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The Thesis Committee for Lindsay Purves certifies that this is the final approved version of the following electronic thesis: "Pines."

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We have read this thesis and recommend  
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PINES: A NOVEL IN STORIES

by

Lindsay Purves

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

May 2011

## ABSTRACT

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The stories here are collected in chronological order and follow Juliana Thibodaux through her life from teen to woman. The stories can stand alone as well as fit together as chapters in the narrative arc. The stories explore love and parenthood, nostalgia and reality. Landscapes from Italy to Texas are navigated through Juliana's eyes.

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## Pines

Anne Broussard and Juliana Thibodaux didn't want to sleep on the couches in the living room, but there were no other beds available in the Broussards' lake house during Hurricane Rita. In the middle of night, as they slept beneath the wall of windows, the first pine tree fell on the house, shattering one of the upper windows. Startled from sleep, they scurried away from the windows and huddled together at the bottom of the stairs that led to the loft where Juliana's parents slept, waiting for the commotion to settle, but the wind kept at a low moan through the now open windows and the backyard full of pines rustled and swayed in the darkness.

They watched the walls, waiting for another tree to fall. Anne squinted through the glass into the darkness now wet with rain. She blinked, trying to make something out on the porch. She wasn't sure, but she thought she saw something.

“Do you see that, Juliana?”

“What?”

“I think I see someone out there.”

“You're just in shock. Don't be silly. Who'd be out in a hurricane?” Juliana walked closer to the windowed wall.

They put their faces up to the window and both jumped back. There was someone huddled on the porch, fighting the wind. It was Alberto, Anne's brother.

\*\*\*\*\*

It was the last week of summer and as Juliana and Anne approached their first year of high school, Hurricane Otto approached the southeast Texas shoreline. There was an excitement in the air. At the store the bottled water aisle was empty, Wal-Mart had generators on sale, the highway was lined with cars headed north. Even the southbound lanes faced north. There was no travelling south. The weather was constantly on the TV at home, in restaurants, at the dry cleaner's.

Anne had other excitement, though. After homecoming, she'd lost her virginity to her date, a boy on the baseball team. It had only been that once. She cried to Juliana that they'd never done anything except go to the movies or sit together awkwardly at parties after that. She wondered what she'd done wrong. Juliana didn't know about these things. Anne had grown up in the fast-moving popular group. Juliana had only been on the periphery. Juliana had never much been interested in that group. She'd always just watched and done her own thing.

Anne's family, the Broussards, were preparing to head north with the Thibodauxs to the Broussard lake house on Toledo Bend reservoir, 100 miles north of Beaumont. They hoped it would be far enough away from the storm. It could be dangerous if the storm stalled once it hit like they said it could. Toledo Bend might not be far enough away. Their friends were headed north and then west to San Antonio or Dallas to family and friends there. The Broussards and Thibodauxs had nowhere else to go. Anne Broussard's father had to weather the storm in Lumberton, only 20 miles from the coast. He was required by law to stay and watch over the refinery. All the women fussed over him, worrying. He would be in the high school building where a makeshift headquarters

were being arranged to monitor the storm and quickly assess any damage to the refinery once it had passed.

Anne's older brother would not be making the trip either. Alberto (his real name was Albert, but unwilling to stand such a boring name, he'd added the "o" at age 13) had just turned 18 and moved out of the house. He lived near the highway in a rented dilapidated house with one of his friends. He worked at Schlotzsky's to pay the rent. His real love was making wood furniture which sometimes he sold. He spent hours working in the garage, breathing in the pine shavings and lacquer. Anne kept a shelf he'd made on the wall of her room above her desk. She had arranged photos and prized stuffed animals on the shelf after receiving it years ago. It had been the first piece he'd made.

Alberto considered himself a musician. He played borrowed guitars in various bands. On the weekends he went to different bars around. He and Harry Broussard, his father, did not get along. Alberto was creative and moody. Harry was an engineer. Harry thought Alberto needed to shave his mohawk and finish high school. He could never understand a person who liked a band called The Circle Jerks.

Harry and Alberto fought as fathers and sons do. Alberto started doing drugs when he was 15. He finally stopped going to school and moved out at 18. It was easier to piece together a living than be with a family at odds with his lifestyle. He still spoke to his mother and sister. Sometimes when they saw him walking down Lucas to work, they'd pick him up and drop him off, inviting him to dinner, promising to sneak Anne out for one of his shows.

As the hurricane approached, Anne hadn't seen Alberto for several days. Usually she never went more than two days without seeing him somewhere around town. She cried and refused to leave. She called his house and Schlotzsky's and his friends. She wouldn't leave town without him. What was he supposed to do? He had no car. Anne cried and cried. She was under a lot of stress. The day before, she'd taken a positive pregnancy test. Lucky for her, the excitement of the storm took attention away from her until this thing with Alberto. She wanted him close. She felt he and Juliana were the only ones she could depend on. Her mother finally convinced her that he probably left with one of his friends. Her father sat silently at the table sipping the glass of warm milk he had every night. It was decided: they would leave tomorrow without Alberto.

\*\*\*\*\*

Juliana and Anne's mothers prepared coolers of food. They cleaned out the refrigerators bringing everything with them because it would spoil if they didn't. Losing power at the lake would cause it to spoil anyway. With the car loaded down with food and ice, water, and DVDS, the two families, headed by Juliana's father, drove north. The usual hour would be extended, they knew. They went, snaking their way through the pine forests, already bored and hot. After dropping Harry at the high school in Lumberton, it took them four hours.

Their two-truck caravan pulled up in the dirt driveway in front of the green A-frame house. Bruce and Juliana unloaded the numerous ice chests full of the contents of two households' freezers. The air surrounding the lake house was heavy and wet, like a rag had been lowered over their little point. The house sat at the top of the lot and the

yard sloped down to the lake. From the deck, you could see water on three sides. When it wasn't hazy and humid, you could see Louisiana straight across. Everyone was sweating with the unloading, but they were finally done.

Anne loved arriving at the lake with food and bags. It was like setting up house, the way she and Juliana used to play when they were little.

Juliana loved arriving at the lake too. It felt peaceful to her, as if she were wrapped in a cocoon. The pine trees formed a canopy over the yard. It was a safe place to her, unlike that of the high school where she had to interact with those outside her family. The lake today was gray and choppy. She felt the storm in the air.

The two girls busied themselves loading food into the fridge. When they finished, they set up camp on the back porch to watch the storm move in over the lake. They spoke quietly, looking over their shoulders constantly to make sure adults weren't creeping up behind them. They discussed what Anne was going to do.

Alberto heard of the storm coming from people at work. He didn't have a TV or a radio at home. He had an old boombox but the radio didn't work anymore. It barely played CDs. He was most of the time completely cut off from music except if it was live or he could bang the boombox in just the right place for it to work. He hated to be without music. He hated even more to be with the music that played at the sandwich shop where he worked. It was mostly Top 40 bullshit. He kept promising himself he would save his money from work for a new music playing apparatus. This never happened. The money flew away for things like rent, like wood for his projects, like smokes, guitar strings.

Alberto was broke.

Sure he made money from Schlotzsky's and various wood projects. There was a guy who taught journalism at the high school who hung around at concerts who'd paid him to make three bookshelves already. There was another one, a famous local photographer who'd seen a chair he'd made for some woman he couldn't remember. He'd ordered 8 of them. That was what he was working on now. He couldn't wait to get home from the sandwich shop to replace the smell of onions and olives with sawdust. Four of the chairs stood finished in the garage.

His roommate, Tim, was such a dick.

He was making Alberto pay extra rent for sole use of the garage as a workshop. It wasn't like either of them had cars.

“Hey man, just look at it this way. Saves you from renting a workshop that would be more expensive somewhere else.”

*Sure, whatever, Tim.* Sometimes Alberto thought he could be too much of a push over about these things, but Tim had a point. He had just budgeted for only \$200 of rent, not \$275. Hell, with that extra 75 bucks a month, he could've bought ten new boomboxes by now. Tim was a jackass anyway. Every day when Alberto came home from work, Tim would be sitting there in the living room doing whip-its with some girl or another that hung around. All these high school girls were always hanging around even though Tim was almost thirty.

It was because he was in a band. Lots of high school kids hung around the Beaumont scene at the Art Studio or the Vortex. You knew them by the big black X's on their hands. Most of them figured out a way to drink anyway since most of the scenesters were older and provided them alcohol. Hell, there were even a couple decent bands that were high school kids. Very Ultra. Wisteria. Molly Maguires. They mostly played at The Dorm Room, a café by the university or Terrell Park, not the big time places like the Art Studio or the Vortex.

Alberto was working on the chairs one night when Tim came to the garage and informed him that he and two girls were headed down to the coast to have a real-live hurricane party.

“Dude, that’s stupid.” Alberto didn’t look up from his sanding.

“Whatever. It’s going to be fun, man.”

“You are so stupid sometimes. Those girls are only sixteen.”

“They want to party.”

“What about their parents? How about, how are you going to get there? I heard the southbound lanes are closed. Plus, you don’t have a car.” Alberto sometimes took pleasure in berating Tim from time to time. Most of the time Tim made Alberto feel like a little kid, naïve to the ways of the world. It made Alberto angry. He knew things. He could make it in the world. He was doing pretty good. Sure he couldn’t save anything, but he was getting by.

“This chick has her dad’s Jeep. We’ll make it, dude. They stopped the northbound traffic in the southbound lanes today. Maybe we’ll even try to surf if we can make it to Crystal Beach before the thing hits.”

“It’s your funeral,” Alberto mumbled, replacing the mask he wore to protect his face from sawdust.

“Forgot, man. Your little sis called while you were at work. Said something about wanting you to go somewhere with them. Man she sounded sweet. Why don’t you invite her over sometime?”

Alberto whirled around to face Tim in the door of the garage, but Tim walked off, laughing.

Alberto went to the kitchen, dialed his home number, and waited. If his father answered, he usually hung up. There was no answer. He figured they’d already left town. The news was making it sound pretty bad. It occurred to him then that maybe he should leave town. Why this hadn’t occurred to him earlier, he didn’t know. He sometimes just rolled on with life, not thinking about things he needed to do. He just wanted to do what he wanted to do. He wanted to work at Schlotzsky’s because it allowed him to come home and do his woodwork. He realized they had told him not to come in because they’d be closed until the hurricane passed. He realized he had nowhere to go.

That night, Alberto sat in the living room of his house. He hadn’t showered after working on the chairs. He was covered in sawdust. It didn’t matter, though. People were all around. Tim had decided to have a hurricane send-off party at the house before setting

out with the two girls. The hurricane was supposed to make land fall at 11 am the next day.

Alberto sat on a sagging secondhand couch, drinking a beer, surrounded by the cigarette and pot smoke of about twelve people.

“Hey, man. Ever heard about those people in New Orleans that tried to ride out the storm?” A random person said to the party. Alberto recognized him as the lead singer of the Molly Maguires. The party quieted.

“Yeah,” said someone else. “They all drowned.” Several girls next to Alberto on the couch snickerd.

“It’s not funny, guys,” a boy near the door said. “So many people died.”

“They’re saying this one’s going to be just as bad.”

“Maybe it’ll make all those fuckers from New Orleans leave Beaumont.”

“Jackass.”

“Just sayin. One of them took my job at Kroger.”

“Sure it wasn’t the drug test?” Laughter erupted. Individual conversations started up again. There was an air of excitement. Everyone was telling stories about bad storms they’d been through or someone they knew had been through.

Alberto left the room to return to his shop and chairs. He studied the chairs for several minutes. The fifth one was shaping up just as beautifully as the first four. He sanded a spot on the arm. He banged the boombox to see if he could get the radio. He

was beginning to get worried. What if the storm was like the one that hit New Orleans a month earlier? He lived in a crappy house off Delaware Street. The roof leaked when it rained just a little bit. He had no car, no food, no bottled water. He usually ate at the shop. How could he be so utterly unprepared for such a thing?

He went back to the kitchen and tried his parents' house again. He tried Anne's cell phone and got a busy signal. He waited 5 minutes and tried it again. Nothing.

That night, Anne and Juliana heated up the grill. They were inseparable these two. Their parents had been friends in high school. They went to Forest Park where Juliana and Anne had started two months ago. They'd already had their first homecoming, several football games. Anne kept a picture in her wallet of herself with the baseball player and Juliana and her date from homecoming. The dresses the girls had spent hours picking out had been obliterated in the picture by the complicated mums given to them by their dates, the green and yellow streamers trailing the floor.

They experienced all this together, but they were very different. Anne was on the dance team, outgoing and popular. She always had the attractive boys trailing after her. She was smart though. Everyone thought she wouldn't end up stuck here, pregnant at 20, married to one of them like the other girls on the dance team probably would. She would go to college. She would do what her mother never did. Anne's mother had gotten pregnant with Alberto when she was in her freshman year at Lamar, the local college. She had put her studies "on hold" so that Harry could finish his engineering degree. They married a year after Alberto was born at Harry's parents fishing camp on Toledo Bend.

It was that same fishing camp that he'd now turned into a beautiful home. The property had been amazing to begin with, scattered with pines, 240 degree view of the lake. The families came here often together. They jet skied in the summers, sun bathed on the boat dock, learned to fish in Bruce Thibodaux's bass boat just under the dock and in the reeds near the public beach which bordered the property. A few summers, they'd rented the beach to have huge bonfire parties and weenie roasts.

Anne and Juliana had grown up here together, mostly isolated from the other kids at school who would occasionally be dropped off in their fathers' boats. It was here they'd built their own secret world. Across from the house was a concrete pad with an old metal carport Anne's grandfather had put up decades ago. This was where they played. They set up a house with old broken dishes and tin cans they found discarded in the woods. They pilfered items from the house to complete certain rooms which were marked off with fishing line. They hung discarded tarps around the edges of the carport to block their clubhouse from view.

Clubhouse was what they called it anyway.

Sometimes it was Anne and Juliana's Artistry. They took phone calls from possible clients ordering pictures. Then, they'd sit and color the pictures in a coloring book. They even concocted a pulley system for order forms and finished pictures to be sent back and forth to the secretary's desk.

Sometimes it was a detective agency. They pretended like they were Harriet in *Harriet the Spy* and carried notebooks around all day, writing down everything they observed. They would get calls for lost dolls or dogs and then go tromp around in the

woods for the afternoon, looking for a doll and finding nothing. They'd often go home covered in mosquito bites and ticks, their mothers scolding them.

Juliana and Anne had discussed the previous summer, in their carport, now a grouping of lawn chairs around a fire pit, how they felt their summers at the lake had prepared them for high school. How they felt equipped to handle the social problems they would face. Anne had spent the summer studying the homecoming queen Sarah Mae Hadley. She had watched her face, watched the way she flipped her long blonde hair at the boys, how she was always smiling, always looking good even after a round of water skiing.

Juliana had done this kind of watching as well, but not to imitate. She had watched merely from an interest in the people around her. These would be the people she would be among by virtue of being Anne's friend. Juliana was the quieter of the two, spending evenings of her childhood alone in her father's smoke-filled study while he worked, searching maps and geological reports for somewhere to drill for oil. She would pull down heavy atlases from the bottom shelf and flip through them on the floor, content just to be in the same room as her father, breathing in his familiar smell of cigarettes and Scotch.

"You're like a cat," Anne had said to her that summer. "You're always content to sit by a window, you don't need to talk to anyone except for like 10 minutes a day."

"Except for you of course."

"Of course." They had run down the yard, giggling, dodging pine trees, jumping off the end of the dock in a race to the water.

Anyway. Their summers had equipped them for the world of the elite crowds at Forest Park High School. They already knew some seniors. The football players all had houses or camps on the lake and were all active water skiers. There'd even been a makeshift competition amongst the outgoing seniors. Juliana and Anne had been invited by a sophomore girl named Lizzie. She was a cheerleader, dating a senior boy on the football team. She had braces and only talked about the Neches River Festival. This was a ball that they would attend as seniors. They all had to wear white dresses and have an escort and parade around downtown for an afternoon. There were teas to attend and all sorts of parties. Juliana and Anne would for sure be invited. They were Symphony Belles when they were in eighth grade. They had so much to look forward to, Lizzie gushed.

Anne made fun of Lizzie to Juliana under the shelter of their carport after they'd gone home. "She's chubby and freckled."

"Hey, I'm freckled," Juliana said.

"Yeah, but she's holding on to Brian for dear life. Too bad he's just as ugly as she is!"

"You're so mean."

"Just honest." They laughed.

This was all different now. The girls felt a seriousness descend on them that had nothing to do with the approaching hurricane. Cars lined the dirt drives of all the houses on the Broussard's street. Juliana sprayed the coals in the grill with lighter fluid, and Anne set them aflame. They put the lid on and rocked in the chairs, watching the sun set

over the now-calm waters, the sky reddened. They were silent and sipped a beer between them, something Bruce didn't care if they did. If Harry had been there, it would have been a different story. Sometimes they wondered how their fathers stayed friends. They decided it was really their mothers that held them all together.

Anne sat watching the water wondering where Alberto was that moment. Was he in his little house off Delaware, lost in the construction of some table or shelf? Was he in a car headed to Dallas with a friend? Juliana watched her knit her eyebrows and knew what she was thinking. She reached out for Anne's hand which she held there for a moment before Anne let go to reach for the beer. She drained what was left from the can.

\*\*\*\*\*

At that moment, Alberto was thinking about Anne as well. His baby sister. He was getting sentimental. He hardly every got sentimental, but he was scared. His life had not prepared him for such a crisis as this.

He was packing a bag. He had a small backpack that he never used. What did he have to take anywhere? No cell phone, no books, no iPod. He dug the backpack out of the back of his closet. He considered what to put inside. Underwear, a couple t-shirts. He took a roll of money, about \$100, and buried it beneath the clothes. This was all the money he had in the world.

Leaving the bag half packed, he went to the phone in the kitchen. The wallpaper was orange and peeling, 1970s harvest gold wheat gone wrong. He stared hard at it and tried five different numbers. He tried his three friends who had cars but not cell phones. No answer at their houses. He tried his grandfather, a rich tort lawyer who also

disapproved of him. His cellphone gave the same out of service signal as Anne's had. Then, he tried the landline at the lake house. It rang, but no answer.

He imagined his whole family standing around on the deck, watching the beautifully gray lake, perhaps rocking in one of the chairs he'd made last summer, drinking beers, having a little vacation, safe from the winds and rain of the impending storm. He felt a pang of nostalgia. He missed those summers, dangling his feet from the dock, watching huge bass mouth the surface of the water, chopping wood from felled trees to make various pieces, or picking up twigs just to whittle with his knife on the steps of the deck.

All the while his second phone call was echoing in an empty house.

He took a half empty bottle of water from the fridge. He walked to the bedroom and put it in his backpack. He went back to the kitchen and opened a can of beer. After drinking half, he picked up the phone and called all taxi companies listed in the phone book. He plugged one ear with his finger, trying to hear over the parties. All five of the companies had a prerecorded message telling him they would be closed indefinitely so their employees could evacuate with their families.

He had 16 hours till the storm would hit land, another hour before it hit Beaumont. Another seven or so until the worst of it hit the lake. He gathered this from the talk of the party. He shotgunned another beer, zipped up the backpack, and walked out into the red dusk.

\*\*\*\*\*

Alberto hitchhiked about twenty miles to a highway that split to the northwest. He had already passed Lumberton and, unknowingly, his father. He knew of a place he used to take his high school girlfriend. That was when he had a car, when rent and food were paid for by his father. It was about ten more miles from the highway split. It was a concrete building with wood beams where a roof once might have been. It was just a small concrete room with graffiti on the walls and a homeless couple who squatted there with a dog.

He used to take Jacey there during the day when the homeless couple was off in the woods somewhere, looking for food. They'd sit against the wall and watch the sunlight filter through the leaves and the wood beams. Sometimes they'd make love or get high. It was their place to be alone. He'd even broken up with her there before driving her home. He'd never figured Jacey out. She'd wanted to be an artist, but she was constantly fighting religious parents and an extreme upbringing. He thought he should have called her before he left the house. She would have taken care of him in some way. It was too late now. He was out in the dusk on the side of an empty road.

He headed north on the highway to the lake where he knew he'd reach the concrete room before night.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the middle of the night, after the tree fell on the house, Juliana and Anne wrestled the door to the deck open. The wind pushed Alberto in, and it took the three of them to shut the door against the wind.

The two girls immediately wrapped him in one of their blankets, and they sat on the couch while he shivered. Anne wrapped her arms around her brother until he was quiet and no longer shaking.

He told them about his last few hours. How he hadn't found out about the storm until it was too late and hadn't been able to reach anyone. How he'd decided to walk to the concrete room. Juliana knew about the place. He'd taken her there once after school when he'd given her a ride home. They shared something, a love for music. They'd sat talking. Juliana hadn't told Anne about it, but felt a twinge of jealousy now.

The three of them talked quietly on the couch for another hour, under the broken window and the swaying pines, until one by one they drifted off to sleep. Anne and Alberto were the last ones.

"I'm so glad you made it. I was worried. I thought I was seeing a ghost out there," she said in the darkness, sleep in her voice.

"I was scared. Can't believe I walked all this way. I'm glad to be here with you, sis."

"I have to tell you something. You're not going to like it."

"You can tell me anything. You know it," he said, trying to find her hand in the dark.

"You know that baseball player, Adam, I went to homecoming with?" Of course he remembered. He'd braved his father's presence to be there to see them off. He wanted

to be informed about anyone she was dating. He wanted to keep an eye on her even though he was out of the house.

“I had sex with him,” she stumbled over the word, “and now I think I’m pregnant.”

“Woah, what?” Alberto rose from the couch and backed away.

“Shhh.”

“Are you sure?” Alberto spoke out loud, not caring if he woke Juliana, figuring she already knew.

“I had a positive test, day before yesterday.”

Alberto was shaking again. He felt so angry. This was not what he had expected to have been told. He took a deep breath, “Have you told him?”

“Of course not. How would I do that? We barely even talk.”

“Anne. Didn’t you use, you know, protection?”

“Well..no. It was a spur of the moment kind of thing. I know it was stupid.” She sounded like she might cry.

“Just don’t worry about it right now,” Alberto said. He stroked her head. “Go to sleep.”

He waited for a reply and got none. He leaned his head down on the couch and went to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the morning, the light woke them. Their parents had stayed in the back of the house, trying to let them sleep, so they didn't notice the broken window and fallen tree till then. The Thibodauxs stood contemplating the tree while Mrs. Broussard swept up the glass.

Everyone had made such a fuss about Alberto when they'd seen him on the couch. He left out the details of his journey to the house and said a friend dropped him off. Anne's mother shot a look at her like, "See I told you so."

It was after the window glass was swept that they discovered they had no electricity. Luckily, most of the food was still in the coolers. They cleaned out the refrigerator of spoiled food. Juliana made eggs for everyone, and Anne passed around the bottled water.

After breakfast, Bruce went to the neighbor's to see if he'd had any news. He had a little radio. The storm had wiped out Crystal Beach and Port Arthur. The whole area was without power and water. People were being told not to go home to Beaumont and the surrounding areas. There was a FEMA station in Hemphill, the nearest town, where they could drive to get ice and bottled water.

Bruce debated with the women, and it was decided that he and Lydia would go get the ice to replenish the coolers. They would have to conserve gas, though. Bruce had brought enough in a red container to get one car back to Beaumont, but not much further.

Anne felt fidgety all morning. There was no relief in the late September heat without air conditioning. She felt nauseated. The eggs didn't sit well in her stomach. She paced the deck, watching the lake which today shone a bright blue in the sunlight. Strange how the storm could cause so much damage and then be gone, she thought. Juliana and Alberto left her alone, trying to keep her mother busy.

Anne paced the deck, thinking, but knew what she would do. There was no way she could have a baby at fifteen with someone she barely spoke to. With someone she barely knew. She knew she'd remember Adam only as the baseball player who took her virginity as quietly as he'd stopped calling her. She felt close to tears on the deck. For now, she didn't think of how she would do what she'd decided to do with the whole area being without power. Telling her parents didn't even cross her mind. Her father would disown her. He would probably take a shotgun to Adam. Mr. Bruce, Juliana's father, would be so disappointed and so would her mother. Her mother would cry. She could see the scene now.

Alberto and Juliana shared glances in the kitchen as they watched Anne. Anne's mother called from the back of the house that she'd found some old clothes of Harry's Alberto could wear while his, drenched in his backpack last night, dried in the sun on the deck. Juliana had carefully set them out on the deck railing when she woke. She'd been the first and found Alberto's soaked backpack in a puddle on the floor. Under the bottle of water, she found a sock that contained the \$100 in cash. She left that there. Now, they watched Anne walk out to the dock, trying to use her phone. She held it up in the air, trying to get a signal.

They exchanged another glance wondering if she was doing what they thought, if she was going to tell Adam. She had decided she better tell him. There was no way he could convince her not to do what she had decided to do, but she thought he ought to know. If nothing else, she wanted to make him feel as bad as she felt now. She felt like she had betrayed her whole life, like nothing would ever quite be the same.

Juliana escaped the house and went down to the dock. She sat next to Anne who sat with her legs dangling toward the water.

“Were you trying to call him?”

“Yeah, but all the phones must be down. Couldn’t get through to anybody.”

“Have you decided to do what we talked about?”

“Yes. I just wanted to tell him first, but I guess it doesn’t matter. What does it matter if he knows or not. He can just go on, living blissfully unawares while I take care of the problem.”

“Don’t be a martyr now. You’re right to tell him,” Juliana said. The water in the reservoir was so high, their toes almost touched the surface. “I have a plan, though. I’ve been formulating it all morning.”

Anne flipped her long brown hair around her shoulder and looked at Juliana. She smiled for the first time all day. Juliana was like a sister. She should’ve known she’d take care of her.

“Now, the only problem is money,” Juliana said. “I have enough in my royalty account, but I don’t think I’ll be able to access it because of the storm.”

“I’ve got about \$150 in cash,” Anne said.

“How much does it cost?”

“I called before we left,” Anne said. “In Lake Charles it cost \$300. We’ll probably have to go further north to Baton Rouge, now. Hopefully it’s the same.”

“Well maybe we can find an ATM or something on the road.” Juliana didn’t mention Alberto’s money. She kept that to herself, in case they needed it later.

“What’s this big plan? Does Alberto know? I want him to come.”

“He’s involved. He has a friend in Baton Rouge. The plan is to get there without our parents and say we’re staying with that friend. I can put a hotel room on my credit card, and they probably won’t even notice.”

“I don’t know if I can go through with this.”

“You can do it. What are your other options? Having it?”

“You’re right,” Anne said. “I have to do this. I’ve already decided. There’s no turning back.”

As they planned, Anne felt a little like a coward. As though she should own up to her mistake, but she thought of how this would change her life. She and Juliana had already discussed how underprepared she was for something like this.

