complicated contraption connecting a bell with food and tiny metal hats for mice with wires sticking out of them. Ingrid had checked out an SAT study guide from the school library but it lay unopened in her bookbag. Instead, she went to the hall mirror and examined her face, wondering what Liam saw when he looked at her. She had thin, strawberry blonde hair down to her shoulders, an unusual color she inherited from her dad's Irish side of the family, and she guessed her face was sort of pretty in a soft, round way. Not supermodel pretty or anything, more like television actress pretty. She leaned in to the mirror and looked closely at her pores. Sighing, Ingrid turned out all the lights, got into bed, and burrowed under the two blankets and comforter she'd taken to using at night since the heater broke Christmas morning, moving around until she could no longer feel any cold seeping into the pocket of warm air she'd created. It took her a long time to fall asleep. She thought of Liam until the color of his eyes and the feel of him merged into one strange, continuous impression.

The next day felt different than all the other days before it. She didn't feel the cold that morning as she walked, because she was thinking of Liam. After lunch, she left her geometry homework in her locker and found herself lagging behind in the hallways, looking for glimpses of him. She saw him disappear into his French class before second period and she realized at lunch that he sat with his friends at the table directly behind hers. In the middle of her last class, she was called to the office. She wasn't remotely worried, she was sure that she was being informed of some other award she was winning.

She sat uncomfortably in one of the cold, vinyl-upholstered chairs as she waited for the principal to call her. After five minutes of watching the clock and listening to the

receptionist sigh at the computer, her long-fingernails clicking annoying against the keys, Liam came in.

The receptionist looked up and smiled at the welcome disruption. "You again. You really need to start behaving. I'm tired of seeing of you in here." It didn't look as though she was.

"I can't seem to help myself," he returned her smile ruefully and plopped into the seat next to Ingrid. "What are you in for?" he asked her.

"I don't know, I'm still waiting to hear," she said.

"Well, apparently the school doesn't like it when you run a fake campaign for political office. I'm told that ridicule is not an acceptable platform."

The receptionist threw him an amused glance over the top of her spectacles.

"I'll try to remember that," Ingrid smiled, shyly.

"Hey, didn't we run into each other yesterday? Literally?"

"Yeah, that was me."

"I think I've been walking with a limp today,"

"Oh, sorry."

"It's really the school's fault."

Ingrid looked up at him, confused.

"They should give us all bumper cars before they unleash the freshmen on us."

Ingrid laughed. Was Liam actually flirting with her? She had no experience with flirting. She looked away nervously and her eye fell on a flyer taped to the bulletin board. It was for the school's upcoming Valentine's dance.

Liam must have followed her line of sight because he said, “Forced merriment. I think I have plans to wash my hair that night.”

“Oh, you’re not going?” Ingrid found it hard to keep the disappointment out of her voice. “Because I thought I might—maybe we could—” the words were out of her mouth before she’d thought them through. She realized immediately that she’d given too much away and felt her heart thud into her stomach.

“I am going, actually,” he paused uncomfortably, “but I think I already have plans to go with someone...”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—”

“Ingrid, could you come in here for a minute, please?” Dr. Marshall interrupted sternly, as a tearful girl Ingrid recognized from her geometry class rushed out. He was not looking at her with the fondness he usually reserved for his star pupil.

After he closed the door and she sat down across from his immense desk, he said. “Did you help Sarah Gardner cheat on her geometry midterm?”

“What? No, I—” This was vastly different from the accolades Ingrid had been expecting. She was caught off guard.

“Then why were all of her answers exactly the same as yours?”

“I—I don’t know, sir.” Ingrid was confounded. “She doesn’t even sit next to me, I don’t know how she could have looked at my paper, but she must have, somehow.”

“Exactly. Miss Gardner said that you arranged to help her beforehand.”

“No, that’s not true. I wouldn’t—”

“Rest assured that we will get to the bottom of this. Consider yourself warned for the future. That will be all.” Ingrid’s face and neck stung with the heat of her blush. Dr. Marshall dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

Ingrid left his office in a stupor, but not before noticing that Liam was looking studiously in another direction as she passed by him. She didn’t bother going back to class. The bell for the end of the day would be ringing soon anyway. She grabbed her things from her locker and jogged home, eager to be alone. But as she unlocked the door and turned the lights on in her empty house she felt a strong desire to be around someone else. She thought of calling her mother, but she couldn’t really talk during her shifts. She would have to be paged and by the time she had a minute to call Ingrid back, she would probably have forgotten. There was no one.

Ingrid went up to her room early that night. She tidied up her rickety desk, refolded her clothes in her draws and lined up her shoes in her closet, all three pairs of them, so that the toes and heels were side by side. She went to the box of bean plants underneath her window she’d grown for her science fair project. Most of the stalks were long and bushy, but not every seed had yielded a healthy plant. One of the seed pods hadn’t opened all the way and the plant emerged mangled and fragile. It had always been much smaller than its counterparts. Another plant was burned by the fertilizer she used and its skin was mottled and brown. She pulled them out and threw them in the trashcan. She began to pull out all the plants that were imperfect until she was staring at a box of dirt.

The Caregiver

When she visited him, she usually brought groceries, but this was her second trip this week and so there was no need. He still had a lasagna and some chicken breasts in the freezer, fresh apples already washed and piled neatly in the big glass bowl on the counter reserved for fruit. He would not eat them, preferring ice cream or jelly beans instead, but if his children visited, they might. It was a beautiful day in Alexandria, and she decided to take the metro to his loft near Georgetown rather than driving. A glossy sky lay cantilevered over the tree lined sidewalks of Old Town, spread with wisps of cloud like the dips and peaks of cake frosting. There were relatively few tourists this early in the morning; it was quiet enough to hear the dry crinkling knell of leaves, just about to fall.

The inconvenient location of his apartment made it difficult for friends and family see him but, stubborn as always, he could not be persuaded to leave the city even after the second stroke left his right side nearly paralyzed. That left it to her as the closest geographically to look after most of his needs, regardless of the awkward nature of their relationship. He refused to hire a nurse, to acknowledge that he needed any help whatsoever, and she could not sleep at night knowing that left on his own he would be eating defrosted frozen vegetables with Italian dressing every night, probably alone. There was only so much computer solitaire one man could play. She had long since realized that if it were not for her, nothing would ever get done. The babies would not have been clothed and fed. The bills would not have been paid. She didn't even complain about it anymore. She just did what was needed. Maybe if she had taken that attitude earlier in her life—but no, it was not good to think too much about the past.

She liked to stand on subways even when a seat was available. Any time she sat for too long, she got antsy, probably a consequence of a lifetime full of hard work. As the train filled with passengers, she found herself standing across from a wriggling puppyish brown haired boy with his mother. She looked down at them over her glasses, disapprovingly. The boy was whining and kept trying to slide off his mother's lap, in that talented way small children had of making their bodies like a puddle of goo you couldn't seem to keep a grip on. She wondered inwardly at the rudeness of children these days, the permissiveness of their parents. Strangers used to remark on how well-behaved her own children had been. Of course, without their father around much of the time, she had had to be the disciplinarian. She got off the metro at Union Station and walked briskly north on Capitol, a deep pink blooming high on her cheekbones. It felt good to push herself, get some air in her lungs, even if it was city air, and she would enjoy the soreness in her legs the next day. Though she had lived in Alexandria for many years now, she had never quite gotten used to the crowded city and still felt the slight discomfort at times she always felt in large groups of people. This was her home now, but she would never be a city girl. She had moved here from Dubuque, Iowa, when she and her husband were first married.

She had a key to his apartment and used it now to let herself up. He was watching a Braves game and she could only just see the top of his balding head above the overly masculine leather armchair, a chair she would never have agreed to buy. His seasons now were ruled by sports—baseball in the summer, football in the fall, basketball in the winter—as they had once been ruled by business trips, clients, conferences, a Blackberry. When all of that was finally over, she had never quite

believed it would be, the thing she had feared, happened. After many years of loyal service, his company forced him into retirement. It was a thing that happened to a lot of executives, and in fact it was not even the first time it had happened to him. The first time, he had seen it coming. He hit the ground running, and almost before the severance package had been drawn up, he had another, even better job. He had seen it coming this time, as well, but a vibrant man in his late fifties, had a better shot than a man in his late sixties, whose hair had turned snow white and began to thin, and whose peremptory demeanor was beginning to fray around the edges. Besides, a man could not expect to work forever. Months of job searching turned into a year while he shrank within his clothes, his life. He had had to buy smaller clothes, a smaller place. That was when he had the first stroke, as if it had waited politely for the moment when he would have the time to be sick.