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Miraculously, their parents bought the story, letting them take one of the cars to get to Baton Rouge. They couldn't stay at the lake anyway. The power and water were out indefinitely. They couldn't take showers and were running out of food. The Thibodaux's and Anne's mother decided to head north. They weren't concerned with splitting up with their children. They trusted them. Juliana had a credit card. The girls probably would never have been able to pull it off if Harry Broussard had been there.

They piled into Bruce's truck, Alberto driving, and headed east to Baton Rouge. They had to take a few detours due to fallen pines blocking the roads, but they finally made it by nightfall. Juliana checked them into a motel near the university. They were lucky to get a room, the clerk said. Apparently people had been coming in droves, but a lot of them had moved on that morning, trying to make it home.

"Where are y'all from," the clerk asked.

"Beaumont," Alberto replied, nervous for some reason, as if someone was going to recognize them and figure out what they were doing. He fought Anne the whole way to Baton Rouge. Was she *sure* this was what she wanted? Maybe she better wait and tell Adam. Maybe she should just wait a few weeks and see how she felt. She said she couldn't do that. She needed to take care of it now. It was the only time they had a free pass from their mother to be out of town. She couldn't get it done in Texas without parental consent because she wasn't 18.

Anne cried on the bed of their motel room for an hour after Juliana made the appointment. She tried to call Adam again and got no answer. They had to wait a day. Then, they would go to the clinic where she'd have a test to make sure, and then have the

procedure. That's what they kept calling it, a procedure. Like if they followed these steps the problem would just go away. That's why Anne was crying. It seemed so awful.

Alberto ordered them a pizza. There was still the matter of how to pay for the procedure. Anne and Juliana discussed this quietly. Alberto ate his pizza, still unsure if he should fight the girls on this decision. He was, after all, three years older than they were. He'd spent his last six months out in the world. He had to have some wisdom to contribute, some reason against this horrible thing they were about to do.

The next day, they moped around the hotel room. Alberto walked down the street briefly to see his friend. It was someone he didn't have much left in common with anymore now that the friend had gone away to college, partying every night, not studying. Alberto felt regretful as if he'd never get to experience this. He'd ruined his chance. He felt nostalgic for home. He wished he was there right now, in Beaumont, just home from school. Maybe next semester he could finish high school or get his GED. He'd shook the friend's hand and walked slowly back to the motel into the wind. Anne was asleep, and he and Juliana sat on the curb outside their room, talking about Anne. They finally moved on to different topics, to music. Alberto felt as if his spirits had lifted a little.

He didn't notice until his hand brushed Juliana's exposed, freckled thigh. He felt a chill at sitting so close to her. He studied her red hair and upturned nose as she watched the cars pass on the street. He was sure she felt him watching her, but she kept silent and turned away. It would be strange, he knew. He'd never thought of Juliana as anything but a little sister, an extension of Anne. But now he felt calm being near her. He wondered if

she'd always had that effect on him. His heart was beating at a normal rate, and his hands were no longer trembling.

"I'm thinking about finishing high school next semester. Maybe trying out college," he blurted out to Juliana.

She smiled at him and nodded.

He said, "I want something more than what I have now, you know. I can't work at a sandwich shop the rest of my life."

"You'll find something to do. It'll be something you love. These things have a way of finding us."

She was right, he knew. She made him feel like there was hope for him. That he wasn't a fuck up. She made him look forward to something that was to come rather than pine for the past.

Her eyes followed the swaying pine trees across the road. The wind had picked up. Night was coming, and they would have to figure out dinner. Maybe Anne would want to go out, Alberto thought. They could have themselves a little party before tomorrow. The wind gusted around them, picking up Juliana's red hair. It brushed against his cheek again giving him goosebumps. He rubbed his arms and watched Juliana's face for some sign that it was okay to do what he wanted.

He leaned over and kissed her freckled cheek. She turned her head quickly to look at him, her eyes wide with surprise.

"What was that for?"

“For making me feel better. About the future, I mean.”

The corners of Juliana’s mouth turned down. “I didn’t know you were feeling bad.”

“I almost forgot about this stuff with Anne, but it’s seeping back.” Alberto felt disappointed. He’d wanted something more, to make some connection with her.

“Yeah. I think it’s going to take a long time.” Juliana reached out then and grabbed his hand, rough and calloused from his woodworking. She gave it a squeeze as the wind picked up again making the pines sway, making a sound like a violent waterfall that only the pine trees could make, rubbing against one another. “She’s going to need you to take care of her.”

This somehow made him feel full of pride. His sister would need him, and he’d be able to take care of her. He’d be able to shield her from the hurt she would feel after getting rid of this child, something she was too young to understand. It would be something he could do that his father couldn’t, something he’d understand.

He squeezed Juliana’s hand back, not quite smiling, but the lines around his eyes deepened. He got up off the curb and pulled Juliana up with him, wrapping her in a hug as the wind whirled around them and the pines danced around them and the hotel. They went back inside to their sleeping Anne, ready for what was to come even if she wasn’t.

## Road Hunting

Every night of the summer Daniel and Juliana go road hunting. They meet at the Pig Stand on Calder Street in Beaumont, Texas. The Pig Stand is an old diner halfway between Juliana's house on the west side of town and his on the south. The waitress, Ella, knows their names. She brings their coffee without asking, and even sits down to join them for a cigarette. They always play the same songs on the jukebox: "He Stopped Loving her Today" by George Jones and "You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling" by the Righteous Brothers.

At the Pig Stand they wait for the regulars to come and go, sometimes each drinking at least five cups of coffee. They wait for the two policemen getting ready for the night shift, the young construction worker from Vidor who yells into his phone that Jesus Christ is Lord, for the two old Mexican men to sit at the counter and flirt with Ella.

Daniel and Juliana wait for the regulars because they are the constants in their lives, like moons orbiting, rising and setting, waxing and waning. This is the summer after Juliana's first year of college. She works at the Texaco Credit Union in Port Arthur, a job her father got her. Her father knows the head of the board of directors, who they knew was important enough to create a cushy job for her. Juliana goes early in the morning to deliver and sort the mail to all three branches. She files in the afternoon, sitting at the central desk, watching people come and go. Daniel does nothing except take one summer class at Lamar.

At the Pig Stand, after they are shaky with caffeine, they climb into Daniel's mother's red Ford Taurus, never Juliana's Dart, and drive out to the country. They take Calder, past the once-grand mansions that are now crack houses, and the Mexican restaurants, and St. Elizabeth's hospital, all the way until it meets Phelan. Phelan runs past still-nice houses with trees, the high school where Daniel and Juliana met, and toward Winnie and Hardin. The strip malls and dentist's offices turn to fields and clumps of towering pines. At the train tracks, once they're out of town, they veer right and pass the Exxon refinery. Its stacks chug on, spewing vapor, in the haze of the yellow lights that hang over the metal structures like stars. They twist and turn through fields and at the stop sign turn right to make the loop through Winnie.

They play a game called road hunting. They have a whole points system and everything. Deer and domestic animals are off-limits. Hitting a possum is one point, a raccoon two, armadillo is five, wild pigs and crocodiles make you the Winner for Life. The armadillos jump straight up in the air and roll up into a ball. In their history of road hunting, only one armadillo has been hit. Juliana has no points because Daniel never lets her drive. He has 13, mostly from possums and neutra rats.

"There, over there. I saw a raccoon's eyes flash," Juliana says, pointing to the brush on the side of the dark road.

Daniel veers a little to the right, trying to scare the raccoon out in to the road. They pass the dark creature, and it slithers away into the night woods. "Missed him. Maybe next time around," he says. "Good job trying to get the assist, though."

Juliana feels she and Daniel are just friends. After driving for an hour, he takes her to his father's shop on College Street. He parks in the back of the metal building, away from the lights and kisses her in the car. Until just recently, Daniel still had the same girlfriend from high school, Tressie. She never entered Juliana's periphery. Juliana sees few people from high school anyway when she is in town. Daniel is the only one she still sees, besides her best friend, Anne. Since Juliana never sees anyone else, she can pretend Tressie wasn't even there because she never would hear about her except when she was calling and crying because Daniel was lying to her. Then, Juliana just pretended she was carrying on some secret love affair where she was playing the role of the other woman, and she felt grown up even though she is only 19.

Sometimes in the car, behind his father's shop Daniel unzips his pants and pushes Juliana's head down to his lap. Sometimes she doesn't want to do this, but she does it anyway because a part of her is afraid that if she doesn't, Daniel will end their summer routine. She needs this. She can't have him take it away. It makes her feel generous to give him pleasure. Anyway, she knows that she has never been good at saying no. Since she was a child, she wanted peace. She doesn't like disagreements. And giving him this pleasure gives her a power she doesn't have the rest of the time they are together. He dictates the relationship except when she makes him vulnerable in his pleasure, in his mother's car behind the shop. Daniel says he won't have real sex with her because he has already taken two girls' virginity, and he doesn't want her to be the third. Juliana was OK

with this because she wants it anyway to be with someone she loves, and she knew she didn't really love Daniel.

Daniel pretends like he loves her, though. "I want to marry you. No one else will have us," he tells her. She recoils internally when he says this. She wants to tell him to speak for himself. *Someone will want me.* This is after he breaks up with Tressie. Daniel bought an engagement ring for his first girlfriend in high school, Megan. When she broke up with him for cheating on her with Tressie, he gave Tressie the ring at the beginning of the summer, but he took it back when she broke up with him because he was spending so much time with Juliana. Now Juliana's sure he will try to give her the ring someday, and that she will certainly say no because she knows Daniel's presence in her life is only temporary.

Daniel has plans. He has big plans. He tells Juliana about them in the car while they are road hunting. "I signed up for the Marine Corps boot camp today." His whole life he has wanted to be a Marine. His brother is an officer. Daniel wants to do the same thing as his brother and go to officers' school at Texas A&M but has decided for this summer to put it off and go to boot camp instead. Juliana thinks this is brave and manly. When he talks about boot camp, she has no problem filling her mouth with him.

Daniel is supposed to leave in August. He'll travel to Houston to get his physical. Some nights, Daniel invites Juliana to his house instead of going road hunting, always after the Pig Stand, though. He lives on the south side of town, somewhere Juliana

doesn't go much. His house is white clapboard with dark wood paneling inside, set between houses much the same, in varying states of disrepair. His mom gives Juliana coupons to Macy's and, one time, flip flops with cloth tassels tied on the straps. Daniel tells Juliana his Mom likes her better than his last girlfriends. His Dad does too. It makes Juliana feel normal and happy to hang out with his parents and have them like her; she feels grown up and comfortable then in her own skin. She decides this is why she can't risk losing their nightly routine. Sometimes she and Daniel watch a movie on the couch and then go up to his brother's old room on the second story with a slanted ceiling and wrestle on the bed. Daniel says things like, "It will be nice when we are married someday. You'll wait for me while I'm away?"

She doesn't know what to say when he says things like that. She just goes along with it even though she feels she won't even know Daniel in ten years. Still, she harbors some fantasy of a perfect life—with him or anyone, really. For now she's projecting her marriage fantasies onto Daniel because he is there and willing, at least in as much as it gets him what he wants from her.

They spend almost every day together this summer. She never really becomes Daniel's girlfriend, even after Tressie. They go to the Pig Stand where it is awkward explaining to Ella and the other waitresses that they are not really dating per se. Sometimes Juliana complains about this situation to Anne. Anne has known Daniel since the 6th grade when he tried to kiss her while they were watching *Top Gun*.

“Hey,” Juliana says, “the first time he kissed me it was during *Top Gun*.” They laugh. Their friend Corrina also kissed Daniel during *Top Gun*. Juliana plays down her feelings for Daniel to everyone. Juliana does like him; he can be charming, but Anne tells her to watch out. She tells Juliana that Daniel is manipulative, that he fake-cries to girls and steers their feelings to make them feel a certain way about him. Juliana doesn’t want to believe this, but she still acts to Anne and others as if she doesn’t really care about him anyway; she sometimes even talks about Daniel sarcastically to her friends. She certainly doesn’t let on that she needs Daniel at this point in her life. That he has for now become important for her. She sometimes even starts to think, *Maybe he is different with me*.

Juliana’s family has lived in Beaumont for generations, but she didn’t meet Daniel until high school. She went to the private middle school before that. Beaumont is like any small Texas town: everyone knows each other, most people work in the refineries or off shore, they love their high school football team, and kids marry young. Juliana is no different except her parents have more money than everyone, at least everyone except the Tort Lawyers—Beaumont has the highest number of Tort Lawyers in the country. Juliana knows that having money has kept her apart, except from Anne, whose father also worked high-up at the Texaco refinery, so Juliana’s father ran in the same circles as Anne’s.

Her mother told Juliana she was slumming after she’d brought Daniel to the house. That she could do better. But her father was charmed by him, much as Juliana herself was. Her father liked that Daniel dropped his “r”s when he spoke, and that he’d politely

opened doors for Juliana: he was simple. Juliana thinks her father probably thought, *This kid will protect my daughter.*

Juliana went away last August to college in the big city—San Antonio. It is a small, private college. Most everyone she knew from high school went to big state universities like The University of Texas, Texas A&M, or Lamar in Beaumont. This made her seem to them like a snob, like she is too good for their public-school ways. And Daniel himself makes fun of the brand new car her father bought her, the fancy things in their house, the fancy school she goes to. So when Daniel takes her out to the country with him, it makes her feel less apart, like she is accepted in the Beaumont world.

The days of summer drown away in the wet humidity that hangs around them like blankets. The smell of the paper factories up north in Buna and Woodville hovers in the air and stick in their nostrils. They roll the windows down when they drive, to overpower the paper smell with the pines that get thicker the further west toward Winnie. Juliana feels the days until Daniel is going to leave for boot camp and she is going to leave for school slipping away, vaporizing and dissipating into the air like the clouds of vapor coming from the stacks of the oil refineries. Soon they don't even road hunt. "It's too humid," Daniel complains. Instead, they just drive, passing the blue shadows of the pine trees, listening to the country-classics radio station, Daniel moving Juliana's hand to find the bulge in his pants.

Finally, it is the night before he is supposed to leave; the night before he becomes a Marine. He is leaving for Houston early in the morning where he will board a bus full of other boys going to San Diego. After dinner with her family, Juliana pulls up to the Pig Stand in her Dart, and Daniel is waiting there for her.

It is a Saturday night and the booths lining the edges of the circular building are full. The Pig Stand inside is wood paneled and plastered with tin Coca-Cola signs, Elvis photos, pig paraphernalia, and 45s. Juliana walks in quickly and the door slams against the jukebox that is awkwardly wedged behind the door. She cringes in embarrassment. She sees Daniel has staked out their usual booth on the east side of the building by the window. She sits across from him on the teal-blue vinyl bench. Daniel is leaning over the back of the booth, talking over his shoulder to the cop with the mustache who sometimes helps Juliana with the crossword puzzle when Daniel isn't there.

Everyone at the coffee shop knows he is going away in the morning, and they are all nice to him. The Cajun cook comes out from behind the grill to shake his hand. Ella sits down and talks for a while when she brings their coffees. The regulars are proud of him and wish him luck. Daniel and Juliana leave around ten to go for their last drive.

They leave her Jeep in the lot and head west, as always, toward Winnie. They make the loop three times this night. They stop during the third loop so Daniel can pee in the woods. "Watch out for those wild pigs," she calls after him. She always finds it creepy when sitting in the car alone in the dark, and they've stopped near a crumbling house which always seems ominous to her.

Daniel gets back in the car but doesn't turn it on. He sits in the dark, smoking a cigarette out the open window, and she waits. She watches the house and thinks *There are things moving in there*. She waits for whatever Daniel has to say.

"I'm scared of going to boot camp," he finally blurts out. "I've heard the loneliness gets pretty bad. If you'll just say you'll be thinking about me it would make it a lot easier. Knowing that someone here is thinking about me will make it a lot easier."

Then he starts crying. Juliana's never seen a man cry before, except in the movies. It scares her. *Men are not supposed to be fragile like this*, she thinks. She tells him she will think about him there at boot camp every day.

"I am scared to go to war. I'm scared of dying," he says.

She hugs him awkwardly across the center console. She strokes the back of his head, feeling the bristling of his now tightly-shaved hair. It feels strange that he is the one crying and not her. At this moment, after all the past talk of marriage from him, she wonders at her own lack of feeling at the thought of him leaving. It is more just having someone there that she might miss, and that he gives her some attention. She doesn't even feel close to crying.

Daniel gets out of the car and gets into the backseat, and she feels she is supposed to follow. She gets out and looks up and down the road where hazy fog hangs from the humidity. Inside, the car is cool and dry from the air-conditioning, and she lets Daniel remove her shirt and then her pants. He takes his shirt off and lays against Juliana, shaking every so often. She holds him until he starts kissing her and then he's taking his

pants off and before Juliana knows it her head is against the car door, and she is crying because Daniel is in her and it hurts. He no longer seems upset, but lost in pleasure. While she's willing to make this sacrifice for him, she's unsure why. Maybe it is easier; maybe, she thinks, she wanted this all along.

Afterward, they dress awkwardly in the backseat, and he goes quickly up to the front and starts the car and takes her in the direction of the Pig Stand. She feels happy and light, forgetting the strange way this moment finally found her in the southeast Texas woods, but feeling like it was behind her now, and she was grateful for that. They hit a raccoon on the way. She finally gets a point—one for the assist—for having pointed out the raccoon in the brush.

He takes her to her Jeep. They hug and kiss. She looks at his face as he pulls away, thinking it will be the last time she sees him, and she doesn't feel happy or sad. Then she traverses the low-lying roads that criss-cross through refineries and swamps; she finds her way back home, back to her bed.

The next day, Juliana's phone rings late in the morning after church. It is Daniel. She asks him, "Why are you calling me? I thought you'd be on your way to California right now."

"I didn't go," he says, and immediately follows up, "Want to go road hunting this afternoon?"

They hardly ever go in the daylight and hardly ever on a Sunday. Sundays are usually reserved for family: church, dinner, lying around the pool. But she doesn't think of this—she thinks of how strange it is that he didn't go. How chipper he sounds this morning compared to last night. How revolted she feels.

“Why didn't you go?” He doesn't answer, and says they'll talk about it when they go road hunting. She figures out some excuse to tell her parents for the afternoon without letting on that Daniel didn't go to boot camp. He picks her up in his father's work van. It is a blue Astro van with missing seats in the back, full of tools and junk. The familiar strip malls and dentist's offices fall away and become pine forests and fields where cows lie like big rocks in the shade of oak trees.

*This, she thinks as the wind from the open window dries the sweat on her forehead, is the last road hunting of the summer. I leave in ten days. I will hear his explanation for not going, and I will be finished with him. No wedding-talk, no third-hand engagement ring, no Pig Stand.*

Daniel tells her he decided this wasn't the right time and that he better finish high school first and instead start in the officers' school the next summer. Then, he would be making more money when he entered the Marines. She listens, but she doesn't say much. She knows that no excuse short of death would douse the disgust that has flared up in her heart.

She too has big plans. She plans to go back to her fancy school away from here, away from people like Daniel. She plans to forget road hunting and pine trees. She feels

she will be more at home now among the cedar and oak-lined rivers of San Antonio, and among the private-school kids from Houston. She plans to never come back to live in Beaumont, but to fall in love, to learn things Daniel will never know. She plans to be happy. She plans for any memory of Daniel to flash only once in a while, like a raccoon's eyes in the bright beam of headlights.

## The Weight

It's April, and Arshi keeps saying there is something he has to tell her. He has been building this thing up for the last month. "Segreto," he says to her at night when she asks him of it. Juliana waits in her apartment on the edge of the city. She waits for the bell to ring to let Arshi in. She sits on her bed, the only soft surface in the place, in a silk bathrobe, just out of the shower. She doesn't know the secret will change everything. That Arshi is a murderer.

Juliana has been here for eight months, just out of college, working at bars, taking weekend trips to Rome. She took the trip on a whim. She wanted to get out, experience the world, escape Texas. Since she got here all she has wanted to do is go back, but something she can't name holds her.

She has known Arshi for seven of her eight months in Italy. They met one night, drunk on wine and the cold mountain air at one of Perugia's many Irish pubs. They had danced silently, then talked in an alley outside a *discoteca* until the sky paled to an icy morning and Juliana stamped her numb feet, awakening herself from a dream. They had kissed, parted ways, only to meet again the next day and the next and the next.

The bell finally rings, and Juliana presses the button to unlock the front door and leaves her door ajar. She straightens the chairs at the kitchen table, waiting for him to come through the door. He enters with his hands in the pockets of his jacket. He is upright, good posture, thin with a silhouette so familiar to Juliana after her eight months here, not only because it is his, but because it seems to belong to the men of Europe. He kisses her cheek, and she breathes in his smell of body odor and cigarettes and cheap soap. His hair smells of coffee after his shift at the Romcaffe near the Palazzo Galenga.

Juliana leads him to the bed where they sit facing the open window. It is just warm enough to leave it open during the day. Arshi lights a cigarette and blows the smoke at the setting sun.

“I have a letter. I want you to read,” he says in Italian without looking at her. “You will understand better the secret in English.” He raises the cigarette to her lips where they rest near the curve of his neck.

He looks very serious. He is very serious all the time though only twenty-one. He walks around with this weight on his head. Juliana watches the sky purple and deepen out the window of her bedroom. She likes their arrangement because it is passive by nature. They operate on instincts, not words. They communicate important things in letters. He tells her the letter is at his *appartamento* in the center of the city. Juliana wants to go there. She wants his secret out, the weight lifted.

Since January, she’s had a reoccurring dream. She dreams of Texas. In the dream, people ask her how to get places in Beaumont. She can’t remember. Each time she wakes, the feeling of reaching into her mind for a piece of something and not being able to find it lingers, just finding a blank, grasping at empty air.

In the mornings, Arshi takes her to a café down the street from his room. He rents a room, much like hers, in the city center. It has two twin beds, a small TV, a kitchen with stove and a tiny refrigerator. Arshi is a student at the Università di Perugia. He is Albanian, studying sports medicine to be a trainer for soccer teams. He has told her he is from a small town outside Lezhë, in the northwestern portion of the High Plateau of Albania.

One morning in January, Juliana awoke, unable to shake the dream. She was disoriented, awakening to a cracked white wall, sounds of children and trucks streaming in through the window with the morning sunlight. It took her a moment to remember where she was. She became aware of Arshi breathing on her neck, making it hot and wet in the curve there.

She moved to wake him. She wanted him to be awake, so she didn't feel alone in his cartoon sheets. She rocked back and forth, rubbed his arm, until, finally, he woke and kissed her neck in the damp spot.

"What is it?" He knitted his brows and searched her eyes. She wouldn't look at him. She turned to him and buried her face in his chest, breathing in the smell of body odor and soap, a smell that had become as familiar as the pine forests of Texas.

"I dreamed of home," Juliana said.

He wrapped his arms around her back. They were muscly and thin but strong. For a moment they froze, just breathing while he absorbed Juliana. He absorbed her feeling as if a current radiating from her pores. It was something that happened when you couldn't use words, some animal intuition, a heightening of other senses.

He got out of the bed. "Wait," he said. He held up a finger and grabbed his jeans and a T-shirt from a nearby chair. "5 minutes."

He left Juliana in his sheets, half naked as she was most nights, operating as if every night was their last. She wasn't sure if she could be any other way. With her, it was all or nothing.

Arshi returned in five minutes as promised with tiny plastic cups of espresso and a Nutella-filled croissant. She sat up in the bed, pulling the sheet around her and took the

offered breakfast. He lit a cigarette and sat in a chair he pulled up to the bed, watching her eat.

“It’s difficult to be far away,” he said. “I know. Also I miss my family.”

*But it’s different*, she thought. He was just across a small sea from his home country while Texas was a whole ocean away. He could go back whenever he wanted. It was like travelling from Texas to California. She imagined her parents’ house in Beaumont and how her father at this moment was sitting in his study looking at maps of Texas, looking for the next well he would drill, glass of Scotch at his elbow resting atop the stack of atlases she’d paged through hundreds of times as a child while her mother snored a room away on the couch in front of the TV, dreaming of her, probably, dreaming that Juliana was a child and her mother had left her at church, feeling that she had forgotten something important, that something was missing.

Arshi’s phone had rung then, and she lighted a cigarette while he went around the wall to the bathroom to answer it. She heard his murmurs travel over the wall. She listened abstractly to him talk while she sipped the bitter espresso and waited for him to be finished. She tried to understand what he was saying, but he was speaking Albanian. It was a harsh, guttural language. Sometimes she tried to repeat the words he said, but he laughed at her, shaking his head.

He came back around the wall, smiling and toothy, seriousness forgotten. “My mother says, ‘hello,’” he said in Italian.

“Ciao mama,” she said. “When will I meet her?”

He avoided her eyes, tearing open sugar packets, brushing croissant crumbs from the bedspread. “I don’t know. Soon. Soon you will meet her,” he says. “Voglio sposiamo.” He leans over to kiss her forehead.

Juliana sat surprised in the bed. *Sposiamo* is a word she knew from Italian classes, from a text book. It meant, “We marry.” Juliana had dreamt about this moment her whole life. She had not yet learned to say no. She was a peacemaker, passive. She wanted everyone’s happiness before her own. She dreams of marriage and grand love her whole life and here it was being proposed to her, however unceremoniously.

”You are a beautiful person and I love you,” Arshi said. “Why don’t we marry?”

They’d spoken of marriage often in an abstract way. She imagined herself barefoot and pregnant with the five children he wanted to have. She imagined the life they would have in the immediate future. She would wait for him all day while he worked, counting money, he always dealt in cash which she thought was from the coffee shop (some of it was, he told her), drawing out a budget, mopping the floor. She could never imagine much past this. She didn’t want to think of this. She merely nodded her head, wrapped in the romantic visions of being married in some quaint ceremony in Albania. It would have to be there because it was difficult for Albanians to travel. He would need to marry her first and then get an American passport. Then, they could go anywhere. She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him back in the bed with her.

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Arshi had approached his Albanian friend Zamira who studied English to write the letter for him. He thought it best to translate from Albanian to English, not muddle it translating from Albanian to Italian to English. He thought it best it come from his

language straight into hers. Since he could not do this himself, he applied for Zamira's help. She had spoken to Juliana many times in English. He had watched them jealously, wishing he knew what they were saying. Were they speaking of him? Was Juliana divulging some important key to her character? He hated the not knowing so much, that he declined to even listen, trying to ignore that it was happening.

In Juliana's apartment, he touches her freckled pink skin. He has never seen skin this light. Skin that doesn't turn yellowy olive in the sun. Hers takes on a more reddish hue. He had wondered if she was English when they first met. He had known a few English that had visited his village, and they had the same type of coloring.

His hand twitches to move to the place where the letter is hidden in his wallet when she asks about it, but he doesn't move. He has felt it there since Zamira gave it to him that morning on his way to work. It has felt heavy and precious, like a bank roll waiting to get stolen. He checked his pocket several times throughout the day while making coffee to make sure it was still there. He hadn't read it until his shift had ended. He texted Juliana to tell her he was coming. Sitting at one of the red umbrella tables at the café, he read the letter but didn't know what the words meant. He hoped it would be satisfactory. He hoped it said the right thing. He would have to trust Zamira.