She greeted him cheerfully, like a nurse and not an ex-wife. She didn't touch him or kiss him. That was not her place anymore. He said, "What did you do to your hair? It looks awful."

"Thanks," she said. "And I was worried you wouldn't notice. I don't know why I come here. Bridget should be doing all this, not me." They stepped into their familiar roles as if they had been handed a script. It comforted her. It was something.

How much he had changed over the past year never failed to surprise her. Throughout their life together, he had always tended toward corpulence and secretly she had loved that about him. Sure, she had made some half-hearted attempts to get him to work out and eat healthier around middle age, she cut some butter and fat out of her cooking, but what she really loved was to feed him and he loved food. He had loved

her pumpkin cheesecake, and her quiches, her veal chops, pistachio crusted pan seared redfish, butter braised chateau briande, chocolate bourbon pecan pie. He had always loved everything she made and been grateful for it. At night, when she held him, he was large and soft, a human teddy bear. She sometimes felt guilty for thinking of him that way, but she felt safe with him. The last thing she had expected was that he'd leave her for a woman who couldn't cook worth beans. He had lost so much weight now that his skin hung in folds; the pith of him was exposed, a turtle that had been deprived of its shell. The sight of him that way made her feel sad and tight in the pit of her stomach. She wanted to protect him, protect the idea of him that she'd always had: strong, forceful, dynamic.

He used his walker to shuffle to the fridge and get himself another beer. He fumbled with the door for a moment with his good hand, the other, a useless club propping him against the walker. She wondered if she should help him but then thought better of it. She tuned the radio to NPR and began to clean right away starting with the bathroom. His place wasn't very big and it only took her a few hours. He had a regular maid but she was unsatisfied with her work. She would sometimes find his socks and underwear on the shelves of his linen closet with the towels, the area behind the toilet was always neglected and the shelves of his book case were never dusted. When she was done, she found him still in front of the television. "Do you need me to get anything for you?" she asked him.

"No. Thanks," he said.

"Do you want me to stay with you for awhile before I go? We could play a game of Scrabble. Or we could get outside. It's beautiful today. I could take you for a walk in

the wheelchair.” But this was more for her sake than his. She wondered if all of it was for her. Did he really need her here or want her here? Maybe all of her work was for nothing. Maybe she should stop coming altogether. But she knew she wouldn’t.

He raised his eyebrows. “No. Bridget will be here in awhile with the kids.” The kids were Mark and Lisa who were eight and ten, the products of his second marriage.

He patted her hip, more roughly than affectionately, she thought, the way he might pat a horse, or a teammate on a football team, his hand making a slapping sound against the extra padding that had begun to accumulate there after the birth of her fourth child. Finally, the boy he had longed for. “I never deserved you, did I?” he asked, but this was rhetorical. He didn’t expect an answer and she didn’t give one. After all, he had left her, and nothing could erase that. Besides, what they had now was the same as they had ever had. She still cooked and cleaned for him, only now she had her own life, too. She had gone back to school for a nursing degree and she worked four days a week at a hospital which left her time to visit her children and grandchildren who lived in different states. But she couldn’t abandon him, the stupid, foolish, old man. She still loved him and there was no one to take care of him now that Bridget had divorced him.

She could easily imagine how an established and handsome man like her husband, if a bit portly, could make a woman, single and a little desperate in her early thirties, drool. How easy it must have been for Bridget to try him on for size, and the life he had already created after years and years of their hard work, both of them. She wondered if the thought of a different life had ever occurred to her husband before Bridget came along, or if he had been dissatisfied with her for awhile. Perhaps Bridget’s attention came as a surprise to him, a temptation too great to resist. Bridget was

younger and beautiful with dark hair and a pouty mouth. In fact, she was kind of a whiny woman in general, maybe she had a father complex. She had hated Bridget at first, of course. Only, Bridget hadn't known what she was getting herself into, the way he was incapable of doing anything around the house, his emotional distance from his wife and family. Work had always been and would always be the true love of his life.