In her apartment, he can't quite bring himself to give her the letter yet. He's been so happy living in this world with Juliana. How they walk through the piazza, watch soccer, play darts, dance, sit on the steps, have coffee. And she doesn't have to do anything. She's just his angel. She glows with light red-gold. In her world, Mateo doesn't touch him. Blood is so far away.

So he lies again. “It’s in my apartment,” he says. He needs an excuse to get her out. Proceeding with caution is of the utmost importance. He must show her his weight; he must make it right.

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Purple is the color of evenings and shadows in Italy. Juliana moves through these purple shadows, stomach churning at the thought of this secret to come. She has theories. She has gone over all the scenarios: another woman, a kid, gambling debts. All these things are plausible to her because in the seven months she’s known Arshi, she’s seen him gamble, she’s wondered at his disappearing acts, she’s met his friends, who are nice but a little rough and brash. She is afraid of anything that will disrupt their happiness.

As soon as Arshi had told her that today was the day of the secret, she’d called Anne, her best friend. She knew Anne wouldn’t understand; she didn’t know him. She wasn’t there. Juliana tried to explain how she was feeling, her theories about what he was hiding, but Anne didn’t understand. She thought Arshi sounded weird and didn’t know why Juliana was so in love with him. Juliana couldn’t explain it.

Arshi’s elbow grips hers tightly and moves her this way and that through the alleys, up the staircases, around corners and piles of dog shit. They reach the Piazza IV Novembre. Crowds of students gather on the steps of the cathedral. Perugia is a town of *stranieri*, or foreigners. The cathedral steps are like the tower of Babel, all the world’s languages coming together. Juliana sees two girls from Cyprus who work at the same bar she does, La Tana dell’ Orso. They wave.

Arshi leads her across the piazza, past the fountain and the storefronts and cobblestones that ripple in the light reflecting off the water. They are underwater, floating (no, more determined than that), swimming towards Arshi's room.

Instead of going straight down the Corso Vannucci, Arshi veers left down toward the grocery store in a smaller triangular piazza.

"You have ten cents?" He stops her and holds out his hand, waiting.

Juliana digs in her purse and finds two five-cent pieces. She drops them in his upturned palm. He resumes his path until they pause in front of *il farmacia*. The green neon light of the sign casts over them, paling Arshi's olive skin, and for a moment they watch the single employee in a white coat checking things on a clipboard, preparing to close.

Arshi opens the door and lets her walk in ahead of him. The clerk looks up at them as they enter. The clerk smiles and goes back to her work. Arshi leads Juliana to a big old-fashioned scale that sits in the center of the square room: it is green metal with a round head. Outside, it is getting dark, but the face of the scale is illuminated by an orange light.

Juliana stares into the face of the scale. "Why are we here?"

Arshi doesn't answer but drops the change in the slot. He takes her purse and gestures for her to climb on the scale. She does. 63.5 kilograms.

"You remember," he says.

She nods and steps off the scale, takes back her purse. He drops in the other coin, and he carefully takes her place on the scale, placing his well-kept American sneakers on the rectangle of the base. The arm swings. 68 kilograms.

He points at the illuminated face of the scale. He says, “Look. I’m heavier than you.” She is surprised because he doesn’t look it.

“Where is the letter? I want to read the letter,” Juliana says, getting impatient. She doesn’t see the importance of this. The scale tells her nothing of the secret. He makes her stand, though, regarding the fact that he is heavier.

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Arshi has planned the whole thing out. He will tell her of this weight he has felt. She will understand. He will weigh them both. It will be symbolic. She can’t be mad at him if she sees how bad he feels about this secret that he hasn’t shared. He is afraid she will accuse him of not trusting her with the information. He hasn’t yet thought that she will hate him for taking another human life. He will realize that later, years after she is gone as he sits in a self-imposed exile.

Now, though, he thinks of how she will hate him for lying to her. For not telling her the whole truth. She is so good. She shines in gold in his mind. His stomach turns at the thought of where he would be without her.

But he thinks the physical weighing will be a good transition. He will show her how hard it’s been. How lying wasn’t something he had chosen, how he’d just become more afraid. He couldn’t really ask her to marry him until she knew that he’d killed a man.

So he takes her to the pharmacy on their way to the house to read the letter. He has weighed himself there often. It is a question his mother asks often on the telephone, concerned about his food intake while he’s away from her.

As they walk in, the scale face shines as if a beacon; it is showing him the way, leading him towards redemption and his savior. His savior. He turns to Juliana and the orange light of the scale reflects of her shiny blonde hair, making a halo of gold around her. He studies her as if this is the last time he will see her. He searches for any knowledge of what's to come, of the pound of bricks he is about to drop on her.

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Juliana isn't sure when things became so serious with Arshi. After they met, things were light for the first few weeks. They would meet at bars in the evening after he finished work at the café and before she went to La Tana for the night. He would usually order a *mocchiato* while she ordered a glass of wine, unaware of all the Europeans drinking coffee around her.

She wouldn't sleep with him at first. He would take her to his room where they watched Italian MTV, or he yelled at the football match, sometimes losing 500 Euros, sometimes winning 100. He gave her massages. He was studying sports medicine which included physical therapy. He would lay her out on the bed and lovingly rub her back and calves. His hands were gentle, as if everything he touched was precious and valuable.

He tried to sleep with her. He took off her shirt but each time he began to unbutton his pants, she would stop him. She tried to put him in her mouth once, slowly moving down his body, sliding off his pants, but he stopped her. "Che fai?" he'd said, surprised.

One night they went out with Juliana's friends from the bar, some Americans who were studying there in the fall. They had been dating for about a month. They went to the Lunabar on Corso Vanucci. It had taken her several minutes to convince Arshi to go in

with her. It was awkward for him with Americans because he didn't know English.

Juliana would translate everything said in the little Italian she knew. It was getting easier for her since she was forced to communicate in it all the time.

He finally agreed, and they went in the bar. He sulked in the corner while Juliana gushed in her native language, happy to be able to communicate her desires and thoughts precisely with words she knew.

Juliana and Arshi left the bar and walked through the quiet alleys toward his room. Juliana leaned her head against his shoulder, drunk from the cold evening air and the wine. They reached his room. She now slept there, only going to her room far on the other side of the city to brush her teeth and shower. She had to keep little squares of toilet paper in her purse since he had none because, like Europeans, he used the bidet, a bar of soap, and a towel.

They started to undress immediately. There was nowhere to be except the bed in the small room. She sat on the bed, and he sat next to her. He ran his hand through her glowing red hair. She waited for him to speak, waited for something. His long olive face was gentle and sweet. He started kissing her. She was a little drunk from the wine at the bar. They went down on the bed, and he started to remove her underwear and she let him. He removed his.

“Wait. Wait,” she said. “Condom.” She didn't know the word for this. She hoped it was a cognate. He looked at her, brow furrowed, confused. “Condom,” she repeated again. She made gestures, tried to explain what it was without words. He still didn't understand

She was frustrated. She got up and went to her purse for the Italian-English dictionary she carried around. There was no word for condom. It was a reduced version, a pocket-size. She looked up the word for sexually transmitted diseases. “Mallatita,” she said, trying that on him.

“Hai mallato?” He was still confused, still searching for her meaning. She didn’t know this was also the general word for illness.

“No, no. AIDS?” she tried.

“WHA?” His voice cracked and went high.

“No, no. Non ho AIDS ma condom.”

He pulled her back to the bed. He kissed her and pulled her harder down to the bed. She struggled a little. He moved his hand between her legs, and it felt wet there. Overcome with desire, he held her down.

“No, condom,” she repeated again, less forcefully.

He mounted her and she let him fill her up, and they became one that night.

Finally, after the *farmacia*, they reach the door to his room for what seems like the millionth time since they met. He takes forever to unlock the door, his key a big old iron thing that has to be jiggled just right to catch. She pushes past him once he gets it open.

“Enough,” she says standing in the middle of the beds. “Where is the letter?”

“It’s here,” he says. She can see his hands trembling.

She holds her hand out. Nervousness overcomes her, and she feels the pressure of the moment: something is about to change them forever. She feels she will no longer be able to stay here, that she will have to run away, whatever it is. She was happy just going

on as they were, happy in their world with their creole of English and Italian, making dinner and drinking wine, holding hands walking through piazzas, going on towards their abstract future.

He places the square of paper, folded eight times in her hand, and stands by the open window. “You’ll want to throw me out the window,” he says. Nervously, she laughs, imagining her pushing him out the window. She sits on the bed and unfolds the letter.

*Dear Juliana, It's long time that I want to tell you this thing. To the last I stayed with this weight on my heart. But now it's arrived the moment to tell you the truth, as well I have very much fear to lost you. I can't go back to Albania. A man there he will kill me. I don't know how to tell it to you. The blood revenge. I killed his brother and it's now turn my. I don't know how we marry. I lie you but with the passing of time I've grown fond of you more and more and I had fear to lost you. I hope you believe me because I value you. Believe me I know that it's difficult now but I don't want to lost you.*

Juliana doesn't want to know this. It washes over her for a moment, while she pretends to continue reading. She reads it once more, slowly. She finally looks up at him. He isn't looking at her but is staring at the cracked wall across from the window. He had told her about the blood feuds one day months ago at the internet café, but she imagined it as something archaic, something that didn't belong in the modern world.

She grasps for the right reaction. In the moment, she feels nothing except fear that he will be taken away from her, that their life will be taken away. She says. “Still ti voglio bene.”

He turns to her, and she sees he is crying. His face is wet. “Come here,” she says and pats the bed next to her. She wraps herself around him feeling like a mother comforting a child. She rubs the back of his head while he shakes. So many questions fill her mind but for now she just strokes his cheek, feeling the weight of what he’s been carrying.

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After she reads the letter, he looks up into her eyes, but he can’t read what’s there. He feels unsure of himself. Unsure of this feeling of letting go, this release. He realizes it’s a feeling that he can’t quite trust her. He can’t quite trust her reaction to this weight that isn’t gone, but that he’s just spread it to both of them to feel a little relief. He realizes what he’s done, how selfish he’s been. He looks away from her at the tiled floor.

“Il film e finito,” he says, knowing he doesn’t mean it. That the film has yet a long a way to go.

The morning after, Arshi wakes up smiling, forgetting momentarily his troubles of the man at home that wanted to kill him, his neighbor’s lifeless body, dead at his own hand. He is happy to have Juliana know everything about him at last. This is just a test imposed on them by his stupidity and fear. He was afraid when he met her in that Irish bar. Afraid of who he was. He no longer feared the life he escaped in northern Albania. Now, he had

Juliana. Her love filled his life. He looked at Juliana still asleep; she glowed in the morning sunlight, golden. *Mio angello*, he'd whispered.

He could move on now. He could do what needed to be done, get away from this place and get her away with him. He thought she would definitely leave with him, when she knew what was at stake. He'd come here two years ago to go to University, to make a better life for himself, to escape the blood vengeance that went back centuries. He had killed when he was only seventeen and had immediately escaped to Italy. He no longer wanted to be a part of the blood feud. He had become sick when he spilled his neighbor's blood.

He had trouble keeping up with his classes at the University. He turned to the easiest way to make money in the new world—selling hash. It was so easy to grow in his country. They prosecuted no one since the country was in shambles. His cousin would bring it over on the ferry and deliver it to Arshi in Bari. He had several customers in Perugia. The Università di Perugia was the second largest University in Italy. The median age of the population in Perugia was twenty. There was such a large market for the hash; he'd made a good life for himself.

But now he wanted to change this. He could no longer be this coward.

Last December, in Albania, Arshi waited. He waited in a grove of trees with his grandfather's rifle in his hand. He waited for his neighbor to walk down the road. He waited every day at this time for his neighbor to walk down the road. His family had killed Arshi's great uncle in 1942, before the communist government, before they'd all moved to town, before their land was taken away. The rules of the *Gjakmarra*, the blood

feud, required vengeance to be brought for the killing of Arshi's great uncle. It fell upon Arshi to complete the task. The feud skipped his grandfather and his father because of the communists. It was now up to Arshi. He would kill the eldest son of his neighbor's family, the boy he'd played with in the streets of the village, shot birds with in the fall, whispered his secrets of loving the girl who sat by the window of their school room where they studied arithmetic and Italian together. It wasn't a choice. Arshi had to do it or dishonor would fall upon his family. Dishonor would kill his family's livelihood; no one would come to their bar anymore. He told himself there was no choice. Even after, there had been a truce declared by the local government official for thirty days while the funeral took place. He sat in his family's kullah and watched the bloodied white T-shirt of Mateo flap in the breeze. The family had hung it out the window, an official sign that the blood feud was back. Soon it would be Arshi's turn to look over his shoulder at every move for Mateo's younger brother to kill him. If only there hadn't been a younger brother it would have skipped a generation and Arshi could kill free of retaliation. He was required to attend Mateo's funeral, but he just got drunk and sulky; he stood in the corner and studied the face of Mateo's mother torn in grief. The grappa burned his stomach and the tears that fell from his eyes as he stumbled through the empty streets of the village after he'd been fed by his victim's family as was the custom. He'd passed out in the square only to be dragged home by his brother as dawn grayed. He had decided that night of the funeral that he would run. That he couldn't be killed. He would end it now, this silly law that ruled and ruined all the boys of the High Plateau.

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Arshi had romanticized Italy to the point that it could be nothing but a disappointment to him. He had been hearing about it all his life, on the radio, on his cousin's TV, in school, in the language on the streets. Even as the ferry docked in the night, surrounded by people who looked and smelled like home and exactly like him, he was tired.

His first stop was Rimini. He had an uncle there who owned a restaurant. He would feed and house him, but he'd have to work. Arshi was fine with that; he just wanted to blend into Italy, forget his life in Albania had happened.

He didn't allow himself to think of it often, the thing that happened there. But sometimes, while he drove his cousin's car at night, just driving to get away on some made up errand, he would imagine great violence: the car hitting the wall, his body scraping the pavement. The tremendous shake and hit and utter devastation made his face scrunch up in the dark, and his hands would tremble.

When he carried trays of wine to patrons of his uncle's restaurant, mostly tourists at the beach for the afternoon, his hands would tremble then too, when he would get a flash of what he'd done. Something about the sandy beach or a person's face would be enough to remind him of the High Plateau. *Matteo had a scar there.*

At these moments, he would go behind the bar and take a nip of the homemade grappa kept in an unmarked, clear bottle there. That would steady him, make the world warm and clear. The grappa reminded him of the words, like a prayer he repeated to himself daily: "You are young and alive and in Italy. That can't touch you anymore."

Finally, he decided he would move to Perugia. He had been accepted at the University there. He would study sports medicine because he loved the *calcio* but couldn't play well enough to be a professional. He took the train from Rimini with

nothing but the clothes on his back, his cell phone, and a wrinkled photograph of his family in Albania. He'd left a brother and sister and his parents there. He also had 100 Euros tucked in the elastic of his underwear. He'd won it over the last month playing blackjack with his cousin and his friends.

When Arshi arrived in Perugia, he had nothing to move into the apartment that the state paid for and that he would share with an Iranian medical student. That was okay because to make up for Arshi's lack of things, the Iranian medical student had a whole drawer full of religious items: a Koran, a prayer mat, several silver trinkets. Arshi would sometimes empty this drawer and look at such things he had never seen before while the Iranian student was away. Arshi was Muslim by birth, but the only connection he had to it was the crumbling tower-like mosques that dotted his home countryside. He would turn the pieces of silver, the prayer mat, the big thick book around in his hands, wondering at owning such beautiful things. He owned nothing in the world except his guilt and that he would give away.

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The morning after the letter she wakes to light streaming through the cracked window and the sounds of an ambulance echoing off the walls of the alley below. He is looking at her. He is watching her wake to their world.

He rushes her to get dressed. She puts on the same clothes she's worn for two days. Luckily, the Italians wear an outfit per week, so she doesn't feel self-conscious about it anymore. They leave the building and burst out into the light of the day. He leads her out to the main *corso*.

“Dove andiamo?” She asks turning her face up toward him. For the first time, she thinks back to the letter the night before and perceives no change. She still likes to be in his presence, under the gentleness of his movements, the care of his actions. Juliana tries not to think of the actuality of it. That someone died at his hands. The hands that so gently touch her face, that rub her back and calves at night. She wonders how he actually did the killing? Did he have a gun, a knife? Did he use those hands?

Arshi leads her through the alleyways of the city. They cross the Piazza IV Novembre where teams of men in blue jumpsuits sweep the cigarette butts and empty beer bottles and use a large hose to spray the ancient stones where so many feet have walked before theirs. They head down the hill, under the Etruscan arch, past the Palazzo Galenga and the Romcaffè where Arshi serves *lattes* to students in the afternoons. Up the hill of Corso Giribaldi, a narrow street is lined with small apartments where hundreds of students live above Kebab and pizza restaurants, internet cafes, and Laundromats.

“Where are we going?” Juliana asks again.

“Qua,” he says, pulling her out of the street into a stone doorway. He rings number thirty on the buzzer and waits. The door opens. The lights don’t turn on, and the hallway of the building is dark and cold. They climb the stairs and go round and round until Arshi stops in front of a door marked thirty. He knocks, and his friend Bessian comes to the door with no shirt on, looking sleepy.

Bessian greets Juliana with a kiss on each cheek and then grabs Arshi’s hand and pulls him into a half hug. Arshi and Juliana enter the room. They sit on chairs in front of a small TV covered in American movies with titles translated to Italian. Arshi and Bessian begin conversing in Albanian. Juliana likes these conversations. Unlike Arshi

who feels uncomfortable when he can't understand Juliana speaking to her friends in English, Juliana revels in the not understanding. She marvels at this part of Arshi she doesn't know: how his voice sounds, what his accent is, what type of person his voice makes him out to be. Sometimes they sound like they are fighting from their faces and the severity of the words, but Juliana has come to learn this is their way, that everything for them is a fight.

Bessian stands in front of where Arshi sits in the chair the whole time. His hair is mussed from having been asleep. He wears basketball shorts that reach to his knees, and he stands at an angle, one leg out, scratching here and there the whole time. Arshi seems to be pleading with him for something. Bessian seems reluctant. He finally goes to the chest of drawers in the corner of the room. He digs in the back and takes out a roll of money. He gives it to Arshi because this is what they do. They help each other out. He tries to convince Arshi that going to Albania, even for a few hours means death. It would be a long journey from the coast home, and word would spread quickly of his return. He would have to be careful. He repeats Bessian's words to Juliana later.

Back on the street, Juliana asks Arshi what happened back there.

"We will go to Albania tomorrow. We will marry, and I'll get an American passport. We'll go to America to your family," he says, finally saying the plans out loud. She will be home within a week with a foreign husband. A foreign husband that is a drug dealer running away from a blood feud. She chooses to think of the foreign husband rather than the going home. This would be the beginning of her life. The thought of her parents forces its way into her head. They would not understand. She'd seen already how her best friend, the person who knew her best, had reacted. Could she use Anne as a

barometer for the rest of the family? Would they accept Arshi? She thought not. Not like his family would accept her because he loves her. This is the impression she's gotten anyway. She hadn't even told her mother about him. She fretted over what she would say when the time came.

But later that night the feeling begins to creep into her heart that this isn't right. Is this really the beginning of her life? How would they survive in Texas? Would he continue to sell drugs there?

She doesn't think it's the questions that fill her head at all. She's no coward. She could face the difficulties that their life would bring. She wasn't so naïve to think that it would be as easy as it was here. He would be in culture shock, she thinks as she watches him stir sauce on the stove. She sits at the table. *What is different about him?*

He pours the sauce over the pasta and lays a piece of sautéed fish over the top. He puts it in front of her, and she eats it, watching his face through the steam. She tries to imagine him holding a rifle or a knife, and he seems so young and fragile to her, so skinny. He feels bad sometimes in the chest from the smoking. He coughs and spits. He wakes up at night, rubbing it there. And the way his brows furrow sometimes she can tell that he is feeling some pressure.

He smiles at her over the meal and reaches out for her hand. "My wife," he says. He says this like it's the only thing that matters in the world. That he is as happy as her. She who grew up in a small town in Southeast Texas. She who never even knew anybody who had died. She who is so afraid of death she has dreams about it at night: her death, Anne's death, her parents' deaths. She once had a dream that a clock counted down the

minutes until she was to die. Now she feels surrounded by death, and she can't believe he could smile at her like that, as if everything is okay.

She moves her hand to continue eating, but the food in her mouth feels like paste. Like tomato flavored glue. She rolls it around with her tongue, trying to swallow. She gulps some wine.

“What is it?” He asks her.

She smiles and tries to hide the change in her face. *You're a killer*, she tells him with her eyes. She knows the smile is not coming off like she wants it to.

“We will be okay. I didn't want to do it. It's just my country. It's like being forced to join the military,” he says.

She nods, turning this over. She is afraid to speak, so she takes another bite of food. She watches his eyes search her face. He doesn't eat any food. It just sits in front of him, the fish looking gelatinous from the oil it was cooked in.

“In life, many people do the easy things. They run from their duty. They run from hardship. It is brave to do the hard things. Those are the good things.”

Juliana relaxes her shoulders at this. She knows she has been clenching them around her ears. She sits up straight. She wonders if he's talking about them or about the killing. She can't imagine he would call the killing a good thing. She can't imagine that being a murderer could be good.

“You are strong, mio angello.” He covers her hand again, but she doesn't find comfort in these words. How can they start a life like this? It is dishonest. How can they?

He rinses their dishes, and they undress and get in the bed. He turns on Italian MTV which most of the time is music. She doesn't watch it though. In the small twin

bed, she turns her back to the TV while his eyes stay there, and she flattens her ear against his chest. His smooth chest, devoid of hair. She rubs her cheek against that chest and thinks how he's just a boy. How he's so young. What will he do without her? She can't imagine, but she falls asleep in his arms knowing it would be her last night in them.

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While Juliana sleeps the next morning, he crosses town alone to her room. He climbs the hill to Monteluca, the neighborhood on the edge of town, the mountain of light. He uses the altar of the Italian God, the Virgin Mother, at the end of Juliana's street as his guide, her blue light a beacon, showing him the way in the gray dawn. He lets himself into the marbled entryway of the building and climbs the white marble steps, looking down at his feet, as he's done so many times before. The thought, *for the last time*, crosses his mind. He enters Juliana's room, and it is just as they'd left it two days earlier when they'd left in pursuit of the secret. Now that weight is lifted, gone. A new weight has taken its place.

He starts in the bedroom, emptying the wardrobe and drawers into the suitcase he knows is shoved under the bed. There are several papers and pictures littering the desk. Taking these in one pile, he puts them on top of the clothes in the suitcase. He thinks of nothing while he does this. His mind is white, glowing, and he hums from time to time. Once Juliana's things are packed in the suitcase, he goes out to the terrace attached to the kitchen and sits for a minute, smoking a cigarette, watching the sun rise. It has been ages since he's seen the sun rise. It was a regular occurrence for him in Albania, the only place he'd known before coming to Italy, watching the sun rise above his village. Now the world is open to him. The places he's only seen in movies are now there in front of him:

New York, Chicago, California. These places are within reach because of a girl he met in a bar.

He throws the cigarette down. He cleans out the refrigerator, something his mother didn't have until recently. His mother. He told her on the phone last night the news. She cried and cried. Juliana would take him far away from her. He would disgrace his family's name by running away from the blood vengeance. Though, he'd already done that.

He has the feeling that things would always be this way: split. One of them would always be a stranger. *Not to each other.* He thinks Juliana sees the good in him. Sees him as more than a pawn in a blood feud. He takes the bags down to the entryway and throws out the trash. He locks the apartment and knocks on the first floor door where the landlady lives. He makes sure the rent is paid through the end of the week and returns the key.

Down the hill, the suitcase rolls behind him, and he waits at the bus stop at the bottom of the hill. Arshi has only the rings to buy, but he will have to wait for the stores to open. It is only eight, and the Italians don't begin work until ten. He boards an orange bus that will take him to the train station. He buys two tickets to Bari. He has only made this trip once. *This time, he thinks, will be for good.* He is sick of Italians anyway, the way they treat him and people from his country. He could tell by Juliana's reaction to his letter that Americans were good and that America would be a much more suitable place for him. He has no idea what to expect from America except what he's seen in movies.

He takes the bus back into the city. He's used an hour. He checks his phone for a message from Juliana, but she must be still asleep because there is nothing. He goes to

the Romcaffè in the Palazzo Galenga. He tells the manager that he is leaving and won't be coming to work anymore. The manager understands. He is a part of Arshi's operation, letting him leave when he got a call, making sales out the kitchen door, as long as Arshi slips him some money every week, he is okay with it. The manager collects his final payment. Arshi sits at a table with a red umbrella and orders a *mocchiato*. He waits.

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Juliana wakes alone in the bed. She doesn't know that Arshi is at that minute doing the thing that she is setting out to do. She quickly dresses and walks towards her room across town. She walks quickly, head down, winding through the streets of the Mediaeval city. The place is gray in the morning. The sounds of the world coming to life surround her: birds, metal doors being rolled up, the street sweepers with their constant whirr. She passes people on mopeds, men with briefcases ducking into cars, women walking tiny dogs. They used to all look after her, her red hair and light skin a shock against the locals, but they'd all gotten used to her now. She wasn't such a spectacle. She passes the Chinese grocery, she climbs the hill. She walks down the long street that leads to Monteluce.

When she arrives, she finds the landlady already showing the room to someone else. She doesn't know that Arshi left with all her belongings two hours before. She is confused. She tries to speak with the woman in Italian but gives up. The woman never liked her anyway; she didn't like foreigners, especially Albanians. She sat in a chair in the hall outside her first floor apartment and clicked her tongue each time Juliana and Arshi walked by. She scolded Juliana when she stayed out for nights on end.

Juliana walks slowly away down the street. She hadn't expected things to move so quickly. Her phone holds no message from Arshi. She wanders down the hill and to the Romcaffè without really even thinking about it. She sits down at a table and jumps when someone touches her shoulders from behind. It is him. He is there.

"Where'd you come from?" she asks a little frightened.

"I was here waiting to buy something special for you." He kisses her cheek.

"What are you doing here?"

*Trying to leave you*, she thinks. "Looking for you."

He recounts his morning activity. He has left her bag at the train station. Their train leaves tonight at 8pm. The ferry leaves at 6am. They will only sleep in snatches tonight on the train. He speaks excitedly. She watches the people pass through the square, to and fro through the doors of the Palazzo Galenga.

"I can't do this," she says to him. "I must go home. I can't go with you." He leans back in his chair, and she watches his face harden. Tears form in her eyes. She leans over and kisses him and walks away. She hurries toward the bus stop. Luckily the number one bus is right there, as if by magic, waiting to take her to the train station. She hurries on and watches him chase after her through the window.