On her way out of his apartment, she almost touched his shoulder, but she didn't. It hurt too much. Instead, she slipped out of the house, turning the key in the lock as she left. She would see him next week. She was already yearning for it. But she had her work to distract her. She had to call her second youngest who was struggling with a difficult boss and had just broken up with the latest of a long line of emotionally distant workaholic boyfriends.

After he died, she and the four children were cleaning out his apartment, boxing a few things for storage, giving away the rest. Bridget, useless as usual, was nowhere to be found. She imagined Bridget could sleep at night because she had left him before his health problems began. In the back of his closet underneath a shoebox that contained his passport and old mobile phones and chargers, she came across a framed photograph of the two of them in the Canary Islands right after the birth of their first child. They looked happy in the picture, tan and windswept, a diaphanous film of salt on their skin. She hadn't remembered being that happy. It was easier to remember the bad times for some reason. She sank onto the sofa and began to cry, hunching over the picture as if protecting a wounded bird. She couldn't believe he had kept it all this time. Even after death, he had found a way to give her just enough to keep holding on when all she wanted was to let go.

Her children whispered in the corner, giving her space to cry, not knowing how to comfort her. Everything about the whole thing was too complicated and tragic to find words that would fit.

One of the middle ones said, "I hate him for what he did to her."

"How can you say that?" the other middle one said. "He was your father and he's gone now. Besides she did it to herself."

"Well, someone has to be the caregiver and it's usually the woman, isn't it?" the boy said.

The oldest said, "Shh. You'll upset Mom." They continued to watch, helplessly, until it passed. None of them could really blame her for taking care of him. After all, he was their father and someone had to do it.

Excerpts From the Eva Crane Field Diary

Jefferson, TX

It took me the better part of an hour to batter through the drywall. The heat was overwhelming by then, like a solid thing elbowing in on me, plugging my nose, my mouth, and my ears. Every time I wiped the sweat off my forehead, dirt got into my eyes, so I gave up, letting it ooze and puddle and drip. Black and green forests of mold had grown up and died and grown up again on the water-stained plaster. Even under the insufferably weak pounding of my mallet—I was an academic, not a builder—it rippled, sagged, and came away in great satisfying sheets. I wore a mask, and still the dust and grit of years of darkness and neglect seeped through the fibers, making me gag and cough. With every stroke that met solid wood, I felt the jarring vibration of each individual bone from the tips of my fingers up to my shoulder blade. My muscles burned, but I pressed on. I want to know what is behind this wall. It is the only thing I think about anymore.

Relatively speaking, it's extremely easy to get through a mid-nineteenth century wall in rural Texas—none of the modern tangle of metal piping and wire guts from indoor plumbing and electricity. Once I had peeled away a sizable portion of the gooey membranous wall, I saw a narrow path between two studs where I might squeeze through. The dingy brown layer of debris between the walls—an ancient humus of mouse turds, dust, and the exoskeletons of spiders—felt strange under my feet, like walking on thick ash. So focused was I on what I could make out of the secret room, forgotten and unseen by human eyes since Reginald Simon presumably closed it up in 1885, I hardly felt the sharp splinter from a demolished two-by-four catch my jeans and

sting across my knee. I could tell it had drawn blood and I'd probably ruined the third and final pair of jeans I'd brought with me to Jefferson. I didn't care.

I pulled the flashlight from my tool belt and felt out the corners of the room with the thin beam of light. I guessed it was approximately 25X25, a tiny world within a world. Such a small space for a woman and the children she was rumored to have to live out their lives, short as they were.

It surprised me that there were four beds: a single bed, a set of bunk beds, and a cradle. That meant that at least three children had lived here. There was not much else in the room. A small table with two chairs, a chest of drawers, and a disintegrating rag on the floor that must once have been a crewel rug of uncertain pastel hues, much of which probably now lined the nests of the house's multitude of four-legged squatters. The wide bay window was boarded up, veins of light glowing through the cracks and spaces. I pried the slats off with the snake-tongued end of my hammer to let the white noon in.

The bones of the little family who had lived here no doubt rested somewhere under the muck of the swamp, feeding the greedy roots of the cypresses and pecan trees. Their graves were unmarked and lost forever. I sat on the end of the single bed and took stock of the four walls that had jealously guarded the lives within them. I knew that I was waiting.

Your lips are so red when you cry, he told me once, licking the tears off my cheeks.

He delighted in my trembling flesh after the lusty squall of a fight. He reveled in my reluctant embrace, cajoling, whispering, kissing away my anger. There were times when I thought he liked to make me cry, to push me away, in order to pull me back again, to feel my will melting under the warmth of his insistence, my flesh giving way before his like a newly calm sea before the prow of a ship.

This time I pushed him away. I'm not sure when it stopped being a lovers' game. When had the stakes been raised so high?

He sighed and folded his hands behind his head, annoyed by the delay of make-up sex. I quickly substituted a gentle paraphrase of what I had originally intended. It was always the same question. "You don't take me seriously," I said.

"I don't take anything seriously," he said, running his fingers up the inside of my thigh.

I turned my back to him. "It really scares me when you say things like that."

"The twenty-first century has no meaning. We've proven nothing except that we can't prove anything. We are all figments of our own imaginations."

"This isn't class, Professor."

"But you are my student."

"Ugh." I got up and pulled on my jeans.

"I'm just kidding. Come back to bed."

"You are a completely different person than what you presented in your book, you know that? Honestly, I'm not sure I'd be here right now," I nodded at the bed, "if I hadn't loved it so much." *Beyond Death: Texas Folktales and Myths of the Afterlife* was

the reason I had gone to William B. Travis to get my PhD in folklore in the first place. It was a useless degree, but I wanted to write about ghosts.

“I knew there was a reason I wrote that thing. Do you have to analyze everything?”

I sat down and put my head in my hands. “Isn’t that what guys say when they don’t want to talk about their feelings?” I said through my fingers. I looked up at him. His eyebrows bunched together and his eyes squinted down in the corners as though he had met with a philosophical dilemma he could not come up with a pat answer for. “I’ve decided to go to Jefferson to write my dissertation.”

“Of course you should go,” he said. His voice was gentle but I couldn’t tell if he was disappointed or relieved.

I wanted to go. I didn’t want him to want me to go. We didn’t make any plans. We didn’t talk about weekends and overnights.

He gave me his profile: the elegant bump on his nose, one small, feminine ear half-covered by unshorn brown hair. I couldn’t tell if he was studying the film of pollen and dirt on the outside of the window pane, or contemplating the corner of emerald Dallas skyline that could be seen from his balcony. The silence was abruptly punctuated by the muted ululation of a siren. I looked around his bachelor’s loft, at the ill-fitting assortment of furniture, the bare walls, the stacks of books and papers covering every surface, the ugly, masculine comforter bunched at the foot of his bed—it smelled just like him, like soap and paper and coffee. I imagined there was something of me in it by now, too. I loved every inch of it. I think I knew I was seeing it for the last time.

I’ve often wondered since then, Can you die of love?

I rented a house on the west bank of the Big Cypress Bayou River. Once, it had been very grand, a boxy plantation built in the Greek Revival style very popular downriver in New Orleans, with deep, covered porches held up by drooping Tuscan columns. The rent was cheap for a reason. If it wasn't a historical landmark, it would have been condemned and torn down long ago. I was not so much living there as camping there. There was an outhouse in the back that was too ancient to even stink, and I washed my hair in the river. A long, winding stair stepped delicately down from the lawn to the river, like a Victorian woman raising the hemline of her dress out of the weeds, unfolding into a narrow pier over the water. I often sat there at the end of a day of collecting, my bare feet making two small wakes in the syrupy, brown water, looking out at the blue patch of sky beyond where the tall trees parted, curtain-like. Behind me, the thickets of creeping vines and the spindly roots of the cypresses crawled up from the bottomland. I imagined that I could be happy here forever.

The town of Jefferson was like the Brigadoon of the Southwest, a mirage, or like those ancient Mediterranean towns perfectly preserved in volcanic ash. In this case, the river dried up and everyone left, leaving behind an unmolested mausoleum to the past. Recently, rich people from all over the place had started buying up all the old, untouched buildings; antique shops opened, restaurants, bed and breakfasts, all the usual quaintness, which brings vacationers galore to a historic hamlet. The investment banker who owned the place where I was staying had big plans for renovations when the economy improved. Until then, I had it all to myself. He didn't know I planned to start the renovations ahead of schedule.