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Arshi sits at the café now. It has been four hours since Juliana said goodbye to him, leaving him here alone, alone to run. He finally lifts himself out of the chair where he's smoked a whole pack of cigarettes. He leans into the angle of the Corso Giribaldi and pushes himself up the street. He goes into the pizza place across from his friend Bessians'

apartment and orders a slice. It tastes like cardboard, and all he can do is roll it around in his dry mouth until he can finally pass the bite down his throat.

He wondered while sitting at the café what you do once your life is ruined. Do you just go on as if everything is normal? Do you hope that you will get your life back? Do you wait to heal and start over? He doesn't know. He feels something cold and stinging well up inside him. He runs out to the alley and is sick on the side of the pizza shop.

Later, he will think how lucky he'd been. How lucky he was to have friends as he did. Albanians, Macedonians, Serbians. They had to stick together in Italy. Bessian walks by just then. He takes him up to his room above the noise of the street. He lays him on the bed, and Arshi just sleeps for a whole day.

His life began the moment Juliana walked into it. You'd think escaping death would make you feel alive enough, but it hadn't. He was too weighed down by his causing of another man's death, another man just like himself, young with the world ahead of him. It was as good as if he had died himself.

In Perugia, he began to use the man's name. The one he'd killed, his neighbor for his whole life: Mateo. He went into bars at night and met Italian girls. He'd tell them Mateo was his name. Sometimes he could convince them he was from Calabria or somewhere in the south and that was where his accent came from. It was hard for him to speak standard Italian, he said, his dialect was so strong.

As Matteo, his personality changed. He went to dark bars, not the Irish Pubs his friends went to throw darts and meet drunken American and British girls. He went down

by the train station to places where he could gamble on soccer games, to bars in the dark corners of the Mediaeval city, wrapped and hidden in the crumbling walls. Matteo was dark and mean. Matteo was a drunk and did drugs. Not just the occasional hash that Arshi had done, but stuff that would make him forget that he had been murdered last spring.

It was winter in Perugia, and he had been there for six months when Juliana showed up. Matteo was on a tear but had joined some friends at a discoteca. He saw Juliana across the bar and knew right away that she would save him. It was something in her smile and the way her chin pushed down in to her neck when she laughed hard with a friend next to her at the bar. He could see it in her eyes then.

He was afraid to go to her yet. He let Matteo sober and become Arshi again. He waited in a corner, but she came over to him and held out her hand to dance. He followed her to the floor and her drink spilled all over his white sweater as they moved to the bumping loud music but he didn't care. He was sweating out Matteo and finally took her hand, helped her into her coat, and led her out to the alley where they talked under the bright moon and clear December sky.

It's like Arshi is sick with a fever; Bessian nurses him back to health. He tosses and turns and sweats in the sheets, twisted around him. Bessian brings him food and finally wakes him after 24 hours to make him eat. Bessian keeps a vigil. Arshi can feel his eyes follow his every movement. After four days, Arshi can sit up and be rational again. He sits across from Bessian at the Romcaffè, and they start to figure things out.

Bessian will accompany Arshi to Bari, using the train ticket that was meant for Juliana. There, he will send Arshi off on the ferry, away to home. The only thing Arshi

knows is that he cannot continue to stay in this walled city, where every stone had been theirs, his and Juliana's. He can't watch those stones pass his feet in the same way.

They sit as the grayness of the winter day turns from afternoon to evening. They watch the people passing the square, students coming from the Palazzo Galenga, American boys playing on the basketball courts, tiny cars and motor bikes, winding through, down the hill. They deliberate for a long time over what Arshi could do to escape the blood feud and still go home. They smoke cigarette after cigarette.

There are only three ways out of the blood feud: (1) involved getting the town official to declare a truce, but that only lasts a few months, (2) stay away as Arshi has done, or (3) lock himself in the family's tower, not even allowed to come out and see his family. His mother would only be allowed to slip food in the door every day, not allowed to see him.

Arshi parts with Bessian at the train station. He thinks now is the time to return when everyone expects him. He could erase the shame he feels from what he did. He feels shame on both sides: for killing his friend and for deserting his family, for bringing dishonor. He thinks if he is going to go back to face his duty, now is the time. He has support all around him. Except from the person who matters the most. He can't do it now. He imagines his life, sitting in the bare room of the *kullah*, waiting for his mother to pass meals in everyday, his sister sitting outside, speaking to him when no one is home, telling him about finding love, living life. What kind of life was that? He might as well just go back and announce his arrival and be shot by Mateo's brother.

Bessian shakes his hand. They hug. No words are spoken. He turns from him and heads down the street in the direction of the boat docks. Arshi walks down the street, no bag, just the clothes on his back, hands stuffed in his pockets and slips into a crowded piazza.

## **It Will Find You**

Juliana spends her spring evenings driving through the countryside with Foard. They paint the suffocating pines red and yellow with the lights of his truck. The golf clubs and shot gun shells rattle and roll around the back as they speed around the windy parts of the uneven roads. They find a different spot every night to have a cigarette picnic. They spread out a blanket, have a cigarette, and they fight.

Before these drives she cooks him dinner. She does nothing all day except clean and read, and he works at home. They don't cross paths. They sit in separate corners. Sometimes Juliana goes out to lunch with a friend from high school or goes for a walk. She makes him stop working at 6 o'clock. He usually fights her, but she insists. This is where the fighting begins.

She spends the hour between 5 and 6 o'clock preparing an elaborate meal, setting the table, mixing cocktails, so all he has to do is leave his maps and the phone and come to the table and eat. It isn't like when she lived in Italy, and she had someone to cook with her, always going behind her back to add more salt to the sauce. The meal is her masterpiece, and Foard has no part in the creation. She rubs lamb with rosemary, she pounds turkey into thin medallions, slices steak, stirs sauces of tomato, mint, or cream. She mixes romaine lettuce and oil and vinegar: pine nuts, walnuts, banana peppers, tomatoes, cucumber, chick peas. She enjoys how it feels to create and finish something.

After they feast, they go out to the patio to smoke. This is the only time they don't fight. They sip whiskey or wine or margaritas.

They spend ten minutes out there just talking to the cat and at least half of this saying the word *kitty*. She always sits on one of the tall bar chairs at the table out there.

“Look at there’s a kitty,” Foard says.

“Awww kitty, kitty.”

“That’s a bad kitty.”

“That’s not a bad kitty,” she says. “That’s a good kitty. Aren’t you baby? Aren’t you?”

“No she’s a bad kitty. Look at ‘er.”

“No sir that’s a sweet kitty,” she says rubbing the cat’s ears.

After this exchange, Juliana walks up behind Foard where he sits on the chaise and rubs his head, her fingers swirling through his gray hair. He looks up at her, and she asks him if he wants to go back to work. She knows what he is going to say because once the cocktail is in him, he is done.

“No, babe. No. I’m done. D-U-N done,” he says.

She smiles and he grabs his keys off the table and asks if she wants to go for a drive. She follows him to the car without even putting on her shoes and they pass housing tracts, dentists' offices, and strip malls, everything of the modern world, and escape into the low-lying wide streets that criss-cross between oil refineries and swamps.

Three years prior to the cigarette picnics, she’d left Italy in a flurry of uncertainty, regret, and guilt. She’d felt like she would somehow have betrayed her roots if she had chosen a life with Arshi, the Albanian there. She came home to Beaumont, her tail between her legs. She had sort of expected to go back to Italy some day, expected that Arshi would be waiting for her. That he would just know that she was coming back for him.

Time passed though and she moved from job to job. In the mornings, she roamed

the town and outskirts taking pictures with her manual Nikon. She liked the broken down barns just outside the city, the trailers, the oil refinery. She'd park her car and walk down a stretch of road she'd never been down, looking for something to shoot. When she had time, she took the rolls of film to the high school where her old photography teacher would let her use the darkroom. Mostly the rolls just sat stacked in her camera case, undeveloped.

She did research for her father in the afternoons, sitting quietly next to him in his study she loved so, feeling a stranger, like some gulf had opened between them while she was gone. Instead of reading the numbers on a print-out he'd given her, sometimes she would sit and stare at the wall of books, not reading the titles but wondering what she could do for her and her father to be as they once were. She showed him the pictures she took and drove out to his wells with him. She invited him to breakfast every Saturday morning, their tradition from when she was a girl. When he'd agree, they'd mostly sit in silence, eating their hashbrowns and eggs. It was like penance. Penance for his knowledge of her as a person not of him.

She worked at a bar four nights a week as a favor to a friend who owned the bar. This is how she met Foard. He was a friend of the owner. He'd come in one night, looking handsome in a tight dark t-shirt, one that showed off his shoulders from his linebacker days. His hair was gray and close cut. He looked distinguished and attractive. Juliana was introduced to Foard T. Maccabee.

"I've never heard that name before," she said, opening a Miller Lite for him. "You from around here?"

"I live in San Antonio," he said. "I'm down here prospecting a couple wells.

Trying to get some farmers to lease me their land.”

“Another guy in the oil business.” Juliana rolled her eyes and served the regular old Mexican at the end of the bar his Big Red.

Foard followed her and with a smile said, “And just what do you mean by that? My Daddy’s been in this business since the start. He made a buck or two in the 30s.”

“Maybe in West Texas that was the start. It all really started right here in Beaumont,” Juliana replied, not looking up at him. “My great-granddaddy was there.”

“Spindletop?”

“He was right off the boat from Ireland, had a cousin in Tyler, moved down here to dig water wells. That’s when they hit it.”

They talked for a long time. They talked about baseball and oil and Daddy’s (he knew of Juliana’s) and Mamma’s from Mississippi (both of theirs were, though a generation apart). He told her he was 38, though when she looked at his driver’s license he was 39. He said that was good because she fit his rule, she was over ten years younger than he, being 23 at the time. At the end of the night, he took her to the park by the river. They sat on a bench and kept on talking under a bright white half moon. When she went home to her little apartment attached to her parent’s house, she called Anne even though it was three in the morning, feeling giddy because she knew she had found It, the thing she had been looking for, the thing she’d run from Italy for.

Foard decides to stay in Beaumont indefinitely. Three years after they meet in the bar, on this cigarette picnic, there is much unsaid between them. They can talk about so much, have so much in common. This includes an unwillingness to share, a shyness. She still

can't forget about the boy she left in Italy. She and Foard don't talk about this. They did once, but that was it. He doesn't want to hear about her grand love for obvious reasons. Just as she doesn't want to hear about his. From the bar owner, she finds out Foard was married. This is the one screw in her love for him. All she knows is that the ex-wife, Marie, ran off six years ago to DC with a politician who she met in Austin at a fundraiser. After about a year, she started talking to Foard again. Sometimes they spoke on the phone. Why do they still speak? From bits Juliana has heard, Marie hadn't wanted to have children and Foard did. Did that mean that Foard still loved her and was just looking for someone fertile? They don't talk about any of this either.

So they fight. They fight about Arshi and Marie. They fight about what Juliana will do with her life. She's been stuck in a kind of limbo since she came back from Italy. She's now taking pictures, doing freelance work for the local paper and one magazine, but the magazine is for free. Her father's hired someone to research for him full time. She spends most of her days moping, no reason to get out of bed, nowhere to go except the grocery store.

"I definitely don't want to go to graduate school," she tells him on the cigarette picnic blanket, surrounded by the green and blue dusk. She feels restless.

"Well I know that, babe. I couldn't even finish the last nine credits to get my degree. Who would want to go to more school after that?" he says. "Look at me, I'm successful and most people don't even know I didn't technically finish college."

"So can't I just keep taking photos my whole life?"

"You can do better than the Beaumont Enterprise, babe. Someone will want to pay you for your photos."

“Yeah, but who and why?”

“We’ll find someone. Just get up off your ass and go take them.”

“It’s hard when I’m not busy. Why get up when I can watch Beverly Hills 90210 every day?”

“If you don’t take the pictures whose going to want em? What about doing that project on wells you talked about. You could send them to *Texas Monthly* or *Texas Highways*.”

“It doesn’t work like that. You don’t understand.”

She plays with a blade of grass yanked out of the ground. She takes a swig from the flask that she got out of the glove compartment. She offers it to him, but he passes. He is paranoid about cops these days. He got a DWI a few months back.

“Well I’m going to get you set up here babe. I might know some people in San Antonio. Hell, I’ll pay for the fancy computer software, a digital camera. Just to get you doing something and get you off my case,” he says.

She takes another swig from the flask and lies down on her back and puts her head in the curve his body makes. He is lying on his side propping his head up with one arm. He plays with her hair a little, but he is staring at the fences that are disappearing with the daylight.

“I just want to move out here someday,” she says sleepily. The whiskey is doing its trick. “Have a couple little kids running around in diapers and maybe a couple horses too.”

“Well babe, we’ll get you some horses and babies, someday,” he says. “Don’t you want to do anything more than that?”

She pretends not to hear him. She wants more but doesn't know how to get it. She is paralyzed. What by? She doesn't know.

He says, "We better get going."

She rouses herself and shakes out the blanket. He starts the truck and replaces the flask in the glove compartment. The truck's lights hit the pine trees and swampy scenery even more brilliantly than before. He carries her home and puts her to bed, and she dreams of horses and Albania.

Even though they fight, they are somehow bound together. They are cut from the same cloth. They both ignore the unresolved arguments that hang in the air. And then things seem to change, as things are prone to do. Juliana's amazed at how things could change so quickly. Five years after she met Foard, she woke up sick one day and knew it could be nothing else but a pregnancy. They'd been sloppy with their love making. She knew it was for real this time. She kept it from him for five days. She went to the doctor who confirmed her suspicions.

When she told him, they set to planning. They needed to take a trip, he'd said after a week of getting used to the idea. They needed a last hurrah, so she'd suggested they take a tour of Italy since he'd never been there, and she wanted to show it to him and have him love it as much as she did.

Foard finally agreed, though they fought a night about it. He gave every excuse—too expensive, too dangerous for her, too hot. But really she knew he harbored some fear of her time there. He feared the things she hadn't told him, the root of her love for the

place. After a night on the couch, he agreed. Not that Juliana had banished him there, but he had spent a self-imposed hiatus from her to get some space, convince himself he wasn't crazy. That she did love him. That he loved her.

“Tell me a story about the last time you were in Rome, babe,” Foard says. He sits across from Juliana at the Café Greco. She's into her fourth month of pregnancy, and they've been in Italy for three weeks.

“It would be better if I made up a new one. I don't think you'd want to hear memories from the last time I was here,” she says. Her skin is unnaturally tan from their week in the Italian summer, her freckles darkened and her red hair lightened.

“You have too many memories in this country that don't involve me.” He drinks his espresso which looks tiny in his rough hand.

“Well, sorry. I guess I should've waited until I met you to do anything.”

“Guess you should have. Then I wouldn't have to be hearing about these boys all the time. C'mon. When was the last time you were here, really?”

Juliana wipes some water from her mouth after a drink. Her water glass sweats and drips. It is July in Rome. She'd insisted they come here. It's her fifth time in Rome, and she's never been to the Café Greco. They have no whiskey, so even in the heat, Foard drinks coffee.

“I’ve never been here, but the last time I was in Rome it was the night before I left to come back to Texas.” She’d lived here after college, years ago, in a small town called Perugia, nestled in the Umbrian hills to the northeast.

“Did you stay in a hotel?”

“I had to leave for the airport at four in the morning. I didn’t sleep at all. I wandered the streets off the train for an hour looking for a hotel with a room.”

“Were you with that crazy girl that came to visit you in San Antonio and slept on my couch and ordered porn on my TV?”

“Any? No. I was here alone.”

“Ah. Running away from the boy.”

She had met Arshi three years before the summer she’d met Foard, eight years ago now. She hadn’t slept at all that night at the hotel, waiting for the taxi at 4 A.M. She had smoked cigarettes on the balcony, taken a shower in the corner of the bathroom, she’d sat awake in the king bed, waiting her journey home alone. She had loved him, though now it seemed like an inexplicable love, absurd with no reason. She hadn’t loved him like she loved Foard, now, with his pinky raised again on the handle of the milky ceramic cup, with his white hair, and his crow’s feet, fifteen years her senior. The cup clattered in the saucer when he set it down.

“My fingers are too big for this thing,” he says. She laughs. “So the last time you were here was leaving the boy?”

“Where’s the waiter with our check?” She turns away from him. She scans the café looking for the waiter. She notices an American man, alone at the table next to them.

“Will you take our picture,” she asks him. The Italians won’t respond if you ask them this. She takes the opportunity to ask someone who understands the American obsession with pictures. She wants to have enough to show her son someday. *Look, you were in Italy with Mommy and Daddy.*

“Sure thing.” He turns from his paper and takes the camera from Juliana. “One, two, three.” It flashes and they are captured here at the Café Grecco, Foard looking away from the camera with his sunglasses on. Juliana studies her face on the little digital screen and notices she’s gained weight.

“Thanks,” she says to the man.

“Where y’all from? On a family vaca?” He asks this slowly, studying the two of them, trying to figure them out.

“Texas. We’re just here seeing Rome. I love this city, don’t you?” Juliana likes to watch people squirm.

“I work here. Haven’t got used to it yet. I’m from Florida myself. You’re with your family or just the two of you?”

“We’re on our honeymoon,” Foard finally says after a moment’s silence. He is quick to explain, quick to dispel doubts and notions. He is taking her on a trip in celebration of their first child growing four months in her belly. Juliana has insisted on wearing fake wedding rings. The Italians would never go for an unwed pregnant girl

sharing a hotel room with a man almost twice her age. Not that she looked that pregnant. She thought everyone just knew. She twists the ring around her finger in the Café Greco and waits to leave.

Foard drains his coffee, and she gathers her things around her. He stands up and throws a couple of bills on the table.

She picks them up along with the check, “You have to pay up front,” she says.

He goes outside and lights a cigarette. She stands in line and pays the bill. She joins him outside where he is doing something on his new iPhone. He’d paid someone to stand in line for two days to buy it for him. She wonders who he’s texting. He puts it away quickly when she comes out the door. He’s seemed distant from her as their vacation progressed, as they spent every minute together. She watches him bring the cigarette to his lips, envious.

They wander toward the Piazza di Spagna, toward their hotel. People gather around the newly renovated fountain in the shade. Three years ago, the last time Juliana was here, it was dry and surrounded by orange construction fencing. The tourists that gather to sit on the new fountain’s edge and rest are collectively ignoring the street performers and Bangladeshi men selling roses and miscellaneous toys. She watches one of the men pulling roses out of the water, putting them back into his bunch to sell again. They wander toward the steps that rise up towards the *chiesa* and the sky.

Foard guides her through the crowd. Right past an overweight honeymoon couple taking a picture, left past groups of Japanese students. She looks up at him in his sunglasses and his burned, wrinkled skin. She stumbles up the stairs, letting him lead her.

They stop to rest halfway up, sitting on a shade-drenched railing right outside the window of the room where John Keats died. She is tired and lets her head fall against his shoulder.

“We can leave in a couple days?” He asks.

“Home home? Texas?” she says. The shade is still hot. She breaths heavily, her sweat pouring against the stone of the railing. The pregnancy makes her tire easily. The baby feels like a rock in her belly. *Sleeping?* She wonders.

“You don’t want to go home?”

“Yes, I can’t wait to get home,” she says. “But here I have you.” Here they are everything to each other. She digs Advil out of her purse when he has a headache, he rubs her feet at night, she sleeps with her head on his chest, something she never does at home in their huge king sized bed.

“You have me at home too.”

She studies the skin of his arm, thick with scattered freckles and sun spots. “Not like I do here.”

“We’re going to change that, babe.”

They continue up the stairs, and again he leads her out into the burning sun. It is the kind of summer sun that sucks the life out of her.

“Let’s go back to the sea before we go,” she says. “The water was so cool and nice. We could go back to Monterosso. Just for a day.”

“Okay. We can do that.” They walk down the Via Vittorio Emanuele a ways to the door of the hotel, and a wave of cool hits her. Foard gets their key from the front desk. “Let’s go pack and get going. I feel restless here,” he says.

“We can catch a train in an hour. I can’t wait to slip into that water.”

“I’ll call for a car to take us. Then we could make it before sunset.” They pad down the carpeted hallway and into their room.

“I wish I had gone to the sea before when I was here. I only went to Elba. That was too far north. It was very cold and rainy and our hotel was a 20 minute cab ride from anything on the island. We tried to go to the beach they advertised, but it was mulch and there were rats. We left just stayed in the room the whole time.”

He throws his wallet and the key on the bed. “See, there’s a story.”

Juliana starts throwing her clothes in the bag. She goes into the bathroom to collect their mess from the sink. “Did you go there with him?”

“What?” She calls from somewhere deep inside the bathroom.

“I said did you go there with that boy?” He now stands at the door watching her carefully wrap their toothbrushes in a plastic bag.

“Does it matter? I told you that you wouldn’t like my stories.”

He watches her intently for a moment and then goes to the armchair near the telephone.

He dials a number. “Yes, Ms. Maccabee and I will be leaving in about an hour. Can you send up someone for the bags? Thanks.” He searches for a small white card in the pocket of yesterday’s pants and again dials. “Yes, I need a car in an hour to take me to Monterosso al’Mare. Yeah. The St. Regis Grand.” He gives them all the information they need and hangs up the phone.

He wipes his forehead with his handkerchief. She stands in the bathroom doorway, shoes off, with one foot resting on her knee, like a stork. This is a childhood habit she’s retained. Her belly protrudes slightly, any change would be noticeable on her narrow frame. Juliana intently watches Foard sitting in the chair. She goes to him and sits in his lap, arms encircling his neck.

“Why don’t you tell me a story? You always have good stories. A lot of them have involved other women. You even have an ex-wife. Maybe I disapprove of those stories.”

He supports her with one arm, the other feels its way along her legs. “That’s rude.”

“Well you’re always rude.” That makes him smile, and he tries to tickle her sides. She jumps up and finishes the packing. She changes her dress and puts her swimming suit on underneath.

“I want to be ready,” she says. “It’s so hot.”

She closes the curtains to the hot sun, and they both stretch out on top of the bedding. She listens to the whir of the air conditioning and the loud city outside—mopeds

and trucks, people calling to one another. He is flat on his back. She is on her side facing him with her feet curled up, her toes shoved under his thigh. His hand rests on her boney ankles. She is still in the heat but restless. Every inch of her body wants to move and stretch but she feels trapped under Foard's hand. She holds her breath and listens to Foard's breathing. The baby moves and causes a pain against her spine. She doesn't move but just lies there uncomfortable.

When she is sure he is asleep, it only takes a few minutes, she sneaks into the bathroom. She shuts the door. He has plugged in his iPhone, and it stares at her from the vanity. She digs in the bag for his spare pack of cigarettes. She opens the little window over the toilet and lights one. She exhales loudly. *Damn the doctors*, she thinks. She'd known at least two people in her life that had smoked while they were pregnant, and it had turned out fine.

She only wants to see if he's been texting Marie. She has never been with anyone with an ex-wife before. She doesn't think it's normal that they still speak. Foard has been eerily silent about her. And now Juliana is having his baby. She wants to know if he's still talking to her. She'd caught a glimpse of Marie's name yesterday when he looked at the phone. Now Juliana just touches the screen. She sees "Marie" and touches it and the phone starts calling her. She tries to end the call but can't find the right button. Her heart races, pounding inside her chest and her ears ring.

"Foard?" An unfamiliar voice comes over the phone. Juliana only knows the little she's heard from people that Foard met Marie in Louisiana eleven years ago while he was working on an oil rig. Juliana was fifteen then, in Beaumont, visiting her own family's rigs.

Juliana stumbled, words tangling on her tongue. “I was using Foard’s phone and called you on accident. Sorry.”

“Who is this?”

“My name’s Juliana.”

“Well, is Foard there? What the hell are you doing using his phone at eight on a Saturday morning?”

Juliana was silent. At least it wasn’t the middle of the night. She had forgotten about the time difference. Foard had insisted on an international cell phone. He had wells that were being drilled. He needed to be accessible.

“Hello? Can you put Foard on?”

“He’s not here.”

“Where is he? Why do you have his phone? Who is this?”

“Why won’t you let him go?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Why have you let him hang on to you all these years? He pushes everyone else away.” Juliana’s voice cracked. She held back tears that were quickly rising.

“I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

“I think it is my business since I’ve been sleeping with him for almost five years now.”

“You what?”

“I’ve been sleeping with him for five years now. I’m carrying his child.” Juliana’s hands shake and her voice rises. “And I love him. Do you love him?” She is angry and starts crying audibly. Her throat feels tight trying to suppress the sounds. She watches her

face in the mirror over the sink as it crinkles. Her cheeks feel heavy and tight. She opens her mouth wide in a snarl to stretch them out, a trick she learned in yoga class. She has trouble recognizing herself and drags on the cigarette.

“Sure, I do. But he pushes me away too. You don’t know how me and Foard were together.” The tension goes out of her voice. “Why did you call me? What can I do?”

“It was an accident, honestly. I was snooping.” Juliana sniffs now, her crying stopped. Her throat aches. She wipes her face with a tissue. “I’ve been trying my hardest to change him. Make me be the one he settles down for.”

“Honey, I wouldn’t wait around for that.” Marie says this gently and it hardens Juliana against her. Marie seems sweet. Juliana wants to be able to hate her.

“Please leave him alone. He’s here with me now.”

“I’m not going to stop him from calling me.”

Juliana hangs up then. Her hands shake, and the phone is there in the palm of her hand. She likes the weight of it there, perfectly balanced, her palm underneath trembling. The door opens, and she looks surprised to see Foard staring at her from the doorway to the bathroom.

“What are you doing?”

She looks up at him. Her red hair, messy, she pushes away from her face. His eyes travel first to the cigarette and then to the phone resting on the palm of her hand. “Babe, what are you doing in here?”

Juliana doesn’t move. She doesn’t say anything. Foard snatches the cigarette out of her fingers and drops it in the toilet. “How long as this been going on?” He stares at her in disbelief.

“I haven’t had many really. Just one here and there.” She can’t look at him. She feels ashamed.

“If I ever catch you smoking one again, babe...” he trails off.

“You’ll what? Why don’t YOU quit so they’re not around all the time. All the time I’m smelling your smoke.”

“I’ve been smoking a lot longer than you. It’s harder for me.”

He looks at the phone then and becomes silent. She starts to speak but stops when she sees his face. He reaches for it. He touches the screen and looks back at her.

“Did this phone ring while you were in here?” He seems confused. “Babe. The phone?”

“No. It didn’t.” She walks past him over to the window, watching a boy kick a soccer ball against a crumbling wall in the alley below. She feels dizzy.

“What’d you do?”

“Nothing. I just talked to Marie.”

“Why did you do that?”

“It was an accident.”

“An accident how? Were you snooping around in my phone?” He isn’t looking at her but at the phone. He walks over to her and grabs her arm. She looks up at him, her eyes wide. He has never reacted this way to her, physically.

Juliana twists her arm from his grip and begins to gather her scarf and purse from a chair in the corner. She starts to leave, but he comes after her and stands in front of the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t grab me like that ever again.”

“Well I’d appreciate it, babe, if you never snoop in my phone again. AND if you’d stop killing my son smoking cigarettes.”

She tries to push past him toward the door, but he grabs both of her arms and holds her in front of him. She struggles against his grip. He pushes her back, stronger than her, against the bed.

“Babe, promise me you won’t smoke another cigarette.”

“Why don’t you stop killing yourself with cigarettes?” she says.

He just looks at her, so she promises. She can see this is going nowhere. She promises though like she used to promise herself she’d stop drinking when she had a particularly evil hangover.

His face softens, and he gathers her in his arms. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m sorry.” He must’ve seen the fear in her eyes.

Before the baby and the trip to Italy, Juliana thought finding Foard was eerily perfect; maybe a dream where something wasn’t quite right. Something was pulling at her and making her feel like this was the wrong choice. That somehow her perfect life imagined with Foard was too easy, flowing like a stream. Her parents loved him. He prodded the land for the oil just as her father does and both their fathers before that. That was how they indirectly met in fact. That was how her father overlooked the fact that Foard was so much older.

“We should be soul mates,” she said the first night they met after finding out all

the things they had in common.

“Babe, I would love it if we could be soul mates. I’ve been looking for a soul mate for far too long.”

It was a Friday night when she’d told him she was pregnant. She waited for him to be done working. He was on the phone attending to some business that couldn’t wait until Monday. He had leases and partners that didn’t know the concept of the weekend or late.

She sneaked into the spare bedroom of his rented Beaumont house where the stuff of her life was. The first time she had come to this house, before they’d even slept together, he had told her that was her room. And here it was, filled with her things. Someday her room would be transferred to the San Antonio house where they planned to move someday. She tried to be quiet so he wouldn’t come in and find her. She pulled a shoe box out of the closet and sat down on the bed she’d had since she was eleven years old, now the guest bed in their house.

Her feet curled under her automatically, and she pulled out the pictures from her time in Italy. It was eight years since she returned. She thought how different things were now that she had this life in her.

She stared at Arshi’s face in a photo. His olive skin and dark bushy eyebrows looked up at her. Her heart swelled, and her betrayal left a cold, hollow ache in her stomach. She couldn’t stop the events that were in motion now. She and Foard would be happy. She would tell him tonight.

She replaced the lid on the shoebox and returned it to its spot in the back of the closet. Foard appeared in the doorway just as she slid the door shut.

“What are you doin’ in here babe,” he asked.

“Oh, nothing. Just looking for a skirt.”

“Are you ready for bed?” he asked, smiling.

She nodded and pushed past him. He chased her down the hall to the bedroom and picked her up and tossed her on the big king-sized bed where he'd opened a whole new world to her; where he undressed her slowly and talked to her in a language she understood. He filled her up and turned her over and they pushed and pulled until they were sweaty and smiling, dopey with release.

This was the only time they were allowed to smoke indoors and they lay perpendicular, her head resting on his hip. He was propped against pillows, and he reached to turn the lamp. He pulled papers and some herb from the drawer in the nightstand and rolled a joint. He smoked this. She watched and waited for him to notice she was not reaching for his pack of cigarettes next to the lamp.

“I will have no legs tomorrow, babe,” he said.

“Good. We can stay right here and watch TCM.”

He coughs and lets out a cloud of smoke. “Nope. We start drilling on that well in Liberty County tomorrow.”

“I wanted you to stay here with me and celebrate.”

“What do you mean? What for?” He reached for the pack of cigarettes offered her one. She shook her head, no.

“Babe, what do you mean celebrate? Why aren't you smoking? Are we celebrating you quitting?”

“No,” she laughed. “Celebrate your son growing a month in my belly.”

She got up and straddled him as he choked on the smoke from the joint.

“Wooooheee!” He stamped out the joint in a dish by the bed. “Guess my mama will get to be a grandmother after all.” She got up and opened a window before crawling in under his arm. He kissed her several times before he turned out the light. She put Turner Classic Movies on mute. He stroked her flat belly. “Babe?” he said to the flashing blue light of the TV, but he never finished the question.

She let herself sink into him, welding her body to his.

Back at the Grand Hotel, the bell boy comes for the bags a while later. They’d gone back to the bed and sat in silence. Juliana’d been afraid to speak. She doesn’t want to let on that she is feeling insecure about Marie. She’s carrying his son for God’s sake. Doesn’t that mean something?

“Tuoi macchina e qua,” the bell boy says.

“What’d he say?”

“Our car is here.”

“Well let’s get on.”

She puts on her sunglasses, and they follow the bell boy down the carpeted hallway to the front of the hotel where the black car is waiting. She gets into the back seat and the driver shuts the door behind her. She leans her forehead against the window, glad for the air-conditioning in the car. Texas makes her used to the heat, but also less able to bear it.

Foard settles the bill and gets their passports. He's absorbed in the small map of Texas he brought, never able to quite quit working, penciling notes and circling areas, as they pull out of Rome. She watches the crumbling, ancient city give way to the newer, dirtier high rise apartments and colorful laundry hanging still with the lack of breeze.

Juliana can't help but think of the months that she lived in this country before she met Foard and before a lot of things. At the very outer circle of the city they pass a sign that reads Perugia with an arrow. She can't help but think of Arshi. She still dreams about him some nights and when she sits alone on Foard's back porch, looking at the Texas sky.

Sitting on the porch she sometimes imagined what their life would've been like. She imagined herself in their one-room apartment. In these imaginings she wore a handkerchief around her hair while she sat at the kitchen table counting their money. He worked illegally for restaurants and doing construction work, sometimes selling drugs. She budgeted their money carefully in her dreams. They ate out once a week. She cooked the rest of the time, but he never liked her cooking. She had the feeling it would have been like starting a life with someone. It would have been new and exciting. It differed in this way from her life with Foard. She had allowed herself to be absorbed into his life. She would've been a more equal partner with Arshi.

The Perugia sign passes in a second and the scenery becomes progressively more mountainous; Juliana catches a glimpse of the sea. She's always been content in cars just to look out the window and watch things go by. She's fascinated by falling down barns, small grape fields, and the rocks and trees. On family road trips back in Texas as a child,

she would just sit quietly, counting the oil wells they passed. She misses the oil wells and pine trees and the cottony Gulf clouds. That's only half of it though. She yearns for this country too. She feels she lost something here, something never to be recovered.

They finally near Monterosso. They pass each of the small villages of Cinque Terre, tucked into little corners, spilling over the rocks to the water, as the car winds around the edges of the mountains, coming from the south. They pull up to the main square in Monterosso.

“Andate a piedi di qua.” The driver makes a walking motion with two fingers, gesturing up the hill. He opens his door and then holds Juliana's for her. He helps her out. Foard has fallen asleep but rouses himself out of the car and looks up the mountain and the town that goes up and up.

“Babe, you go down to the beach. I'll go get a room and take the bags up. I'll meet you down there.”

She's happy to do this, happy to be alone in the brilliant air that pumps energy into her limbs. The sun is better here, less violent. They are further north of course. She goes down the concrete walkway and under the railroad bridge and down to the pebbly beach. She sets down her bag and removes her dress and scarf. The water is cold when she walks in up to her knees. She lets the waves splash up on her legs, getting her body used to the temperature. Finally, she dives in. The water takes her breath away, but then sends a feeling of well-being and peace through her body. She stays under the surface of the clear water for ten seconds, drifting with the waves. She comes back up, gasping for

air. Floating on her back, she lets the wind cool her body as she looks up the side of the mountain.

Juliana thinks she could spend the rest of her life here and be happy. She'd be tan from coming to the beach every day. She'd eat all the seafood she wanted and always get to see the pretty pink flowers that covered all the trees. Maybe Arshi would join her. Maybe she would never have to look at another oil well or endless map of Texas again. Her little son would speak Italian and pull the tails of dogs and talk to pretty girls on the beach every afternoon (neither of them had entertained the fact that she could be having a girl. It just made sense that it would be a boy, someone to carry Foard's name since his older brother, nearing fifty, hadn't had any children either).

Her eyes go back to the shore, scanning the people. She rubs her belly absentmindedly. She can feel the baby move. Maybe the cold water wakes him, or maybe it's Juliana's own spirits lifting. There are women with babies on the shore, men in Speedos, large groups of teenagers up from Pisa or Florence for the afternoon. She sees Foard then, standing next to her bag scowling against the sun in his thin, linen shirt. She puts her feet down going upright in the water. Swimming with the water helping propel her towards the shore, she nears the beach where he is standing.

He's sitting in the pebbles on the beach, fully clothed when she reaches him. She takes out a towel and spreads it on the ground. She collapses onto her stomach, not yet careful of her condition, dripping and content to be warm in the sun.

“How's the water?”

“Amazing. You should've come in.”

“I will in a bit. I have to get unbearably hot first.”

“Will you put sunscreen on my back?” She hands him the bottle.” I know the sun is fixing to go down, but it’s still coming down pretty hard right now.”

He smooths the lotion on her back, quick and efficient. “Thanks,” she says, her cheek against the back of her hands.

Foard’s eyes float from the boats drifting to the waves gently licking the beach. After a while, he starts to take off his shirt and shoes.

“You coming in with me?”

They go hand and hand to the water. She dives in again. She knows the best way is to get it over with. He stands, his shorts barely getting wet and watches her floating, belly up, eyes closed to the evening sun on her face. She can tell without looking at him that something’s eating him.

“Was it because of him that you wanted to come back to Italy?” He asks more in the direction of the sinking sun than to her.

She looks up at him, shading her eyes from the sun. He towers over her not yet all the way in the water. “That would be silly seeing as how I’m not even going to see him because I’m here with you. I don’t even know where he is. That was seven years ago.”

“He has to have something to do with you wanting to come back here. I know he’s part of some sort of nostalgia you feel for this country.”

“Of course he is, but that’s just a part.”

“Why don’t you feel that way about me and Texas?”

“I feel that way about you and Texas when you’re sitting right next to me on the couch at home. Why do you still talk to Marie?” It’s just a continuous thought. She doesn’t pause. These things are connected. She can’t imagine he feels any fear on the part of Arshi because she hasn’t talked to Foard about him. He doesn’t know how deep her feelings were.

He just stands there, looking out over the waves. He watches a group of people filing onto a boat, going out for a sunset cruise.

“Is this about that story I told you?” She’s upright now, treading water to stay afloat. The cool water streams past her legs as they move through its weight. He dives suddenly under the surface and comes up a few seconds later right next to her.

“I try you know, but I didn’t want you getting too close. I don’t know why I still talk to Marie. She just feels...comfortable.”

“If you didn’t want me getting too close why do I practically live at your house and why did you bring me here and why am I pregnant with your son?” She feels angry.

He floats on his back a few feet away from her, staring up into the sky that’s slowly turning purple. She watches the people on the beach slowly packing up their things and trickling away. She wonders, were they going home, to hotels, to lovers, to children?

“What’s wrong with you?” She asks.

“I just want to go home. I like how things are at home.” He pulls her over to him. They kiss. She’s still angry, and her lips are hard against his. The sound of the water lapping against them echoes in the space between their bodies. He pulls her closer to him and she softens a little.

He finally pulls away and says, “You want to have supper at that place with the star lanterns on the main square?”

“Yes,” she says, and he smiles and strokes her wet hair.

“You know this is hard for me,” he says.

“I know but I wish it wasn’t.”

She starts swimming for the shore. The air is significantly cooler with the onset of the evening. Juliana shivers a little as she hurries to her towel, the only one left on the beach. She wraps herself in it and slides her feet into her sandals, shaking the pebbles out. He follows her as they set at an angle up the hill, away from the beach, towards the hotel where they will shower and the night will be the same as each of the last.

They feast then, after the showers and makeup and general primping. She squeezes into a dress she hasn’t put on since they got there. She’s getting a little bigger all the while. She likes the period of primping before they go out to eat. It’s an activity they do often in Texas. She likes the busyness of the bathroom, the sound of the hair dryer, the smell of his cologne.

They leave the hotel looking beautiful. He wears his standard black Lacoste polo (she couldn't believe when she first met him his closet full of black and white Lacoste polos). His gray hair is cut close to the scalp, his face tan, his shoes modern.

She matches perfectly in a black dress, one he bought her for a wedding they went to some time ago. It has a belt that Juliana barely fastened. She wears black pumps, a sapphire necklace he gave her for her 25<sup>th</sup> birthday.

They walk to the restaurant with the star lanterns in silence, following the moonlit streets that are more like alleys. The streets are empty besides the other tourists; it's early, eight. They request a table at the corner of the patio where Juliana can watch people passing in the streets. While Foard smokes, she watches a dog take an uneaten squid from a plate on the other side of the patio. He plays with it in the street until he's bored and unable to eat the slimy thing. They are tensely silent as Foard lights another cigarette. She can tell he's being more careful and deliberate about them now.

Juliana is starving. She says so every five minutes.

"I know, I know. It's coming, babe." Foard sips his wine, something he never drinks at home.

She eats and eats. She has a bowl of spaghetti with pesto, a local specialty. The bowl holds enough to feed a family. The parsley and basil waft warm in her face when the waiter sets it in front of her. She eats most of it. Foard picks at the rest. He's a strange eater; she never sees him eat that much. She flakes off huge bites of swordfish grilled with rosemary, and Foard picks at shrimp fried with the shells still on.

Foard lets her sip his limoncello after the meal. It is made locally, the same kind they'd bought from a guy at their hotel. They call him Luigi. She'd tried to speak to him in Italian, but he must have only spoken the dialect. She couldn't understand much that he said. She'd followed him into his wine cellar one day when they were in Monterosso prior to their week in Rome. She had been waiting for Foard in her swimsuit coverup.

“Sei incita,” he'd asked. Juliana hadn't understood. He pointed to her belly. She smiled and nodded, immediately becoming shy. Her hands had instinctively fluttered to her middle. “Che bellissimo,” he exclaimed with flourish.

Foard had been angry with her for following Luigi (her made up name for him) into his little wine cellar to buy the limoncello. *Not to be trusted*, or something along those lines he'd said. He has become very protective of her.

After the limoncello, Foard takes her hand at the table under the star lanterns. They don't fight because they don't talk. Juliana counts the people who slip on the squid in the road.

That night, Juliana waits for sleep with the window open, breeze blowing gently on her face. The moon is bright and full, and while Foard snores next to her, she thinks this is a strange place she's in. Looking out at the moon and stars, brilliant through the window, she thinks how unhappy she feels and how funny it is to look at something beautiful when you feel unhappy.

She tries to know in her heart that she loves Foard. She doesn't know how you know it is right, when you should just give up or when to fight. She feels like she's been fighting for the last year. She does love him, she does. He doesn't say much, never talks about his feelings and is an independent man. His house is full of interesting things: paintings from local artists, handmade drinking glasses, bowls made from Spalted Maple, old photographs of his father in the 50s on oil rigs. He is nice to her, takes care of her, but these feelings never finally translate to love. Or maybe they do. Maybe she just doesn't believe he loves her without a grand gesture. There has been no grand gesture. Or maybe it is just Marie or Arshi, looming in their pasts, interrupting their present.

It has never been easy with him. She thinks it is supposed to be easy, that ease means it's right. She was just a kid when she met Arshi seven years ago. But of course she will probably look back on this trip with Foard in a few years and think of herself as a kid. She is 28 years old. She wonders if she will ever level out in her life or if she will just keep making mistakes and not learning from them. She wonders if she will figure it out in time for the baby. How can she bring a person into the world without knowing the answer to these questions?

Arshi had made a grand gesture. He'd all but got down on his knee. He cried. He made a scene. Juliana thought it was love. He had proposed they go to Albania and get married, get him an American passport and then they would travel anywhere in the world. "Bonnie and Clyde" he called them because without money they'd have to rob a bank to travel anywhere.

She had become suspicious then, as she always did of something. She became suspicious that he just wanted the freedom of being a citizen of her country, since his was so oppressed and depressed. But she never quite believed this. She had left more for her own reasons. The night before she left, she had tried to imagine her life with Arshi: going to her college reunion, tailgating at a football game, going to a Wal-Mart.

In the hotel room with Foard, she feels like she has a choice to make, like she is at a crossroads of the heart. She could leave Italy and go home with Foard, or the thought begins to creep into her mind that she could leave Foard, now, while he was still asleep and go to Perugia. She chose the opposite path at this crossroads when she finally left Italy eight years ago. Her breath quickens as she thinks of the finality of this. She had thought about doing this before but always has an excuse. Being in Italy affects her feelings beyond reason. Or maybe it is her hormones. She has been having trouble assigning feelings to hormones or reality. Her feelings for Foard, she can see, even at home, are somewhat superficial. He fits the picture of the man she wants: football games, steak, and oil wells. She attaches romance and nostalgia to him. But still there is this tenderness she feels as she watches him sleep.

She sits up in the bed and rests one hand on her stomach, almost putting her foot out on the floor but not quite able make herself do it. She thinks maybe she's crazy. She doesn't even know if Arshi is still in Perugia, where he lives, or if he wants to see her. He must though. She can't imagine a world where he would forget her. She sits there for a moment, clutching the sheet in her hands, staring out at the moon, throwing bright white light in a square on the floor. She tries to grasp loving two men at once. Arshi said once that love was everything; it was giving up your breath so the other could breathe. Juliana

tries to imagine a scenario where she'd have to decide this but couldn't. She looks at Foard next to her and feels tenderness toward him, even in his violent, vulnerable snoring.

She gets out of bed then and hurriedly gathers her things from around the room. They shared a travel bag so she finds a plastic shopping bag and stuffs it with her clothes and toothbrush. Going to the chair for her dress, she stubs her toe in the darkness and swears. Foard moves and groans in the bed and Juliana freezes, holding her foot in her hand, holding her breath in. He rolls over and, not finding her under his hand when he reaches out, says out loud, "Babe?" He sits up rubbing the sleep away from his eyes and looks straight at her in the dark.

"What are you doing dressed in the dark?" She has done it now, ruined everything on either side.

She recovers herself, "I'm just going out for a walk. Can't sleep."

He's silent, just staring at her, confused and half awake. "I thought for a minute you were leaving me. I was having a dream you were leaving me," he says. He rolls out of the bed then and goes over to her, stepping through the square of moonlight. She can see him. All of him. She regrets what she is doing. She doesn't want to leave him.

He envelopes her when he reaches where she stands. Their skin sticks together, clammy in the summer heat.

"I was coming back. Really I was," she says into his chest.

“I don’t want you to leave ever,” he says above her head. “I’m sorry I haven’t let you in, but I will. I will.”

They rock back in forth a little in the dark. She breathes and feels him against her, her arms around his middle, her hair pushed around her face by his arms around the back of her neck.

They get back in the bed, and lying face to face, Foard falls back to his snoring. Juliana still can’t sleep, though. She feels something hovering over the bed, a dark mass of things unsaid and unfinished. She feels the mass settle around her gently, pushing her towards the bed, forming a shield between Foard’s face and his night breath until it forms a pressure on her. She wiggles out of his embrace and sits up, leaning against the headboard, a pillow in between. She looks at the clock: 2:41. She watches the moon inch across the opening of the window. She thinks she can see it move with the turning of the earth. The baby seems to kick in time with this ticking of the moon across the open space. Dinner must not have agreed with him.

*How would I get there anyway? She thinks. Not to mention the absurdity of running to one man with another’s child.* The clock changes to 3:33. She hates being awake at that time. The dark corners of the room are disorienting as she scans them for spirits and ghosts.

She slips out of bed again, still dressed. She moves slowly, deliberately towards the door, picking her way through the furniture. With her hand on the knob of the door to the hallway, she turns back to look at Foard sleeping. Once again, a feeling of tenderness rushes to her eyes, making them ache as she looks at him there on the bed in vulnerable

slumber. She can recognize she's being a girl and that her feelings are from being young, from forcing herself to do things before she's ready, before she has considered them. She's chosen her life now. There's no running away, no romantic life in Albania. She leaves the room and the hotel, and the moon follows her out into the night, through the streets of Monterosso.

## Crossroads

Bruce walked into the Pig Stand on Calder Avenue. He came here every morning for breakfast, but this morning was different. He ordered the same thing every day: one egg over medium, wheat toast dipped in salsa, and a cup of coffee. He'd had coffee other places—Starbucks, Mexico—but this coffee was the best. You couldn't get a better cup of coffee than the Pig Stand.

He sat in a booth on the left smoking side of the circle. Not like it mattered. They had banned smoking a year ago. Just habit. He arranged his waiting coffee and silverware, readied the bottle of salsa. He opened the paper and scanned the headlines.

When Bruce was younger, he'd come to this diner at night. There'd been souped-up cars in the car hop slots that now just served as parking spaces. He'd grown up at this place, kissed his first girl in his first car—a 1960 Camaro—over a milk shake, had his first taste of beer in the back of a friend's Ford pick-up, eaten here after little league games, gotten ice cream with his mother after trips to the doctor. He had fond memories here. Now it was just an old grimy place full of nostalgia items—memorabilia that was real—not the fake kind like at the new Chili's that had opened on the highway.

Bruce thought about this, but it didn't really bother him. The town and the Pig Stand just seemed to brown and age right along with him. They had grown up together and now they were stuck in that time, not this one. He knew nothing of the world today. His mind had somewhere stopped keeping up. He perused the paper merely for events—tsunamis in Asia, wars in central Africa, earthquakes in South America, drownings on the Gulf Coast.

Ella, the waitress, had changed too. Seemed he still remembered when her voice was low and soft and her hair blonde and so shiny looking. When he'd been just out of high school roughnecking in Liberty County, he'd sit at the counter and eat supper before the 30 minute drive out to the well where he'd spend all night moving pipes and operating the complex machinery. He could remember watching her walk toward him with that shiny hair and he felt a little ache or he'd feel lonely all night on that well covered in mud, not really knowing why. She came toward him now, her ponytail long grayed and dried out, her face lined with years of smoking in a smoke-filled diner. Maybe it was something Ella did that made the coffee so good. She set down his plate in front of him and in the same motion sat across from him.

“You're looking pretty as ever today, Ella.” He meant it too. He still saw a shine somewhere in her. She laughed a little in her deep, gravelly way, like she had a bad chest cold.

“What's going on in the world today, Bruce? I feel as though my legs might just give out. I been down on my knees all yesterday, scrubbing the floor of the trailer. Finally getting it put back together after the hurricane hit. Damn time too. Three weeks is too long for anyone to stay with my sister.”

Bruce used the side of his fork to cut through the egg. Yolk spilled. He scooped some up with the white and cleanly placed it in his mouth. Now that he was settling down, he realized he was starving. He waited for her to finish talking so he could tell her the news.

“My sister is a trip. Why, just last night I got home from work and there she was standing at the kitchen table, butt naked potting plants. It was damn near eleven at night. I

told her I wasn't going to eat of no table and sit at no chairs where she'd been potting plants without a stitch of clothing on." Ella shook her head and sipped her coffee. "I've been sitting here running my mouth. You know Bruce, you're looking tired today. What's going on with you?"

This was his chance. He finished chewing the bite of toast he took. The bright sun in the window warmed him, and he smiled at Ella. "I should be tired. Been up all night."

"Why no sleep Brucie? Wife keeping you up? Got a well somewhere I don't know about? You know if that damn hurricane hadn't hit, maybe I would've had enough money to invest in one about now." She watched the parking lot, waiting.

"Nope. Juliana's keeping me up. She had her baby early this morning. You're looking at a grandpa." Bruce beamed. He never felt so excited about something. Not hitting a big well, not even the birth of Juliana. He'd been scared back then, wrapped up in making a living. He'd had to grow into love with his daughter. He was lucky she was naturally drawn to him, and they didn't have to work very hard.

His grandchild was something else entirely. He knew things now that he could give to such a child.

Her face brightened a little, and she looked back at him. "Well, isn't that something! Congrats, Bruce." She patted his hand. He jumped a little. A trance seemed to have descended on him.

"It's a boy," he said. "His name's Whittfield, Whitt for short."

"I hadn't seen her in a while. I was thinking she must be about getting time. You make sure she brings me some pictures now." The bell at the door rang, and Ella heaved

herself out of the booth to go get the coffee. Bruce noticed she wasn't as thin as she used to be, just like him.

After breakfast, he drove his truck back to the hospital. He figured Juliana was sleeping, so he went looking for his wife and Foard. They were both dozing in chairs in Juliana's room, unwilling to leave her side. His daughter was awake, though. She held her son and stared down into his face, smiling.

They exchanged glances. Bruce felt a little shy towards her, the baby in her arms proof of her womanhood. He bent over, putting his face near that of his grandson's. The baby smelled clean and of baby powder. Holding his arms out, Bruce whispered "Give him to me."

He walked around the room, bouncing Whitt as he went. Foard snored a little and Juliana giggled. "Isn't he beautiful?" She whispered loudly to her father. Bruce turned to face her wondering if she had meant the baby or Foard. He was still getting used to the idea of his one and only daughter getting ready to marry someone so much older than she was.

But with relief, he saw that she was looking at him, Bruce, and the boy as they toured the room. Whitt fell asleep in his arms. Bruce carefully put him back in the plastic cradle next to Juliana. She relaxed back against the raised bed. She looked tired. He sat on the bed and squeezed her hand. *You're going to be such a great mother*, he said with his eyes. He couldn't quite say it out loud.

"I love you, daddy." She said, closing her eyes. He brushed hair out of her face and watched as within seconds she fell asleep. He looked between his daughter and the

boy and thought how excited he was for what was to come. He felt more excited about life than he had in a while, and he hadn't even wanted to take a drink all night.

Foard stirred. He rubbed his eyes, the wrinkles around them more prominent. Seeing Bruce, Lydia and Juliana asleep, he walked quietly out of the room. Bruce followed him.

"Why don't you go home, son? Eat some breakfast, get some rest," he said out in the hall. "Take Lydia with you while you're at it."

"No sir. I think I'll stay right here." Foard seemed to Bruce to have been as amazed by the new presence of the boy as Bruce himself was. He could imagine how it was, seeing your first child born at over 40, a time when Bruce had felt he was winding down in life. He still had a wide-eyed look. He wondered if Foard felt the same fear he had felt as he had watched Juliana sleep the day she was born.

He clapped his hand on Foard's back, taken a little by surprise with the force of the action. Foard jumped a little. "Well, can you believe it? You're a father."

"No sir. Cannot believe it after all these years. I wish Mama could've been here. I couldn't get anyone to drive her in time from New Braunfels."

"She'll get plenty of time with the boy. Did you find someone to bring her in?"

"Not yet," Foard rubbed the back of his neck. His shirt was ruffled and bags were dark and lined under his eyes. "I have a cousin who lives out there but couldn't take the time off from work. Maybe this weekend. I would go pick her up, but I don't want to miss a minute."

This last part seemed a confession to Bruce. That Foard had shown him some soft part of him. "Well, we'll try to figure something out." Bruce thought maybe he should

offer to pick up Foard's decrepit mother. It made him feel a little selfish to want all this time with his newborn grandson to be just his. As he got older, he had trouble deciding what was right and wrong anymore. He thought you were supposed to get wiser with age; he'd just become more unsure as if the newness of life had worn off and these things had just happened too many times.