I had discovered something interesting about the house's history that day and I brought my tapes and my dinner—fried catfish and hushpuppies from Swampi's in town—down to the dock where there's sometimes a little bit of a breeze. It was very quiet out there, except for the occasional sound of something splashing in the river and I expected to have light until after eight.

I couldn't wait to listen to the Captain's story again. I did a cursory search on the history of the house when I moved in, what I could gather from birth and death certificates, marriage records, bills of sale, without turning up anything particularly noteworthy. As far as I could tell, the house had been built in 1860 by Robert Nesmith, a man who had owned a stagecoach business, the historical equivalent of an airline. For whatever reason, Nesmith closed up shop in Jefferson, and sold his home to Nathaniel Simon in 1869, who lived there with his family until he died in 1895.

Captain John Nash was a born and bred local who took tourists up and down Big Cypress Bayou, pointing out the ruins of Confederate arsenals, the old harbor (now little more than a divot in the bank), and such sleepy wildlife as there was during the heat of the afternoon, a few turtles and alligators sunning themselves on hollowed out logs, the primitive mud houses the barn owls had packed into the western edges of the bridge soffit, where they could be baked and dried by the setting sun. They eerily resembled over-sized wasp nests.

The Captain was a good-looking man in a rugged, tan, middle-aged sort of way. His stomach poked through his t-shirt a bit too much for my taste, but it was far less pronounced than the bellies of most Texas good ol' boys. He wanted to know all about what I was doing in Jefferson and how long I would be staying. He seemed pleased that

I was interested in his town—I'd had that reaction from most of the people I'd talked to. I didn't tell him the whole story, just that I was an anthropology student, and I was collecting folktales for my dissertation, that I was interested most particularly in stories about Magnolia Hill, where I was staying.

I listened patiently as he related his lineage; he was descended from Alabama sharecroppers who migrated to the area looking for land. His great granddaddy had fought and lost an eye in the Civil War. Finally, he took a breath and I asked him again if he knew anything about Magnolia Hill back when the Simons lived there.

Captain Nash settled into the leather chair behind his desk, crammed into the back of the sweltering boathouse, which had been converted into an office and a gift shop. Even though all of the doors and windows were closed and we were alone, the smell of the river—green and marshy—and the sweat of tourists was so overpowering, it left a rank taste in my mouth.

Unbothered by the tape recorder I placed in front of him, he spoke directly to me in a hoarse twang. "My mother used to tell us these stories before we went to sleep," he said, rubbing his lips with his fingers, the way people who desperately want to light up a cigarette do. "She heard them from her uncle who heard them from his Daddy and so on. I'll see what I can remember." He stared at some point beyond me, visibly dredging through long-overlooked memories, the way his boat, the Water Spider, crawled arthritically through the murky river shoals.

I took notes while I listened:

Reginald Simon, a steamboat captain, bought Magnolia Hill for his new bride, Beatrice to impress her father who owned a successful plantation just south of Jefferson

near the Louisiana border. In 1873, Beatrice died giving birth to her first child, a girl he named Claire, the same year the US Corps of Engineers dynamited The Great Raft to smithereens, a huge logjam extending 165 miles: a natural dam that redirected the waters of the Red River and the Mississippi up the Big Cypress Bayou River to Jefferson. With the demolition of the logjam, Jefferson was no longer connected by water to New Orleans; the town dried up with the river and Reginald Simon's steamboat business collapsed. He took his daughter west and was lost to the town's knowledge until he returned some fifteen years later. Nothing was known of his exploits during the time he spent away from Jefferson. Some rumors favored oil, others gold, but when he returned home with his grown daughter, it was apparent that he was wealthier than when he left.

There were rumors that when Claire returned to Jefferson, she was pregnant. Since she was unmarried, this would have meant shame and disaster for her. But no one ever knew for sure, because she was a recluse. She never left the house and her father allowed no one to see her, except for the one servant they kept, an old woman he paid for her discretion. Children would dare each other to look for a glimpse of Claire's silhouette at her window. Some in town said they could hear the cry of a child, others the noises of several children at play, somewhere within that huge house. But no one ever saw them, and no one ever dared to ask.

Now that I've found Claire's room I wonder if I will ever write the book I intend to write. I didn't trust in stories anymore, I didn't trust in my memory to tell them. But memories had a truth even if they were wrong. There was another way I remembered that last night with Ben.