He peeked back into the room and saw that Lydia had awakened. He motioned for her to come out to the hall. Foard had gone to the bathroom down the hall.

"Should I drive to New Braunfels to get Foard's mother, you think?"

"Might be nice of you to offer at least. How long would it take?"

"Bout eight hours round trip."

"That's a long drive. But the Broussards are coming up here to the hospital later. They could help us out until you get home."

"Is she even able to travel that far? You've met her, I never have." Bruce looked around, lowering his voice like he was ashamed of talking about Foard's mother behind his back.

"You'd probably have to stop for the bathroom pretty often. Not sure if she can use the bathroom herself. That's why he didn't want to just get a car service. She can't get on an airplane alone either. She'd need help."

Bruce scratched the back of his head. He was beginning to feel tired. This kind of planning. This kind of kink in his plans. He thought how awful he'd feel being old and decrepit, not able to drive to see the wonderful grandson he'd now known for nine hours. Lydia went to the bathroom, and Bruce paced the hall.

Foard came out of the men's room and walked toward him. Bruce stopped him with his hand as he walked through the door of the room where Juliana and Foard's son slept.

"How about if I go get her?"

"Well, Mr. Thibodaux."

"Told you a million times to call me Bruce. We are both men of the field."

"Well, Bruce. That's really nice of you to offer, but I just don't see how you could manage. She's in a home. She can't use the restroom by herself. That's why I wanted a family member to do it."

"What about your brother?"

"Oh, he's in Vail skiing. He's flying back Sunday."

"Will he be able to bring her then?"

"Yes sir." He sounded uncertain, but Bruce wanted to make sure it was the last option before he agreed to go get the woman.

"But..?"

"Well, you see, he's got a big case starting Monday. He'd have to drive all night to make it."

"Okay. Why don't I go get her?"

"You really don't have to do that. I wouldn't want you to miss the excitement and bringing him home and all. He's your grandson."

"Yeah, but he's your mother's too."

“I would object more, but I’m just worried she won’t make it much longer. She’s wanted this for so long, sir. I’m just afraid with her heart, she might die before I can get her here.”

“If I leave today, I could have her back tomorrow.”

It was decided. Bruce would go get the elderly grandmother. He felt the strain of the day behind and the day ahead all at once as he left the hospital. He’d given the sleeping baby a kiss on the perfect, clean foot he wiggled in his sleep. Juliana, he’d kissed on the hand, trying not to wake her. He wanted to remember them just like that before they got home and things began to change.

Lydia had persuaded him to sleep for a few hours before leaving. She wanted to go home with him, but he knew this was just to make sure he didn’t empty the bottle of whiskey before he napped. But that was the only way he’d be able to.

He convinced her to stay. He needed the bottle to suspend the next few hours. To come back to that excitement still intact.

He sat at his desk in his office feeling as though the life were drained out of him, he sipped the Scotch straight from a glass. He felt like he was a ninety year old lady himself, slight and frail, needing help to go to the bathroom. He downed the glass, dreading that scene. He slept for four hours and then left the house to head west at noon.

Foard had given him directions and said he would call ahead to let the home know Bruce was coming so they could pack her bag and make sure she had plenty of Depends. As Bruce drove out of town, he passed the Pig Stand. He stopped to have a cup of coffee, rouse himself from the heaviness of sleep.

He sat at the counter, his signal that he was in a hurry and just stopping for coffee. Ella set the coffee in front of him. “Bruce. You look worse than before. Seems as if your spirit has been dampened a little.”

“I’m headed out of town.”

“With that grandson over at the hospital?”

“Got to go pick up the father’s elderly mother from New Braunfels. He’s worried she’s going to die before she can see the little one.”

“Well gee Bruce. That’s a long way to go. Maybe you need some company?” Ella said this in a light way.

“Aw, no. Half the town would be uncaffeinated if I took you away from here.”

“Just kidding. They’d have my tail for leaving in the middle of a shift.” But Bruce detected disappointment in Ella’s face. It was just a flash. It was like she wanted someone to sweep her away from all this. He’d never really thought of her in outside of the Pig stand though she was one of his best friends. He realized in that instant, after all the years he’d been coming here, but he’d never seen her house or met anyone from her family. He didn’t even know her favorite color.

“Say, Ella? What’s your favorite color?”

“Blue,” she said, not turning from the new pot of coffee she was making.

It was Juliana’s favorite too. “Why not come with me? When you ever taken a sick day?”

Ella turned to him. “Oh, no, honey. I can’t do that.”

“Come on. Everyone needs to play hooky once in a while.”

“You know I was just joking, Bruce. How will it look, you a married man?” She said this leaning in close to him so the three others in the restaurant wouldn’t hear.

“You call up Betty and see if she can come in early. I’m taking you on a road trip.” Ella shrugged and picked up the phone. Bruce felt only a twinge of fear at the thought of Lydia finding out what he was doing. He couldn’t imagine what she would think, but obviously she had nothing to worry about. Bruce knew that in his heart.

They left a half hour later. Betty said she was glad for the extra money. They bumped across the parking lot and headed out to the highway, west across town towards Houston. In Schulenburg they stopped for Kolaches, almost halfway there, or so Bruce hoped. Around then he felt safe enough to point to the glove compartment to where he kept a flask of bourbon. They each took a sip before they headed out again.

Bruce learned all kinds of things about Ella. She’d never been married, but she had a son a few years younger than Juliana. Bruce had never heard of this in all the years he’d known her. She spoke shortly of her son. She’d been a reluctant mother, giving up a large portion of his time in visits to his father and his father’s family in Vidor. Her son had grown up mean and “red-neck” like his father. Ella had little to do with him anymore.

Bruce laughed but didn’t mean to. He was just imagining their lives as sort of parallel. The two of them had been living alongside one another, only intersecting at the Pig Stand. He could tell Ella had such a different life from his. She’d been a waitress at the Pig Stand for almost forty years, since she’d been just a teenager herself. Her mother

had sent her to work when her father left. Years later she'd found out he drowned at Crystal Beach on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

Bruce's whole life had been lived in a well-appointed house on Thomas Road in Beaumont. He went from his parents' to his own. His Daddy had been in the same business. Bruce had just taken it over when the old man decided to retire, after he'd spent two years learning the trade from the ground up, rough-necking. It was after that he'd met Lydia. Lydia had quickly changed his dirty, rough and tumble life to one of control and beauty.

He missed that freedom sometimes, but he loved Lydia and Juliana. He loved their life together.

Bruce didn't know why he drank, especially now. He took another swig from the flask as Ella drifted off to sleep against the passenger window. It made him feel so much more clear, so much more at ease. He took another sip and another. With Ella asleep, his boredom and sleepiness filled the truck.

He was nodding off, fighting to stay awake as he exited the highway in New Braunfels. It was late. He'd pulled over at a rest stop to sleep for an hour or so. He'd driven through a place to get a huge coffee which helped him make it to where he was.

"I don't think I can make it back tonight. We'll have to stop at a motel."

Ella silently agreed by not objecting. They pulled into the parking lot of a Motel 6. Bruce had millions of dollars but he was never one to spend them. A Motel 6 could provide just as good a bed as some fancy hotel in the middle of town. To him at least.

He got a room with two double beds while Ella waited in the car. They walked across the parking lot to an Applebees and had a quick dinner. They didn't talk much. Ella seemed content just to be away from Beaumont, looking out the window, watching the cars pass. Bruce got up three times to go to the bathroom to drink from the flask. For some reason, he didn't want Ella to see. He felt it would change him in her eyes.

They went back to the hotel room. It was awkward for both of them. They each stretched out on their own bed, watching the local news on the TV about someone being swept away in the river by tubing. Bruce was drifting off, fully clothed, on top of the bed spread. When Ella moved in front of him. She muted the TV. She was moving in a way that was strange and foreign to him.

“Bruce, didn't you ever think of me as more than just a waitress? All the years we known each other?”

He wasn't sure about the way she was walking toward him, still in her Pig Stand uniform. The teal shirt hung loose around her hips. He didn't say anything, but just blinked. “I know you did.”

“Maybe I used to. When I was roughnecking. I don't know. I always thought you were pretty, Ella.”

Their breathing was audible in the silent motel room. They could also hear a baby crying, someone's TV, traffic on the highway.

Ella moved closer, and he could smell the cigarettes on her. Her dry ponytail slid off her shoulder and brushed his arm. It made him shiver. He was afraid. There was some little voice that told him no.

“I’m sorry, Ella. I can’t. What about Lydia? Juliana?” He had too much to lose now. He was thinking of that little baby, clean and smiling.

She turned and shut herself in the bathroom. Bruce drifted off to sleep. In the morning, he wondered if he’d dreamed it all, if it had really happened at all. While Ella still slept, he finished what was in the flask. He got a bottle out of the back of the truck which he kept there for just such times. He refilled the flask. He showered. He felt fresh and ready to get back home to his new baby grandson.

At the nursing home, Mama Maccabee was upset Bruce was so late in getting there. It was 9 am. He was supposed to have been there the previous night. She shuffled down the hall, holding onto the rail built into the wall.

An aide helped get her situated in the back seat of the truck. Bruce didn’t really have any words with her. She didn’t seem to notice Ella, sitting in the front seat of the truck. She wore a yellow suit and white gloves. Her shoulders were so hunched over, she looked about four and a half feet tall.

Bruce went to the bathroom before going to the car. He watched himself in the mirror take another drink. He was ashamed. But how could he make it back without it. They drove the empty state highways back to Beaumont through grassy plains and pine forest. They stopped in Schulenburg again. Ella took Foard’s mother to the bathroom. Bruce told her Ella was a nurse. “Seems like there’s something up between you two,” was all she had said. All she had said the whole trip.

A half hour after Schulenburg, Bruce began to feel sleepy. He opened the window but then Mrs. Maccabee complained of her hair being messed up. So he closed the window. He ran the air, but she was cold. Ella rolled her eyes at him.

Just outside of Houston, Mama Maccabee complained of again having to use the restroom. Bruce was just coming to a crowded section of I-10. They had hit the edges of lunchtime traffic. They still had to make it across the city and another 60 miles to Beaumont. Bruce was tired and just wanted to be home. He desperately wanted the flask in his boot, but Ella was wide awake and Foard's mother was watching his every move.

He motioned to change lanes, almost hitting a van he hadn't seen. He changed lanes and looked over his shoulder again and just as he looked away traffic in front of him came to a screeching halt. Foard's mother screamed. Ella gasped, putting her hands out in front of her. Bruce whipped back around, and braced his head back against the seat. He'd done it now.

There were fifteen cars involved in the pileup. It wasn't Bruce's fault. He wasn't checked by the police, thank God. Someone about five cars in front of him was the first to hit after an El Camino stopped quickly in front of them. Mama Maccabee was unhurt except for a bad bruise from the seat belt. Ella had a broken collarbone. They spent a couple hours in Southwest memorial getting patched up. Bruce had luckily been uninjured except for scraped knees from hitting the steering column. The truck was another story.

Bruce called Lydia from the hospital.

"Honey, where are you? They're letting Ju go home today."

"Got some bad news."

“Everything okay? You sound shakey.”

“At the hospital in Houston. No one’s badly injured. Just a few scrapes. We were in a pretty bad pile up on the highway.”

“Is Foard’s mother okay? She didn’t break anything did she?”

“No. Luckily she was in the backseat. She just has some bruises. She’s a little shaken up though. Don’t know if she’ll get back in a car with me.”

Bruce hung up the phone. Lydia had decided Foard and Harry Broussard would come and get them. Bruce sat in a chair, waiting for Ella to get her cast at the hospital, blaming himself for this accident. He could have reacted quicker. He could have been more aware of what was happening and they would have avoided this whole mess.

He sat next to Foard’s mother in the waiting room. He got up twice to refill her coffee. Luckily they were surrounded by nurses that could help her in the bathroom. She said nothing. He got up to speak to Ella when she was through getting the brace around her shoulders. He apologized, hanging his head.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said, brushing him away. “I just have to wear this damn contraption. And phew I don’t want to think of this hospital bill.”

“Don’t you worry about that now.” Bruce led her to sit down next to Mama Maccabee. He stood against the wall, nervously jangling his leg, arms crossed, waiting for Foard and Harry to come, wondering what he would say, how he would explain putting Foard’s mother in danger, how he would explain Ella’s presence. He thought now how silly it had been to bring Ella. He couldn’t rely on Mama Maccabee’s discretion probably.

Foard finally appeared next to Bruce who jumped a little when he noticed Foard standing at his elbow. Foard's eyes had followed Bruce's over to where his mother sat next to Ella. Both women were sitting quietly. Foard's mother may have been dozing a little.

Bruce stepped away from Foard a little, not wanting him to smell any of the remaining traces of the liquor on his breath.

"Who's that?" Foard asked of the woman sitting next to his mother.

"Oh, that. It's someone who was involved in the wreck. Where's Harry?" Bruce looked down the hall past Foard and towards the door.

Ella turned a bit to the side. "Why that's the waitress from the Pig Stand." Foard had recognized her. Bruce's stomach felt cold. What would Foard say? "What's she doing here?"

"I brought her." Bruce looked down at the floor.

"Why? Didn't y'all have to stay overnight somewhere?" Foard's question sort of trailed off. He looked at Bruce questioningly. Harry appeared around the corner.

"Yes, son. We had separate b...rooms. I went to the Pig Stand for a cup of coffee before I left, and she wanted to come. I've known her for years."

"Was in the bathroom," Harry said, reaching to shake Bruce's hand. He seemed tense looking uneasily from Foard to Bruce. He too followed their eyes to the two women.

Foard paused a moment and then walked over to his mother to greet her. He asked if she was okay. She showed him the edge of a bruise on her shoulder, and said something indicating Bruce by the wall. Foard patted her hand and looked at Bruce,

shrugging his shoulders. Bruce couldn't tell if this was a gesture of friendship, of trying to indicate to Bruce he was on his side, that they shared something, a secret. Foard nodded hello to Ella, he helped his mother out of her seat and led her past Bruce out to the car. Bruce watched Ella rise, and they followed Foard and Mama Maccabee silently out to Foard's truck. Bruce would worry about his later. Now, he stopped to take the flask of whiskey out of his boot. It was engraved with his father's initials. It had been a wedding present to his father. He tossed the flask into a nearby trashcan and walked out after Ella, already not thinking about her, already thinking about his little grandson waiting at home.

## **Alamo Heights**

### Part I: Juliana

Foard was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, and Juliana was the only one there to take care of him. Their only family was his dead brother's ex-wife, but she had moved off to Jackson Hole with a rich friend of Foard's father. It was a big family scandal. Foard was the last of the Maccabee's except for his son, Whitt, of course. Their son was 16 years old now. He kept busy with high school and football practice. Football had become more time consuming as it became apparent that Foard was getting worse. Foard began hallucinating. Juliana took him for a nightly walk, trying to keep his muscles from tightening up any more. They walked arm and arm in the humidity of the near-fall, and he pointed out dogs that weren't there on the neatly trimmed lawns of Alamo Heights.

He was only 62. Sometimes when they sat and watched TV in the evenings, his hand, resting on his knee, would begin slapping. One night he told her he wasn't able to control it. She had thought he'd been doing it on purpose, just a tic he'd acquired. This had been happening for almost three years already.

Juliana sat on the patio in red light on the evening she decided that she would have to hire someone to help her. Foard had to be lifted and helped to do everything. His muscles were getting weaker and tightening up. It'd become more and more difficult for her to get him out of his leather chair in the living room to go for a walk.

On the patio she cried. She regretted that her son would have to see this happen to his father. She regretted that soon she would be alone in her forties. Dr. Ferris reassured

her that Parkinson's patients usually lived 10-15 years after diagnosis and this, she thought, was supposed to console her.

The morning after she decided she'd need help, Juliana just let him sleep. She felt there was no use in getting him up anymore to have breakfast. Sometimes he would sleep until ten or eleven. She guessed he was finally worn out from all the nights of sleeping an hour at a time, getting up out of bed to make coffee at four and again at six to get the paper and finally at seven to shower and start his day.

She rifled through the phone book and then the papers from the doctor and the specialist they'd been to. She was looking for any name to call and ask, *please help me*. She dreaded going in to get him up and shuffle him into the shower and rinse him off and bring him out to his chair where he'd spend his day.

She called a place from the health insurance company's list: Where the Heart Is. The name was cheesy, as everything seemed to be that had to do with the end of life. She thought he'd get a kick out of this. She would ask them for someone young and pretty, someone that talked a lot. Juliana always worried she had given him too quiet a life.

"Hello, yes, I'm looking for someone to come in to my home and help out with my husband. He has Parkinson's."

"Yes ma'am. We can do that here at Where the Heart is. Just what kind of care is he needing?"

"Well," Juliana paused, "he needs help going to the bathroom, getting up, bathing. That kind of stuff." She felt indecent about it. She knew Foard would too. He had always

been kind of private about this stuff. He was repulsed when Juliana had to begin helping him. It reminded her of the time he broke his leg soon after they'd first met. He wouldn't let her help him at all. He'd hired someone to help him and then he'd rather crawl across the floor without a crutch to go to the bathroom than have someone help him.

“We can certainly do that,” the lady on the phone said. She sounded sweet but distant.

“Any other services? Physical therapy?”

“I guess so. His muscles are getting pretty tight. He used to have these beautiful athletic arms and shoulders,” Juliana said. She was watching the leaves swirl on the back patio. The cat, who had managed to stay alive all these years, slept in the vortex, unaware of the wind and leaves. “He used to play football, before I knew him, of course. He's nearly twenty years older than me.”

“Ma'am?” The nice lady on the phone cut Juliana off and brought her back to the task at hand. “We could send Brandy. She's about 30, strong, and also a physical therapist. It looks like your insurance covers an hour of PT a day and two hours of in-care home.”

“When can she start?”

Juliana took tea out to the patio to sit with the cat. The sun was rising on the fall San Antonio day, and she was warm in a patch of sun. She remembered Foard when she first met him, his arms bulging out of a tight black shirt. He was extremely handsome and

athletic looking. She had made him soft and lazy. He still went out to the ranch to shoot pigeons and doves. Up until a year ago that is. He couldn't hold the gun steady enough anymore.

They never participated in the rigorous hour-long marathons in bed anymore either. They had become slow and soft in the bed as their love widened and deepened with age. On the porch, Juliana thought that getting pregnant with Foard's son was the best decision she'd ever made.

Now, she would have to watch Foard die, though. She had known the day would come; she'd been waiting for it for several years. She dreaded it, of course. It was like these dreams she used to have of her parents dying in the night when she was a child. She would sneak into their bedroom and listen for their breathing, reassured by the gentle rise and fall of their bodies. Some nights she sat awake, watching Foard's face as he slept. She had done this in their first years together as well. She would watch him sleep, watching his chest to make sure it was moving, to make sure he hadn't left her in sleep.

She called Whitt at school. She told him about Brandy. "That's great, Mom. This will be much better than having to send him somewhere." She was pleased with herself that she had pleased her son. "Gotta go, Mom. They'll take my phone away."

She called her mother then. Her mother said, "Yes, things are fine. Yes, you're father's fine. Yes, yes. Don't worry. How are you holding up though?"

"Oh, Mom."

Juliana waited until ten. She sat on the patio with the cat in her lap, sipping her tea after it'd long turned cold. She felt immobilized. She was afraid to go into their bedroom. Afraid of what Foard looked like, shrunken in their sprawling bed. But at ten o' clock she made herself. She crawled in next to him and tried to snuggle up to him. He slept strangely now. His legs jammed up like they were tied to his hips with rubber bands. His mouth was usually open, all his hair gone white. Sometimes his hands quivered under the white sheet. She just lay there next to him, waiting to wake him from sleep that was much less painful than being awake.

At three that afternoon, the doorbell rang. Foard had been sitting in the leather chair. She had gotten him up and around some. He'd sat on the porch for a while in the back with Juliana. She read the newspaper and chattered away about all the articles she read.

"Hmm," she said. "They're going to build a Whole Foods on that empty lot in Olmos Park."

Foard's response was usually a grunt, just a movement of torso from his lungs pushing air out harder than usual. He watched the leaves fall from the oak tree that hung over the patio wall. He'd been raking those leaves for thirty years.

"Maestro. We need to call Maestro," he said to Juliana. She had to ask him to repeat himself. He was getting hard to understand, his jaw and tongue muscles deteriorating just as the rest of his body.

“Honey, we haven’t seen Maestro for almost ten years.” He’d been their gardener for a long time. He mostly just sprayed down the stones on the patio and made a general mess of things. Foard felt sorry for him so he let him come around on Saturday mornings the half of the year he wasn’t in Mexico. He couldn’t even mow the grass because he’d gotten so old. He just pattered around with a hose or a rake or whatever, having taken the bus all the way across town to get there.

When the doorbell rang, though, Foard was in his chair, watching Sportscenter so loud Juliana first had to turn it down. She opened the door expecting a hefty, bland looking woman named Brandy. Instead it was an older woman, probably in her mid fifties.

“Hello, my name’s Marie. I’m with Where the Heart Is home care,” the woman said.

“I was expecting someone named Brandy,” Juliana says. She stood just holding the door in, not moving aside to let the woman in. She was peering around Juliana’s arm into the dark living room.

“Yes, she’s coming later. I’m just a consultant come to check out the home and offer my services for running errands, and cooking, things like that.” She leaned toward Juliana and whispered, “I’m mostly just a volunteer. My sister runs the company.”

Juliana moved aside and let her in. The woman was tall with long gray hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was an elegant woman Juliana could see. Foard didn’t look up from the TV. Juliana thought he’d fallen asleep.

“At least this doesn’t look like an old sick person’s home,” Marie said.

She was right. The floors were still a marbled concrete, the furniture all dark leather. Juliana hadn’t wanted to change a thing when she moved in fifteen years ago. The handmade table with the Texas star in the dining room still held bills and papers and royalty checks from Foard’s many oil wells. They had sat untouched for several months. Juliana needed to hire someone to take care of that as well. Foard had always done it. She had no head for math. The walls were graced with local art and the kitchen counters lined with handmade bowls and glasses.

Marie took a few steps to her right and left, taking it all in. “You know, I’ve never been to this house, but it’s just how I would’ve imagined Foard’s house to be.”

Juliana was confused. Who was this woman? She started to reach for the phone to call Where the Heart Is and find out just what was going on.

Marie stepped toward her and said, “You don’t need to do that.” She looked over at him sitting in his chair in the light of the patio door. “I’m an old friend. I must confess. My sister called when she saw his name on the new client list today. I had to come over.”

Suddenly it clicked to Juliana. This was Marie. THE Marie. “I moved back here to San Antonio a couple years ago, after my second husband and I divorced. I wasn’t sure if Foard still lived here,” Marie said.

Juliana didn’t speak. She just looked at this woman and could see the young woman she saw in pictures when Juliana had first met Foard. The pictures disappeared only when Juliana moved in and took over the house, when their son was conceived.

Marie could see Juliana was struggling. “I really do volunteer for the home care people. So if you need help with errands or cooking or anything I can really do that.” She touched Juliana’s arm.

They both glanced over to the square of sunlight. Foard’s eyes were closed, but he was holding his mouth closed. He must not have been asleep, just resting.

Juliana finally came to. “No, we don’t need any help. I’ll just wait for Brandy. I just can’t lift him anymore. My back’s hurting. Thanks for stopping by.” She began to move toward to door, trying to corral Marie out. Foard was her problem. She felt suddenly protective of him. She felt he was very vulnerable in his chair by the glass door. She was afraid even of the cat jumping on him, as if he might break.

She must get this woman out of the house. “I’ll call if I need anything.”

Marie hesitated, looking at Foard once more, and left without a word. Juliana locked both deadbolts behind her as if now she were barricading them in. As if now it were her and Foard against the world. Maybe this was the natural cycle. She thought she had missed having this feeling with a young husband. She wasn’t sure if this was how having a young husband would have felt, but she thought it was. Like they were young and could do anything: like the world could throw anything their way and they’d tackle it. Maybe this was their time. She could take care of Foard alone. They didn’t need anyone else. She called Where the Heart Is and cancelled Brandy.

For two weeks, Foard and Juliana saw no one but each other and Whitt. They were like young lovers. It was as if they were regressing, as if their relationship was in reverse. She sat on his lap for as long as his muscles could stand it. He fought and tried to get her off his legs, swatting her away, but he did it with a smile and tickled her until she couldn't stand it. They stayed in bed whole days, Juliana got up only to make them sandwiches or frozen waffles and to take Foard to the bathroom.

She knew they couldn't stay like this forever. She felt bad that she had broken their routine of daily living. It was like she'd given up on something. But she felt still that she must protect Foard and part of that was protecting his privacy. She didn't want anyone to see him like this. Whitt would come home from football practice every day and finding them still in pajamas, the TV in the bedroom blaring, would close himself in his room, playing video games until Juliana slipped food through his door, ashamed that she was not being a good mother, not keeping it together for Whitt.

On the thirteenth day of living like this, Juliana saw Whitt off to school in the morning. She made breakfast for Foard and when she went to bring it to the bedroom for him, he was there trying to get out of bed himself. He'd flung the sheet off of his legs and was trying to get his feet steady on the floor. His feet were curled and no longer easily flattened for balance. As Juliana set down the tray she was carrying and rushed over to him, his socked feet slid across the concrete floor and his back slid down the side of the bed. He was left in a sitting position against the bed. Juliana had tried to catch him in time but missed.

The corner of his mouth turned up in a smile. “Was just trying to get up, babe,” he mumbled. “Had to get the paper.”

“I got the paper hours ago,” she said.

“You never brought it to me.”

“Well, I was fixing to. Look, it’s right there.” She pointed at the tray that was precariously sitting on the rumpled sheets of the bed.

“Let’s try to get you up.” She stood over him and hooked her arms under his. She strained and could only get him about a foot off the ground.

“Come on. You’re going to have to help me.” She kept trying to haul him back up on the bed. She took off his socks so he could get a better grip, but his muscles were useless. After an hour, she brushed her hair out of her face and sighed. She sat down next to him on the floor. She gave up.

“Guess we’ll just have a picnic here on the floor,” she said. She was frustrated. She got the tray and arranged it in front of them. Somehow, she wedged a pillow between Foard and the concrete floor. She opened the blinds, so they could watch the patio which they faced on the floor of the bedroom.

They ate toast and fruit. They never ate eggs. Foard was allergic to them, always had been. Juliana suddenly yearned for eggs. She missed the days of her childhood when her father took her to breakfast every Saturday morning where they would eat eggs and crispy bacon, salsa and toast. When they were finished Foard fumbled for her hand. He looked her in the eyes. His blue eyes seemed to be lightening with age; they were no

longer deep and dark but had become a watery blue. His hand trembled in hers and they sat and waited for Whitt to come home.

Juliana was relieved when she heard his car door slam in the driveway on the other side of the patio. They had been watching the cat stalk a dead leaf as it was blown around by the wind. Juliana stretched her aching bones. She had been sitting for two hours. She couldn't imagine what Foard's must feel like, having been sitting for six.

She went out to the living room to meet Whitt as he came in from the garage. "Honey, I'm so glad you're home. How was practice?"

"It was great. We had to run ten miles in the mud." He didn't even look at his mother, but went straight to the kitchen to dig through the refrigerator. It was pretty empty. Juliana hadn't been to the store since she and Foard began their retreat from the world.

"Honey, can you help me with something?"

"I've got homework, Mom. Plus I told Heather I'd go over there for dinner tonight."

"Look, just come in our bedroom for a minute."

He bit into an apple and followed her down the hall back to the bedroom. She didn't want him to know they'd been sitting on the floor all day. He would scold her, make her feel bad. He would tell her again they needed to put him in a home.

"Mom. Has he been sitting here like this all day?"

“No, no. Just a couple hours. He was trying to get up after lunch and just slid right down like that.”

“Mom. What is this tray doing sitting in the corner on the floor. Looks like breakfast.”

“I just stuck it there this morning. Haven’t had a chance to pick it up.”

He knew she was lying. She could see it in the way he was looking at his father sitting down on the floor. She realized she was running her fingers through her hair, something she did unconsciously when she lied. Whitt had pointed that out once. Immediately she stopped, jamming her hands to her sides. Foard was watching the cat lick her paws out the window on the patio. If he bent his head a little to the left he could see the fish pond. He hadn’t seen his fish for months.

Whitt bent over and easily lifted his father’s frail body back on the bed. “I want to go outside,” Foard mumbled. Whitt had to lean in and have him say it again. Juliana went to the closet and got his shoes. She slid them on his feet, and Whitt helped his father outside. He walked excruciatingly slow. It took five minutes to get from the back of the house out to the patio. Whitt settled him on the cushioned chaise lounge there. Juliana put a flannel blanket over him. He got cold so easily now and the temperature had finally dropped to the 60s.

She realized she hadn’t been to one of Whitt’s football games all season. He was a wide receiver at Alamo Heights High School, defending state champions. He was a sophomore but already on the varsity team. She watched his athletic back go through the patio door into the house. From the back he looked so much like Foard used to look. He

had long surpassed Juliana in height. His once blonde hair had turned brown and shaggy. He kept it a little long. He had his father's dark blue eyes. She couldn't believe she'd had such a beautiful child, one she had always dreamed of. She followed him in the house.

He was eating the apple again, sitting on the couch, apparently waiting for her.

"Mom, you can't let him sit on the floor all day while I'm at school."

"What am I supposed to do? I tried to lift him for an hour and couldn't."

"You shouldn't be trying to lift him either. You've got to get someone to come in and help. Or he needs to go somewhere that he can be cared for all day."

"I care for him all day. It was fine. We read the newspaper and then you came home and got him up."

"It's getting too difficult for you. Someone needs to help us. I can't be here all the time." She sat next to him on the couch, her arms crossed. She didn't care what Whitt said. Their life was fine. She could do it alone.

On the fifteenth day, the doorbell rang. It was one in the afternoon and a Saturday. Juliana and Foard were still in bed. She lay there feeling guilty that she wasn't doing something more productive, like the bills or cleaning. Maybe later when Whitt was back she could go to the store. She tried to decide what to do about the door, whether just to ignore it or not. She snuggled closer to Foard in the bed. He was napping. Whitt was out for a run.

There was more knocking, so Juliana got up and put a robe on. As she headed down the long hallway toward the door, she noticed for the first time in days how messy the place was. The blinds were drawn and clothes and mail were strewn all over the living room and office. She tried to see out the window who was at the door. More knocking. She opened it a crack. Marie was standing there.

When Foard first got sick it wasn't like he suddenly changed. It was just a few things, like the hand shaking and muscle deterioration. He was still the same; he just seemed a little frailer. It was sometimes hard for Juliana to remember him like he used to be. She couldn't imagine him smoking a joint out their bedroom window or loading his gun. He used to drive this big truck; he needed it for driving on dirt roads around to his oil wells. He couldn't even step up high enough to get into it anymore. Whitt was happy to drive it to school.

She most often thought of him on those wells as he deteriorated. She thought of him as one of the roughnecks, moving pipes and cables, dirty with mud and sweat. She fantasized about him coming home to her like this, dirty and ruddy from the sun, young.

Juliana stood behind the closed door trying to decide whether to open it to Marie's knocking. "Hello?" she called trying to see in the windows. "I see your car in the drive. I know someone's here."

Juliana sighed and cracked the door. She couldn't imagine what she must look like at one in the afternoon, messy hair, in a robe, probably dark circles under her eyes from days of inactivity.

"You look awful," Marie said.

"Gee, thanks." Juliana was past politeness.

"Well, are you going to let me in or what?"

"I don't think that's such a great idea." Juliana looked behind her at the scattered newspapers and dirty plates. One had the crust of a sandwich still there. "Why are you here anyway?"

"I was worried that I was the reason you cancelled the nurse." Marie took off her sunglasses and gave Juliana a sheepish smile.

"I just didn't need her anymore. I can do it myself."

"Honey, I think you do need help."

Juliana didn't open the door any wider. She just stood there looking at Marie. Whitt came up the walk then behind her. He pulled his headphones out of his ears.

"What's going on, Mom? Who's this?"

"Honey, this is Marie, your father's first wife." Juliana opened the door for him and began to close it on Marie after Whitt stepped inside.

“Oh, you’re his son. Boy, you look just like your father when we first met.” She stuck out her hand to shake Whitt’s. Whitt’s attention had been caught by the phrase ex-wife. He looked curiously at Marie from under the hair that hung in his face. Juliana, on instinct, reached up to brush it out of his eyes. Whitt jerked his head away, swatting at her hand.

“What are you doing here?” Whitt asked after the three of them were silent for a moment.

“I’m just trying to offer your Mom here some help. I bet she could use it.”

“Mom, that’s great.” He turned to her as she tried to slide further behind the door. He turned back to Marie. “I’ve been trying to get her to get help for a while now. She can’t lift him anymore.”

Juliana wished she had gotten rid of Marie before Whitt came home. Now she would never get away. She opened the door wider. “Do you want some tea?”

The two women sat on the patio. Juliana hurried Marie through the messy house out to the patio in the back where things were normal. The fountain spilled its water into the Koi pond. The Koi circled each other and mouthed the surface of the water as Juliana sprinkled food over them.

When she was young, Juliana had seen Marie as a woman in the position of power. Foard held Juliana at arm’s length because of Marie. Juliana had imagined her as someone warm and breezy, someone he saw as a paragon of good. Juliana felt threatened that Marie was here sitting on her patio sipping her tea. But all those old feelings had

kind of dissipated as she and Foard grew together through the years, like the trunk of a fichus, braided into one. Marie wore all black with a deep purple scarf. She wore light makeup to accentuate big brown eyes. Her hair had gone gray, but it didn't look dry and worn out yet. Today it was styled down.

Juliana sat in a chair opposite her and pulled her silk robe closer around her. Her hair, once red, was darkening with age. She waited for Marie to speak.

But Marie didn't. She said nothing; she just sipped her tea and looked around the patio, taking in the sundial and the smoker in the back, the chiminea where they used to throw their cigarette butts long ago.

Juliana was uncomfortable, but she was too tired to be nervous or worried. "What do you want? I need to get back to Foard soon."

"I'd really like to see him, speak to him."

"I can't guarantee he will recognize you."

"We can see. I'd like to help the two of you. It looks like you could use it."

"Like you don't have anything better to do with your time? Than bother Foard in his old age, while he's dying?" She surprised herself by saying this. Juliana knew it wouldn't be Foard she would be bothering, but her, Juliana.

"I don't work. My second husband was a politician. He left me enough money. I have nothing else to do with my time."

"And you were in love with him once."

“But that’s been so long now. I just want to help you. I can see y’all have had a happy life.”

Juliana watched the cat stalk the coy in the pond, moving from one wall to the next, swatting with a paw here and there. Juliana felt tired. She didn’t have the energy to fight anymore. She and Foard were losing their strength against the world. They’d have to let someone else in.

“We have. I guess I could use some help with going to the store and stuff.”

Marie got out of the chair. She passed a business card with her name and cell phone on it across the table to Juliana. “Here’s my number. Call me with a grocery list, dry cleaning, anything. I’d be happy to come and sit with him too if you want to get out of the house.”

Juliana didn’t feel much need to leave the house. She loved the off-white walls and leather furniture. She had been a graphic designer, working from a desk tucked away in a sliding door closet on the front living room wall. She hadn’t taken on a job from any of her clients for almost a year. The closet had been permanently closed since then. She hadn’t even taken out her computer in several months.

She let Marie leave. She didn’t even get up to see her out. She finished her tea on the patio and went back to bed with the sleeping Foard. Watching his feet and legs move and shake under the sheets, she knew now their vacation from life was over.

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“How about a rotisserie chicken for dinner?” This is the first thing Marie said when Juliana answered her phone call the next day. “I got your number from the home care people. I hope you don’t mind. I’m at the store now, so what do you want?”

Juliana had to catch her breath. She’d been scrubbing the tile in the bathrooms with bleach and a tooth brush. She was in cleaning mode now. She felt as if she couldn’t do another thing until the bathrooms were clean. Even this phone call was a distraction. But she could use a few things.

“I could use a few things.”

“I’ll get a chicken, maybe a salad, some potatoes? I’ll be over about six. I’ll make you dinner. Then maybe Foard and I can talk.”

“Sure. Fine.” Juliana hung up the phone and went back to her hands and knees. When she was younger, she may have felt worse about someone helping her like this, but now she was just glad for someone to get groceries so she could continue to scrub the grout in the tiles.

When Marie knocked on the door at seven that evening, Juliana was dressed and looking more presentable than she had for two weeks. Foard was also showered, sitting neatly in his chair. He was watching a baseball game. It was October and almost the World Series.

Marie came in with several bags in her hands. She’d gotten some things Juliana needed, such as bread and milk. She had also brought dinner. Mostly prepared foods from the Central Market down the street. Juliana had never served prepared foods to Foard.

She made everything by hand. Sometimes Foard would even make things. He was a good cook when it came to brisket or steaks or tamales. She made this small judgment of Marie, but she had decided to be nice, grateful.

She took some of the bags and went to the kitchen to begin putting the milk away, heating potatoes and green beans. Marie dropped what she was carrying near the door to the patio. She was wearing the same black clothes, this time with a red and orange patterned scarf and black boots with a slight heel. She went straight to Foard and knelt next to him.

“Hello, Foard. It’s Marie. Remember? Baton Rouge?”

“Hmph.” Foard looked at her, slanting his eyes without really moving his head.

“I’m living in San Antonio now. How are you?” She had begun speaking loudly, like she thought he couldn’t hear her. Juliana observed this from the kitchen as she put away the cheese. He could hear fine. It was everything else that was failing him. He probably couldn’t see her. His eyes were worse.

“Marie?” Juliana came around the corner out of the little kitchen.

“Yes, dear?” She stood up from where she had squatted next to Foard’s chair.

“Can you bring those bags in here, and I’ll start preparing dinner?”

“Sure, sure.” She picked up the bags and deposited them in the kitchen.

“His mind is fine but his body just won’t cooperate. He may recognize you and want to say something, it just won’t come out as anything we can understand,” Juliana said to her as she unloaded the food.

Marie went back to the living room, trying to talk to Foard about baseball. She mostly just chattered inanely. Juliana heated up the food in the microwave and set the table. She had cleared the bills off the table that afternoon. She went in and lifted Foard from under his arm out of his chair.

“Come on, you. Dinner time.”

Marie hovered uncomfortably while Juliana settled Foard in his chair. It was a difficult process for Juliana. She’d never been very strong physically. She didn’t ask Marie’s help. She just wanted her to witness what happened, their daily routine. Though eating at the table was rarely routine anymore. They usually sat at the living room in front of the TV. Foard could still feed himself fairly well, unless his hands shook the food off the fork. The doctor had told her there’d come a time when his fingers would swell up like sausages (her words not his) and they would be almost immobile and he would have to be fed. She got him situated in the chair and put a plate of food in front of him. He fell to eating, hunched over the plate more from his weakening muscles than anything else.

“Where’s Whitt tonight?” Marie asked.

“Off at his girlfriend’s house. Heather. She lives down the street.”

Marie and Juliana served themselves and chattered away, filling the silence of the house. They talked about the past mostly, filling each other in on the details of their lives.

Juliana talked about Foard and Whitt. She got a picture of them off the shelf in the living room. It was one of the last pictures taken of Foard, three years earlier at one of Whitt's pee-wee football games. Juliana hadn't wanted to remember anything since then.

This dinner became a weekly routine, Marie coming over with groceries and something for Juliana to make. Juliana had asked her the second time for specific things: fresh rosemary, lamb chops, sweet potatoes. This was how she hinted that they didn't eat prepared food from Central Market every week.

While Juliana prepared dinner, Marie would shout at Foard in the living room. Or maybe it was just her voice. Juliana had known people like this, with voices that just carry. She had never been one of them. Foard would look sideways at Marie, trying to lift his head, the muscles in his neck tight and weakening. Juliana wasn't sure if he recognized his ex-wife; he never said anything to Juliana if he did. The conversations were terribly one-sided, which Juliana learned was true most of the time for Marie. She wasn't someone who listened very often. Juliana wondered if this was how she'd always been or if something had changed her, maybe being married to a politician.

At dinner they shared stories about living in San Antonio. Marie lived just under the highway in Olmos Park. The schools weren't as good but the homes rivaled Alamo Heights in their grandeur. Juliana had gone to college in Olmos Park years ago. To think that whole time she had lived five minutes from the house where she would share her life with Foard's. Foard and Marie had lived in Houston then. It was closer to Shreveport where she was from and Foard's wells.

They talked about Houston. Juliana had spent a lot of time there growing up. They talked about Mardi Gras and King Cake and boudin.

It was nice to have someone to talk to, Juliana thought. She realized she had so little connection to the world outside Foard and Whitt. She spoke to her parents and Anne who were both from Beaumont. She'd had enough of Beaumont gossip.

Whitt seemed to be cautiously friendly to Marie. He sometimes stayed for dinner, but mostly went to Heather's.

It was December when Juliana began to be suspicious of Marie's presence in their life, more so than just someone outside their tight family circle being privy to how they lived. She became suspicious of Marie's motivations. Juliana began to suspect there was something Marie wanted, and she wasn't yet sure what it was.

Fortunately, Marie left them alone for two weeks for Christmas. Juliana assumed she had family of her own to visit. She'd never had any children with her second husband, but her parents were still living and she had brothers and sisters.

Juliana got Whitt four tickets to a Houston Texans game, knowing it was probably futile to suggest she and Foard would go, and a new X-Box for Christmas. She had never imagined she would have a child who played video games, but she felt it was something cruel to deny him, something his friends would make fun of him for. Whitt still kept her old copy of *The Last Picture Show* jammed under his pillow. It was one of the few books she had seen him read over and over. He took it with him on trips, almost like a security blanket.

Marie came back the week after New Year's. She just showed up one day with a bag of groceries for Juliana to make a beer marinated pork tenderloin Marie had decided she loved so much. She brought a homemade gingerbread too, a Christmas gift she said. Their dinners struck up again and after the holiday, Juliana forgot her suspiciousness. Marie was nice. She was as nice as Juliana had thought she was when she briefly spoke to her on the phone that day when she was pregnant with Whitt. It all seemed so funny now.

Sometimes, Juliana would get Whitt to stay with Foard in the afternoon and she and Marie would go to the nail place down the street. They'd get pedicures and talk about Foard.

“Don't you just hate his snoring?”

“Actually, I kind of like it,” Juliana would say. “It helps me sleep.” And they would laugh comparing other stories.

Juliana couldn't really relate to the way Marie saw Foard: as a wild one. Someone who got in fights at bars and took acid. Juliana hadn't known this part of Foard, so she just listened to the stories trying to glean whatever she could about this man that she loved.

Marie even invited Juliana over to her house once for dinner. Juliana set Foard into the car, folding his wheelchair into the back. They drove the short distance through the park and under the bridge and parked in front of Marie's pink stuccoed house. The tile on the roof looked new, and two old cedar trees flanked the walk. They ate on a tiled patio on the back of the house, with the French doors to the house open, the white curtains fluttering around them. They watched the garden full of yuccas and mimosa

trees. There was a cactus garden and a rose garden. Marie spent the whole dinner talking about gardening. It was apparently what took up most of her time since she'd moved to San Antonio after her divorce to be near her sister who ran the home care company.

After dinner, they left Foard on the patio in his chair, dozing, and wandered through the gardens in the back yard. Juliana had never had a green thumb. She unconsciously took it as a reason Foard had liked Marie more.

They continued to know each other better, and Marie didn't bother Juliana as much. She got comfortable in their routine. She felt happier to have some connection outside her family. Each time her parents or Anne called her, she let it roll to her voice mail. What could she say? Have Marie around made her feel more safe, less isolated in case of an emergency, not so much a medical emergency with Foard, but an emergency of the heart, her heart, Juliana's.

And then, in March, on a Spring day that made San Antonio seem bright and cool, and the sky so blue it hurt, it made her ache for something that made her feel alive, made Juliana ache to drive too fast with her windows down, Foard got worse. He had been steady for about a year. The same deterioration. The same amount of shaking. And all of a sudden, like a cloud that moved, darkening the sun for a moment on such a spring day, he was changed.

Juliana got up on that March day and pattered about the house, cleaning, fixing breakfast. She brought Foard breakfast at ten, and she could see he wasn't right. His chest

was heaving, and he seemed like he wasn't breathing. His face was so white it was almost blue. She called 911.

She insisted on riding with him to the hospital in the ambulance. She felt so panicked once she saw Foard calm and breathing through an oxygen mask, the color returning to his face, some sort of fluid travelling into his vein through a needle and tube. They rushed him to the hospital, Juliana bracing herself against the sharp curves, trying not to fall over on him as she held his hand. It shook in hers. She traced her fingers over the loose skin, the swollen knuckles as if she were writing words to him: *love you, okay, breathe.*

Maybe it was the smoking, he hadn't quit till he was in his forties after all, or the Parkinsons, or the drug use when he was young. "It's his heart," the doctor told them, in the gray hospital room where the beautiful spring blue was hidden by blinds. Foard slept in the bed. She could tell he was asleep by the slackness in his jaw. When he was awake, he made a point to hold it closed. Some last dignity he imposed on himself. Juliana nodded while the doctor told her they'd do surgery and put a pacemaker in. Juliana continued to trace his hand. *Heart, failing.*

He stayed in the hospital for almost a week during the surgery and recovery. It was unimaginable that he could recover at all from the stress of surgery. It seemed he had slept for a week straight when he'd had surgery on his leg, almost 20 years ago. It was dicey for a couple days. Whitt was called and came immediately to the hospital after school, his days free of football practice, he had begun to worry more. He had begun taking drives, talking about marrying Heather, about moving out. Juliana could only sit

stone faced and cry, later in her room thinking of losing her boy, especially now, but she realized they were taking his youth. *He wouldn't do it*, she thought as she watched him that first day stand by his father's bed while he slept. She was imagining how it would feel for this to be sped up, the dying of one's parents. Her parents were dying slowly, over decades. She thought maybe this was easier.

They watched Foard, wondering if he would live, or if this would be the end of him. Whitt had become angry. She could see it in his face. Small things made him angry. The dropping of a glass, stubbing a toe, the lawn mower jamming. But now at the hospital, he stayed with her, the model son. He went and got playing cards from the gift shop, food for Juliana when she was through feeding Foard dinner. He drove home and got Foard's slippers and pajamas, a toothbrush. He brought back his copy of *The Last Picture Show* and settled on one of the chairs in the corner. He flipped around and read different pages.

Juliana tried to play solitaire, tried to read a magazine, but she just kept watching her boys. She willed Foard awake as he slept. She willed him to come back to her and Whitt too. She imagined bundling them up and putting them back in her belly and carrying them away with her.

Marie was eerily absent during this week. Maybe she didn't know. Juliana hadn't been home, so maybe she'd been calling without getting any answer. Juliana didn't care. She only passed through her mind briefly when Whitt mentioned there had been a piece of paper stuck on their front door. He hadn't checked to see what it said, figuring it for a takeout menu. She figured it must be a note. She had a passing feeling of guilt, that she

knew Marie would be worried, no one at the house, no one answering the phone. But she couldn't get herself to the phone to call her. Whitt went back and forth from home to school to hospital to school. He lived in a circle of the three buildings, coming to the hospital in the evenings to do school work, usually with his headphones on. He would stare at Foard in the bed, recovering from the surgery, as he thought of his next move on a math problem.

## Part II: Whitt

Whitt was becoming angry. He was angry at his father for getting sick. He was angry at his mother for the way she was dealing with it. He was angry at Marie for butting her way into their lives. He was angry at the cat for rubbing against his leg. He was angry at Heather. She just didn't get it. They weren't meant for each other after all.

The mild San Antonio winter eased into spring, and the skies were so blue and cloudless it made him ache as he lay in the grass of the practice field while he should have been in geometry class. He felt like there was something he should be doing. Something more for him. He could only place hope in football. It was what would save him as practice had saved him from going home after school in the fall.

His conversations with Heather and their time together became more tense. He had offered to marry her, move out of his house, get an apartment off Broadway by the Catholic University. She had merely said they would see when the summer came. But he was tiring of being with her. Sometimes he hated the way she always listened to anything he said and took him so seriously. She waited for him every day after school and he drove her home. It was the same thing every day. He was bored. He was even bored by his

father's illness. It seemed like never-ending days upon days of the same symptoms; the same look on his face.

Then one day, he was lying on the still dead winter grass of the football field, again missing geometry class, and everything changed. It was almost a relief when his phone vibrated in his pocket against the ground which was coming to life day-by-day. It was his mother and he felt for a moment before answering that it could only be something bad.

“Hey, mom.”

“Honey, I’m calling you from the hospital. It’s your father. Something with his heart. I’ve called the office at the school, and they say you can leave early.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s breathing better now. I guess they’re going to have to do surgery. Put in a pacemaker.”

“Okay. I’ll come as soon as I can, but I have to stay for that test in Biology.”

“Please just come soon. I’m sorry.”

She hung up. Gone were the days of nagging him to do well in school, he thought. He flopped his phone down on the crunchy grass next to him and rolled over on his side, looking down towards the line of trees at the edge of the field. He felt immobilized. Stuck.

He stayed at school all day, drifting from class to his locker to class again. He normally would have loved the excuse to skip class, but he wasn't ready to face his father in a hospital bed. What if he never left?

His football teammates passed him in the hallway, giving him slaps on the back, smacking his hand and pulling him toward them, yelling about a party on Friday night. Whitt wandered around in a haze and nobody noticed.

He forgot to tell Heather what happened. They didn't see each other in the afternoons because their schedules were so different. His phone buzzed in his backpack three times on his way to the hospital, but he didn't hear it.

When he got there, he drifted around in a daze. He did what his mother asked him. He didn't say much. He watched Foard sleep in the white sheets, his face green from the harsh lighting.

He went home that night to sleep and to gather some clothes for his father for the next day. As he pulled past the house to the driveway, he saw something stuck to the front door, a white spot in the darkness. He trudged across the lawn and retrieved the paper. It was a note from Marie.

Worried about everybody. No one answered the phone all day. Came by and no one was here. What's going on? I had something special to tell Foard. Call me asap. Marie

Whitt read the note several times. What could she have to tell him? Probably something to try to steal Foard back from his mother. He had stood in the halls and listened to Marie

and Juliana talk about Foard and it was clear Marie was a lonely divorcee who missed this one man, missed the life Juliana and Whitt had with him. Why couldn't she see his Dad loved his Mom? Why did she have to meddle? She must have nothing else important to do.

He crumpled the note in his hand. He walked through the house, straight through the patio doors and burned the note with a lighter that he found on the table. It felt good to destroy something like that.

The next day, he went to the hospital, forgetting school completely. It didn't even cross his mind.

"Mom, there was a note on the door." He wasn't sure why he mentioned it when he knew the note was long gone, a pile of ashes in the chiminea on the patio. He was testing her. But she was too concerned with Foard who was just out of surgery. She sat next to him and smoothed his hair. *Stop fussing with him.* He felt the annoyance at the whole thing well up in him. His fists clenched at his sides for a second and then he relaxed. He always relaxed before he lost his temper. All he had to do was think of his father dying.

### Part III: Juliana

After the crisis with Foard's heart, spring came on in full force. The cedar and oak trees were green again and they covered everything in their yellow pollen, making everybody sick with the Cedar Fever. Every day the sky was a brilliant blue, free of clouds. The weather was perfect and it would be for weeks until the heat of summer came creeping on.

Juliana was able to bring Foard home from the hospital. She sat him on the chaise on the patio. The cedar had never bothered him. His eyes followed the birds hopping from the fence to the lime tree in the corner of the patio, his fish swirling in the pond he'd built the year Juliana met him in that bar in Beaumont. The cat rolled over on her back on the ground next to him, trying to get a rub or a scratch, but his hands sat limp, mildly shaking on his belly. Sometimes he stared at them, but she didn't know if he was really conscious or just letting his eyes fixate on something, his mind wandering.

He'd been home for a week when Marie showed up at the house. There had been several messages from her, but Juliana just hadn't had the energy to call her back. There were things to get back in order and Foard to take care of. She'd finally hired someone to come to the house and help her for at least a few hours during the day. Coming out of the hospital into the beautiful spring day, she had realized she'd been living in a fog, a kind of winter. She was trying to shake that.

When Marie rang the doorbell a week after they were home from the hospital, Juliana let her in and explained everything that had happened. They sat in the shade of the patio and watched Foard in the chaise. He'd seemed a little more alert since the hospital, like he'd had a bit of a restart. When Marie went over to say hi to him he said, "Where have you been?" They took this as a good sign that he'd known she was there the whole time. Juliana was secretly injured to think that he'd missed Marie. That perhaps in his shaky almost death state he had thought of her and not Juliana. These were questions she would never get answers to unless Foard addressed them himself. Gone were the days of such girlish quarrels.

The first day, Marie seemed to hang around awkwardly. Juliana moved around her to finish various chores. For a while Marie just sat next to Foard on the chaise, holding his hand. It looked like they were talking about a bird. Juliana watched them through the glass door as she cleaned the kitchen. A dish slipped out of her hand while she was watching. She cursed herself for being distracted. She cleaned up the mess and finally Marie patted Foard's hand and left, hugging Juliana without a word on her way out.

It was a beautiful night. The kind of night that, before the disease, they would have spent sitting on the patio of a restaurant that one of Foard's many friends in San Antonio owned, drinking margaritas. Instead, Juliana brought dinner out to their patio where Foard had been all day. He'd gotten some good sun. His skin, once tan and healthy, was now pale. She brought their dinner on a tray. Whitt, as usual, was at Heather's. Juliana lit candles all around the patio. They reflected off the fish pond creating a glow around the patio.