“You don’t take me seriously,” I said. He was two people to me, my professor and my lover, and I never knew which one I was going to get. It frustrated me to no end the way he slipped between the roles depending on his need.

“I just think you should cast a wider net is all. Who’s going to be reading this book? Telling the ghost stories of one small, insignificant town may not appeal to a wide audience.”

“I thought ghost stories appealed to everyone? And they’re not just ghost stories. They’re a valuable remnant of the past, especially in this town. Because of history and geography these stories have been bottled and hermetically sealed in a way that almost doesn’t exist anymore.”

“I get that you’re in love with the town, but it’s not going to be a significant contribution to anthropology unless you survey a larger region and cross reference the stories.”

I wanted to tell him that I didn’t care, but I hated to admit that he was right. Instead, I hit him below the belt. “No one read your book either,” I said.

He gave me a look I knew well and it only infuriated me more: one eyebrow raised, nostrils slightly flared. It said You’re not my favorite person right now but I’m more mature than you and so I’m going to take the high road.

“Eva, you do know that ghosts aren’t real, right? They’re an intellectual idea, a symbol, a memento mori,” he took a book from the nightstand and opened it as though the case had been closed and he was losing interest in the conversation.

“How can you even discuss a symbol without acknowledging the actual thing it represents? Signifier and signified have no existence apart from each other. ‘Freud

observed that to admit the possibility of ghosts is to know that you will come face to face with your own.”

“No one really listens to Freud anymore. I gave him a nod purely for the entertainment value.”

“I’m shocked, Professor.”

He put his book down and turned over onto his side, facing me. I was sitting on the edge of the bed, clad in jeans and a bra, arms crossed over my breasts. I was very aware of how petulant I must have looked to him.

“I hate it when you call me Professor,” he said. “You only call me Professor when you’re mad. Look, maybe you should take a semester off, rethink the direction of your research. You’ve got a lot on your plate right now.”

His words stabbed me in a place I had not known existed until his words found it out. “Go to hell.”

“Eva, I’m just trying to help you. I know you’ve had a rough time. But you’ve got to let go of this obsession.”

“You couldn’t possibly understand anything about what I’m going through. Once I thought maybe you could, but you can’t.”

“I want to understand. Help me to understand.”

I tried to explain, and found myself at a loss, “Stories are like ghosts, they’re like an echo or a ripple. You know, in physics a ripple never ends, it’s called Chaos Theory...”

“Eva you’re never going to bring them back. You’re never going to understand why he did what he did.”

“I know.” Didn’t he know that I knew that? Didn’t he know that it didn’t matter?

I couldn’t explain it to him and so I left.

I noticed a clump of ragged cloth and yarn, what was left of a doll, on the bed next to me. She still had one blue button sewn onto her faded face. I picked it up gently.

Here was the rest of the Captain’s story. Claire ran off one day with the help of the servant woman’s son. She was no longer seen at the window. No one ever heard the noises of children again. When Nathaniel Simon died of Scarlet fever in 1895, no children were found by those who attended and buried him. Before they left town, Claire and her savior, Peter Beaumont, spent the night at the Jefferson Hotel, listed as Mr. and Mrs. Beaumont. No children were listed on the registry. Those are the facts. But what is the truth? Ben was right when he said the truth could never be proven. You could never really understand how children could disappear, or why a father would come home from work one day and shoot his wife, his son, and himself, my mother, my brother, my father. Here, all around me was the evidence of the children who had been hated by their parents. Or loved. Which one was it that ended their lives? Did it matter?

The suffocating heat of the room was making me sleepy. I laid down among the dust, and the rags, and the filth, and held the doll to my chest, the smell of it filling my nostrils: dust, love, death. The empty cradle rocked by an unseen hand in the corner. Here was the real meaning of *ghost*; the sight of such a thing meant one was no longer fit for life. I closed my eyes. I pictured the person who would discover my remains in another hundred years, my bones mingling with the dust of this house. I was surprised to find it a pleasant thought.

Here was the third and final way I remembered the last night. I knew I didn't want to leave. Not that night, not any night. I peeled my jeans off and got back into his bed, curling up in the bend between his arm and chest, counting his breaths.