They'd once had sex on the patio on a night like this. On a weekend visit from Beaumont, she'd told him she'd never done it outside and he proceeded to remedy that. They had spread an extra sheet on the small strip of grass enclosed by the fence. They were out there for hours watching the stars. She reminded him of this. His mouth curled into a smile, and his eyes shined. She laughed recounting the story of how he'd cut his knee on a hidden rock and she'd kept sneezing from the recently mown grass. But she had loved looking at the stars with him, naked and chilly on a spring night. Looking at the stars, watching sunsets, she felt more connected with the world and somehow with the

people around her. As she recalled, that was the first night he'd told her he loved her. She'd had to beg him to stay out though; he hadn't seen the use of watching the stars.

She looked up now at the sky. She couldn't make out any from either the clouds or the growing amount of city lights around their little neighborhood that had once been not quite so busy.

“You know, Marie's good to have around. I feel less isolated from the world,” Juliana said to the sky. She felt Foard was listening though, waiting for her to speak. She'd taken to talking out loud to him often, as she'd done to her cat when she lived alone. “Even though I think she wants something from you. I wish I knew why she left you all those years ago to be with that other guy. I guess you can't really tell me the whole story now. It seemed like a big deal at one point, but it has faded I think. At some point, I forgot about her. Forgot that you'd been someone else's husband before you were mine. But now I have you all to myself, right?”

She turned to him and took his hand.

“Babe...told me...never said...” He started to mumble something. She looked hard at his face trying to make out the words.

“What? Can't understand you.”

“She was pregnant.”

“When? With her second husband?”

“When she left me. Thought it was his. Never told me.” He was straining to hold his head up and be clear. He let it go for a second, listening to Juliana’s thinking out loud before going on.

“Why would she tell you that now? Why did she think it was his?”

“Turns out, when the kid got older, they had a fight that turned back to me. Had a test.”

“Paternity test?”

“Wasn’t his. Had to have been mine.”

Foard released the tension in his neck and let his head relax a little toward his chest. She sat, staring at the stone ground for a minute before moving again. She stood up behind him and gently helped him lean his head back against the chaise cushion as it was more comfortable. He closed his eyes. She was quiet. What was there to say to this? Words were trapped in her throat. What was the use of questions or arguing? She just wanted to live these last years with Foard before she had to face the last years of her life. She couldn’t think of it.

She sat back in the chair and watched him doze. The light from the candles played off his face, changing the shadows. She moved him to one side of the chaise: first his legs, then his torso, something she’d learned by caring for him for all these years as his body got weaker. She slid into the space she had made and curled against his warm body. He seemed to be radiating absorbed energy collected all day from the sun. She didn’t sleep that night, unable to turn her mind off. Whitt came home around midnight, but she

waved him away silently when he opened the patio door. She just stayed curled next to Foard all night, getting up only for another blanket to ward off the spring chill.

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Marie didn't call or come by for several days. Juliana thought perhaps she was giving them space. She wanted to talk to Marie to glean details that Foard couldn't communicate to her. Maybe if another good day would come he could explain more. Juliana felt there was something more to the conversation. Something still unsaid. She sometimes thought that Foard forgot about the conversation; he never mentioned it to her if he was thinking about it. He often forgot certain things they talked about. The only gauge she had was that he spoke to her of other things: of the hospital and death and Whitt. Sometimes he would scold her in a moment of clarity for being a neglectful mother. It was more important that Whitt have her attention than him. He would be gone soon. Whitt needed a mother.

Juliana would just nod at this and then escape to the bathroom, trying not to cry, resolving that she would do better. And she would. For a few days she would spend time helping Whitt with his homework, talk to him about Heather, about what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to be a fireman, or a businessman. Juliana tried to give him room to breathe, tried not to say, "And what about your father's business, your grandfather's?" He never said anything about that. She couldn't tell yet if he didn't want that business or if he just didn't think about it.

“You know, your father took his business over from his grandfather when he was out of college.” This was a slight lie. They’d never told Whitt his father didn’t finish college so it wouldn’t encourage him to not finish.

Whitt just shrugged at this, “I know.”

That was the end of that conversation, and Juliana didn’t press it. She thought there would be a time for that.

Finally, one night, Foard mumbled something in his afternoon sleep. She’d been decluttering the living room while he dozed in the chair, and he was talking. This was her cue that he was thinking about Marie, at least subconsciously. She leaned her ear close to his mouth, and she heard the name, Marie.

She went in the bathroom and cried this time. She let it all out. It was something she used to do when she was younger but hadn’t for a long time. Disappearing in the bathroom was just her reset trick, the thing that held the tears back. She sat on the toilet and thought they were going to have to deal with this now.

Juliana picked up the phone several times to call Marie. She wished it could be accidental like that time years ago when she had called her from Italy. This time it would have to be something deliberate, something that she decided to do to resolve this issue. For years Foard had let her be lazy about resolving problems. They had allowed each other to be let off easy, saying it was okay too soon, ceding responsibility instead of working it out.

Finally, Juliana called Marie. It was evening and she was alone in the house. Whitt was gone at spring football practice, and Foard she left sleeping in front of the TV. She sometimes wished she still smoked cigarettes. She had finally quit when she was six months pregnant with Whitt, feeling gross and disgusted by them in comparison to the beautiful life she was creating.

Instead, she had a margarita. She sipped it on the porch as she dialed Marie's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's Juliana."

"Was wondering when you'd call."

Juliana was silent. She gulped half the margarita.

"Guess he told you, huh?"

"Yep. Don't know what to say." She was so bad at expressing things. She always had been, and Foard hadn't helped her at all. He had just let her be like that, accepted it.

"Do you have any questions?"

"I mean, why do you think she's Foard's?"

"I don't know how much he told you. Eric and I were fighting about ten years ago, and he claimed Tina wasn't his. It was sketchy there for a while when I started the affair with Eric while I was still married to Foard.

I told Eric I had stopped sleeping with Foard after I'd been seeing him for a month. A month later, I found out I was pregnant. We assumed it was Eric's because I had stopped sleeping with Foard, but there may have been a few lapses in that which Eric didn't know at the time."

"So, someone you were married to many years all of a sudden decided to get a paternity test?"

"We were in a very bad place. We were fighting a lot about how we got started under dishonest circumstances. How there was no way we could survive almost two decade or so later when the child we thought was ours was growing up and moving out.

I would have preferred going on just assuming Eric was her father. Especially considering Foard's circumstances."

"Does your daughter know? You didn't even tell us you had a daughter when you first started coming over."

"Tina doesn't know. I didn't want to tell her yet. I wanted it to be Foard's decision. I've managed to get Eric to agree not to tell her."

"Is the paternity test available for us to see? Can we get her tested against Foard or Whitt to make sure?"

Marie was silent and then, "You're saying you don't believe me?"

"Not exactly," Juliana fumbled for words. This was what she was saying. "I just want to be sure. You have to imagine how this is to me."

“It’s not exactly been easy for me. I’ve been dealing with it a lot longer.”

“Weren’t you shocked when you found out?”

“I guess it didn’t really matter to me. She’s my daughter. My marriage was falling apart, so I was almost glad to have that honor of being Tina’s father taken away from my husband. I always think back with such tenderness to Foard and wonder, ‘What if..’”

“Oh, well. Foard’s calling me from inside. I’ve got to go. We’ll talk more about it later.” Juliana hang up. She didn’t want to hear this kind of information. The information Marie had probably sugar coated for Foard. The information that Marie wanted this to be true; she wanted Foard to be the father of her child, after she’d lied to him all those years ago, and used the child as an excuse to leave him. Juliana knew she shouldn’t have trusted her and let her into their home.

She went inside and sat on the couch, watching Foard doze in the chair. At ten, Whitt came home. She burned to tell him, her only other connection, the only other person she talked about things with, but she didn’t, knowing full well that this was beyond him. Telling him this would be asking too much of a sixteen year old boy.

“Hey, mom.”

He’d been much warmer to her since the hospital. He kissed the top of her head. He plopped down next her on the couch, all legs and freckles.

“How was practice?”

“Same as always. Heather says hello.”

She thought he was being so nice because he'd seen what she didn't see till she was much older, his parents' humanity. Their weaknesses and failings. He was slowly getting over it, she thought, adapting himself to this circumstance.

"When's she coming over for dinner?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

Juliana tried to smile, but she just felt so tired. She felt all that she had found out tangling in a knot that would never be untied. She couldn't think about it anymore. It was like a puzzle she'd tried to put together a million times and just couldn't fit together. She needed to be outside of herself for a day.

"Hey, why don't we get out and do something fun this weekend. See a movie or go to a Spurs game?" Juliana said.

"Are we going to take the old geez?"

Juliana playfully smacked his arm. "Don't talk about your father like that." But she felt some relief, and she smiled in spite of herself.

"What, Mom? Look at him. Snoring away with his mouth open. Hope I'm not like that when I'm old. I doubt I'll live past 30."

"Don't you say that, Whittfield Maccabee. You're going to grow old with me, right?"

"Sure, Mom. Don't get all *Pyscho* on me."

"Sounds like a good idea. Want to watch it?"

Whitt shrugged and got up, heading for the kitchen. "I'll make the popcorn," he said.

He and Juliana snuggled on the couch and watched the movie as they used to watch movies growing up. There was none of that shyness between them that had existed between her and her father as she grew up into womanhood. He would be innocent as long as she lived. Nothing would be awkward between them. He was her only child and her only child was with Foard, and he was Foard's only child. This would bind them together. She wouldn't let Marie drive a wedge through this triangle. Juliana had built the walls strong.

Marie came by again later that week. Juliana had stopped trying to untangle the mess in her head. She'd been much happier not thinking about Marie and Tina. Marie showed up unannounced as she had the first time she had come over.

Juliana was almost as reluctant to let her in. She decided it was best to be civil, to give controlled access to her home. Foard slept much of the time Marie was there anyway. Marie sat on the couch, waiting for Foard to wake. It seemed like she was burning with something to tell him. She didn't speak to Juliana much, and Juliana didn't speak to her. Juliana felt that she had changed over the years from that woman whose voice had become so tender on the phone when Juliana had begun to cry. She felt Marie was hard now, from her thick black eyeliner to her black clothes, to the way she was now obviously trying to shut Juliana off from Foard. Did she really think it would work after all these years?

Juliana disappeared around the corner into the kitchen. How she was glad for this kitchen now, when for years she had begged Foard to knock down the wall making the kitchen and living room one big space. She was glad now for the half privacy, where she could listen and wait for what Marie came to say to her aging Foard. She felt as if they were school girls passing notes with hidden agendas, wanting just that one boy so bad to like you and not the other girl.

At this point, Juliana was pretty sure she had Foard's heart. She was still jealous. She only had him for so much longer after all. But over the years, talk of Marie had ceased, especially with the birth of Whitt. They had become a family, a close one, without many hiccups. Foard had always been faithful to her, and she to him, something she may have worried about before. Surprisingly, with the birth of their son, their fighting in the early days had ceased. Everything had sort of worked itself out. Juliana had learned html and gotten a digital camera, picking up a few clients as Whitt grew. Those clients had given her enough to do over the years and had allowed her to do something alongside being a mother. While some of the work had been boring, some of it had been challenging and fun. She had created things that she could see, that were there on the internet for the world to see. She had taken beautiful pictures. In the back of her mind, she had always expected something more to come of her pictures, but Foard had allowed her to get lazy about this too, as he expected more of her as a mother while Whitt grew bigger.

For a few years there, everything had revolved around that boy, Juliana thought as she sat on the kitchen counter, swinging her legs. She banged a cabinet or ran the water in

the sink every once in a while so Marie would get comfortable, thinking she was busy in there.

Juliana remembered with happiness the years when Whitt was a toddler, and how he used to climb into that big bed with them. He'd squeeze between them smelling of sleep, his breath of dry milk and they'd all just be there, watching a movie or just talking nonsense. She missed those days when she could just talk nonsense to Whitt, when she and Foard were the greatest things he'd ever seen. He used to follow Foard around the house and do exactly what he would do. He'd comb his hair, standing on a stool in the bathroom, hike up his pants like Foard would; he even tried to drink a Scotch once. Foard had to learn quickly what to do in the garage or away from Whitt. This is when he finally quit smoking.

Juliana heard a loud thump. She ran into the living to see what had happened. It appeared Marie had knocked the wood bowl off the coffee table. It clattered before settling on the concrete.

"I'm sorry! I was reaching for my coffee, and I just knocked that thing right off."

Juliana watched as Foard stirred and opened his eyes. She went back to the kitchen and ran the water. She went to the corner and strained to hear. From what she could make out, now that he was awake, it seemed Marie was asking Foard if she could bring Tina to meet him. That she had told Tina all about him and she wanted her to come and meet her father before, well, she stopped there.

Juliana burst into the room. She couldn't hold back any longer. "You want to do what?" She couldn't believe the nerve of this woman, and in the moment, she realized

she'd always hated her. Those days she had provided a friend, an ear, were just a manipulation that Juliana had allowed herself to be pulled into.

“What’s wrong with that? She has every right to meet her father.”

“You said you weren’t going to tell her. What about us? Don’t we get a say in this?”

“Of course, dear. That’s why I’m asking Foard. It is *his* daughter.”

“Yeah, well let’s not jump to conclusions. I’d like to see the documentation first.”

Marie hadn’t stopped looking at Foard the whole time. She let a moment of silence pass. “Foard, honey. Would you like to meet Tina, your daughter?”

Foard’s head was quivering a little, and he had to look up to Marie’s face as his head hung toward his chest. His eyes went sideways to find Juliana. She had no idea if this was impacting him. His hand was shaking slightly as well. He brought it up to his chin, trying to stop the shaking and hold his head up at once.

“I think you should leave,” Juliana said. “I understand that you have an interest in Foard here. If he really is Tina’s father, then he’ll have to make that decision if he can. But why would you do this to him now? Why not ten years ago when he wasn’t sick? You could’ve looked him up. We’ve built a whole life together. I thought you were a friend, but I was wrong.” Marie didn’t move from the couch. She kept searching Foard’s face which was now turned away toward Juliana. “For my family’s sake, I’m going to have to insist that you leave.” Juliana walked over to the door and held it open.

Marie finally stirred. She made her way slowly toward the door, looking back at Foard twice. Juliana slammed the door behind her. She sat on the couch, biting a fingernail, something she never did except in times of great stress. Not speaking to Foard, she considered if she had done the right thing, or if she had acted like a jealous teenager. At least she'd had the decency to come before Whitt would be home from school. Juliana sat there for the next two hours, waiting for Whitt, holding Foard's hand, taking the time to just breathe.

"Mom." It was one of those yells she hardly ever heard from her son, the sixteen year old grown up, anymore. It was the yell that said, we have no food in the fridge, or I'm tired. Juliana roused herself from the couch, where she'd been since Marie left, and went to find Whitt in his room in the back of the house. Foard had said nothing to her all afternoon, but had drifted in and out of sleep. She'd silently taken him to the hall bathroom at three.

She sat on the edge of Whitt's bed. "I can't figure out this English paper. I'm writing it on *The Great Gatsby*."

"I'll help you. Let me see the paper." Juliana read it three times, unable to make anything stick.

"Well?"

"I don't know, Whitt. Can we do it later? I can't get my mind around it right now."

“What’s wrong, Mom? Everything seemed so much better just after the hospital and now you seem worse than before.”

“I don’t want to burden you with these grown-up problems, honey. You’re still so young.”

“I don’t care, Mom. Oh, by the way. Marie tried to see me at school today.”

“What?” Juliana suddenly snapped up straight. “How do you know?”

“My friend, Ben, works in the office during sixth period and apparently she came into the office saying she was my aunt, trying to get them to pull me out of class to talk to her about a family emergency. She tried to use Dad as an excuse. They called you, but no one answered so they sent her away.”

“Weird.”

“I thought so. Kind of freaky. What’s up with that?”

“There’s some things going on with me and Dad right now. Marie’s causing some problems for us.”

“How do you mean? Is she trying to get some of Dad’s money or something?”

This thought hadn’t occurred to Juliana. It had always been about Foard’s love and attention to her. She’d thought Marie was trying to steal that from her. The money, well, it didn’t really matter to her. “Hmmm…” Juliana trailed off for a sec.

“Mom.”

“Not exactly, maybe.”

“Why’s she coming to my school?” She looked at Whitt, his messy brown hair in his eyes as always. His eyes were the deep blue of the sky at dusk. She loved that color of his eyes. She just reached out to pull him to her. “Moooom. Stop.” He pulled away.

“Nevermind,” she said. “I’ll take care of it and tell you someday. Now let’s look at this paper.”

#### Whitt: Part IV

His mother was starting to scare him. After his dad got out of the hospital, she was more absentminded but in a better mood. She started chores that she didn’t finish. She forgot to pay bills. She was almost giddy though, starting pillow fights with him. He thought she was going a little crazy.

Who could blame her?

Whitt had ideas about what was going on in the house. There was something they weren’t telling him, and he was sure it had to do with the note Marie left on the door while they were gone. He stayed away a lot again. He had spring football practice anyway. He wanted to just stay outside all the time because the weather had turned so nice in San Antonio.

Heather was making him less annoyed than she used to. He hung out at her house most nights, falling asleep on the couch, waking at midnight or later and driving the couple blocks home through the dark quiet streets. He loved that time of night. The low

hanging oaks looked like monsters in the dark. Sometimes he'd come across a cat or a raccoon, a man in pajamas walking his dog.

Whitt decided he wasn't going to let his father's illness take his life too. It would have come someday. Someday his father would have to die. It was just happening sooner than him to most. He wanted to be young and play football and go to parties and think about college and what he would do with his life.

He didn't need to be rich. He had his father's money for that. He could be a painter, a taxi cab driver, a Peace Corps Volunteer. He would get a football scholarship to a good school. He liked books. Maybe he'd be an English professor. He always thought he'd want to do something more active so he told his mom he wanted to be a fireman. He could tell she hated that idea, though she didn't say anything.

She never said anything to him anymore. He could stay out as late as he wanted, come and go as an adult would. She never questioned him about his friends or what he did with his time. She asked about football; sometimes she asked about the future. It was almost as if she wanted to say, "How are we going to move on once this is over?"

He imagined how it would be. His mom was stronger than he ever thought she was when she was invincible in his child's eyes. Now he'd seen her weakness, the crying in the bathroom, the way she kept people at arm's length, never interacting, her passivity. But she was strong. She'd held them together. She'd formed a circle that couldn't be broken. He knew she would be fine when this was over, but that he would have to take care of her. Maybe she'd work more on her photography and get a show around town. He

hoped she wouldn't move back to Beaumont to his grandparents. He made a mental note to talk to her about this someday.

The day his paper was due on *The Great Gatsby*, Whitt drove to Heather's to pick her up for school. It was a crisp morning. Birds were chirping. All that. Whitt was in a particularly good mood. He didn't know why.

He could tell as soon as Heather walked out of the house that she was in a bad mood. He wasn't sure he could handle one of her bad moods. He was scared of her bad moods. Nothing he said would be right. Silence was the best idea.

He'd heard so many stories from "Uncles" about his dad's past, the number of women he was with (a lot). The drinking and drugs he did. He wondered how he ended up a clean cut athlete with the same girlfriend all through high school. He figured it was the time. His dad lived in a different time when the kids on the football team were still drunk at practice. Whitt didn't think he could function like that.

Heather got in the car with a sigh. He just kissed her cheek and pulled away from the curb. He'd had things he'd wanted to talk about in his good mood: dinner at his family's that night, a Spurs game that weekend, maybe he'd take her out to dinner. But she just sat there staring silently through the windshield. She didn't even say hello or good morning to him. Her bad mood was bringing him down.

He'd danced with some other girl at a party last weekend. Her name was Mindy. She wasn't from Alamo Heights. At the time, it had been innocent, but now he thought he could've got her number if he tried. Who needed Heather and her bad moods anyway?

"I think we should break up," he blurted out to Heather.

She turned to look at him with first shock in her dark eyes and then anger. They narrowed at him. "Don't take your bullshit out on me."

"Look at you, you're just sitting there being mad about something that has nothing to do with me. You're the one taking your bullshit out on me."

"Well I have shit going on too. You're not the only one with family problems. My mom and dad were fighting all last night."

This made Whitt feel bad. He was being selfish. Maybe he was being too hasty; changing something on purpose because he was bored. But Heather was picking up steam.

"I just mean don't break up with me because you're mad your dad isn't as young as the rest of our dads. That he's dy-ing."

This hit Whitt like a bug splattering against his windshield in the spring morning. No one had ever said that word. Sure, he'd said it to himself, but even his Mom had never said that word to him in their most intimate of talks about his father and his illness.

Whitt didn't say anything else the whole ride. Heather had just leaned her head against the passenger window. When they got to school, she bolted out of the car as soon as he put it in park.

Whitt took it slow. He gathered his backpack and walked slowly toward the school. Streams of kids led toward the door. He looked around, watching the kids faces who were passing him. They all seemed so light and happy. He would be glad to have their problems.

Whitt caught a glimpse of someone on the edge of the parking lot. An older lady. Was that a teacher? Something clicked in his brain just before she called out to him. It was Marie.

“Whitt. Oh, I’m glad I caught up with you.”

“I heard you were here yesterday. Why?” He was kind of curious. Maybe Marie was meddling, but at least then she would tell him what was going on. Maybe he didn’t want to know.

“I just wanted to talk to you about something. Can we have a seat over here? Do you have a couple minutes before school?”

“Why didn’t you just come to the house to talk to me?”

“Well, you’re hardly ever there.” She led him over to a picnic table in the shade of the building. She wore all black with a blue scarf. Her gray hair was tied back in a ponytail. She was a little overweight, but her face was still pretty. Whitt studied it carefully, trying to find what his father saw in her all those years ago. She seemed meddlesome now, a busybody.

“Now, Whitt. There’s something going on with your parents and I. I know it’s probably not my place to tell you, but I thought you’d like to know.”

Whitt said nothing. He watched her face and waited for what she would say. “You have a half sister. My daughter, Tina, is your half sister.”

She let this sink in. “I never told your father because I didn’t know myself until a few years back.”

Whitt watched the ground. He can’t get his mind around it. This must be why his mother was so upset. Imagine this woman wedging herself into your life with someone you love. Whitt wrinkled his brow. “Why are you telling me? I don’t want to meet any sister; if she even is.”

He got up and walked toward the entrance of the school. Marie didn’t follow him. He turned back when he got to the door and she was still sitting at the picnic table, watching him. He would talk to his mom about this tonight. Right now he felt tired. It was amazing how his good mood could be squashed so quickly, so easily. He wished he could live in a world that was his own and no one else’s. He went into his homeroom and put his head down on the desk. He slept until the teacher woke him to go to his next class.

Juliana: Part V

While Whitt was at school the next day, Juliana and Foard went for a walk that was short in distance but took up the whole afternoon. Juliana was feeling less tangled. It wasn’t that she had undone a piece of the knot, the knot just didn’t seem like as big of a deal to her as it had in the previous days. So what if Foard had another kid with Marie?

She pushed Foard in his wheel chair around their trapezoidal block. The sun was shining and it felt good. After the fifth time around, Juliana’s arms were getting tired.

They stopped at the driveway to the house and just sat. It was nice to be out in the world and not trapped in the house all the time. Juliana missed interactions with others, even simple ones at the grocery store. The girl she had hired did all that now. Juliana had decided this morning, that she'd be able to work again.

Sitting on the curb, it scared her, thinking about it now, how little she went out into the world. She had barely left the house since she hired the girl, Sarah. She often asked Sarah questions while they put away groceries: how was the high rise condo building coming along at Broadway and Hildebrand? Was Cappy's done remodeling their patio? She really had no friends to speak of in San Antonio. Anne lived in Austin. Maybe she would ask her to come for a visit.

As she was musing about her isolation, a car suddenly honked from the street. She jumped up. It was just Whitt trying to pull into the driveway. She smiled and waved, moving Foard aside to make space for Whitt's car. Foard was watching her. Had she spoken out loud? It was like he was waiting for her to say something. Had he been watching her the whole time?

"What is it?" She said but he just looked down into his lap, silent.

Whitt came out of the garage and kneeled in front of his dad's chair. "Yo pops. What are y'all doing out here?"

"Walk." Foard said. "Your mother is lonely."

*So I did speak out loud. He was listening.* Unless Foard knew her so well by now that he could see it in her. That was always possible. She'd always been a loner, only few

close friends, her life revolving around Foard and Whitt, her parents and the Broussards. She'd never seen anything wrong with that. Until now. She saw how much she'd isolated herself. She hoped she wasn't teaching Whitt to do the same thing.

Whitt pushed his father's wheelchair up the drive leaving Juliana at the curb. He turned and looked back at her, catching her eye. She felt the knot go tangled again in her head. She followed the boys into the house. She never did this kind of thing before, but she asked Whitt to come to the bathroom with her.

"Can you watch your dad for an hour or two? I just need to clear my head, drive around, get out of the house."

"Sure, Mom. You need some alone time." Whitt hugged her. She felt a twinge of guilt at leaving them. She felt like she had to spend all her waking moments with Foard because they could be her last. She let go of this thought, kissed him on the cheek, and got in the truck, the old one they used to drive through the woods outside Beaumont.

She turned it toward the park, just a minute's drive. When she was younger, driving used to cure her of most of her ills. She'd take her Dodge Dart and drive around with the windows down, get out of town. This was a tradition that fell by the wayside of motherhood and a happy married life. She thought about how the baby and marriage had cured her and Foard. How she felt that their best state of being was together, which was what she always dreamed marriage should be.

Before she knew it, she'd passed the park. She was winding through the mansions of Olmos Park, the neighborhood on the other side of the highway. It was three in the afternoon. She passed Marie's street but didn't glance down. Instead, she went to the

wine bar near the roundabout. She sat at the concrete counter and ordered herself a Pinot Noir. She drank it quickly, all the while thinking about Foard and Whitt at home.

Thinking that she had to rush back to them, as if they were children she'd left for just a minute to get the mail or talk to a neighbor. But Whitt was capable, she told herself. He was a strong boy. He loved his father, she could see, even if this situation was "too old" for them. She and Foard never imagined they would have to deal with this so soon. His father had been healthy into his seventies. They thought it'd be the same for Foard.

She ordered one more glass of wine. By the time she finished it, she knew what she would do. She paid the bill, left the bar, lowered her sunglasses in the harsh afternoon sun. She drove the truck back the way she came, but this time, she turned down Marie's street. She hadn't even been thinking about Marie in a tangible way. Something just drew her there. Stopping the truck in front of the stuccoed and Spanish tiled house, Juliana sat for a second. Her knock was answered by a girl a few years older than Whitt, with short curly hair pushed back with a headband who looked at her questioningly.

"Hi, I'm Juliana. You must be Tina."

"How'd you know?"

"Is your Mom here?"

Marie came around a corner and saw Juliana and smiled. She invited her in for a cup of tea.