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THE FIRST THING TO GO

by

Ashley Leigh Paige

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

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## ABSTRACT

Paige, Ashley Leigh. MFA. The University of Memphis. December 2011. The First Thing to Go. Major Professor: Cary Holladay.

This collection of loosely linked short stories predominately features young women at moments of change and transformation, who often feel lost and alienated from their homes, relationships and, often, their own bodies. Some of the young women struggle to determine if they have made the wisest decisions while others struggle to find the best solution to their situation. The stories take place in South Carolina, Boston, southwest Virginia, and central Alabama, with several characters showing up in multiple locales, exploring and illuminating feelings of displacement, or physical alienation. Relationships and connections, or the lack thereof, also play a large part in the collection, with the relationship between mother and daughter being the strongest.

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## **The First Thing to Go**

And then, before I know it, it's a Wednesday and I'm twenty-four, with my mother's skin—or, God forbid, my grandmother's—standing in line at the Dollar General, buying extra-large bottles of discount face cream because I use too much to afford the nice stuff. I'm standing there, face flaking, longing for anything that resembles the awfulness of being young.

The place smells of something dying and something else desperately trying to keep the will to live and I feel certain that everyone here knows what'll win in the end, but will never say it. My mother would say it, if she were here. She'd say, "My God, Joanna, is this really what you've wanted to do with your life?" She would leave here and go somewhere where she could sniff a jar of something made in Europe at a counter of a store with a European name and say, "Are you kidding me? Are you honestly kidding me? Who wouldn't prefer this stuff? Who wouldn't save away for weeks, if she had to, to get this?" But who am I kidding? She would not be here.

The grey, pump-top bottle has a fine coat of lotion from another bottle that exploded on the trip here. Everything is dated; its packaging looks at least ten years old. Off in a corner, a teenaged girl screams to another teenaged girl, "Oh my God!" In another line, a mother yells at her toddler to "Stop showing out or I'll whack you one," and I don't understand why she says "showing out." I feel like I am being purposefully cut out of some big important language, or that I am too old to begin to learn another. Another mother looks at the yelling one, nodding sympathetically, saying, "It's all just so hard, isn't it?"

I see the truck sitting there in the parking lot out front, the low beams still on. In my mind's little eye, I can see Jackson with his eyes closed, head back against the seat, fingers strumming against the steering wheel along to "Stairway to Heaven" in a not-at-all-ironic way. And I think that this is how it always goes, when a woman falls, when she goes riding off to Alabama in a goddamn ancient pickup truck to a place ten hours away from anything resembling a home state. This is what happens when a woman goes off on her own free choice, not even because she's on the run from the Law or anything.

\*

*Well, it had seemed like a great idea at the time.* You say that to someone and they look at you like you are the dumbest person alive.

It was his idea, his question. I realize, of course, that I can't put the entirety of the blame on him, since I'd been right there with him, but it really was all his fault.

We sat in his living room that overlooked swamplands, in the middle of August. I'd just graduated from the University of South Carolina and moved back to Myrtle Beach to stay with my mom and her new husband and Jackson had just turned thirty and was working up the courage to open his own construction business. I don't know if it was a clock or not, but I'm pretty sure we both heard something ticking.

"Could anyone even live simply anymore, even if they had to?" he asked on the inhale, his eyes red and wide-open crazy.

"You know, no," I said. "Not at all. Everyone's all always thinking the best thing is to be clever, everything organized, planned, prepared."

He nodded, opening a can of beer. I kept on. "Nothing saved, nothing sacred. No more Bonnies and no more Clydes, even without the robbing and the dying."

I could have cried. “No more good girls going bad, or honky-tonk angels. Never again. This is it.”

He smiled a big smile, teeth blazing white against his tanned skin. In spite of his strong Carolina accent, the Gamecocks posters and plaques up on his wall, those teeth never once betrayed his swampy upbringing, where the fluoridated water could induce night terrors in beautiful girls who worried about brightly spotted teeth.

“Jo, honey,” he said, leaning in, his hand heavy and strong on my knee, his accent heavy and soothing. “It’s fine by me if you wanna go bad.” His lids grew heavy over his eyes, but the brightest blue I’d ever seen peeked through.

I was sure the universe would finally collapse in on itself because I was so full of it all. And I thought maybe I wouldn’t mind, because it was exhausting work. “Jackson, you know it, right? Don’t you know? You know there’s no love in anything anymore, and certainly not in this world.”

He moved closer, kissed me, slid the lighter into my hand.

So, then and there, we promised to make our lives all about love, to keep everything we took, and to never take that which we wouldn’t want to keep—starting with each other. I could say I only went with him because he was older and solid, because he knew things like how to plant tomatoes, cut the grass, change oil without a manual or a light coming on to tell him it was time. Or I could say it was because he knew how to sit still, how to be quiet, how to look off into some unfathomable distance and not look bored in public. Except he did, though—he did look bored in public and, if he didn’t look bored, then he looked anxious. His grass was never mowed in even lines, or even all at once. The first time he put oil in the car my mother had loaned me, he poured it all over

the engine and the car smoked for seventeen miles as I drove down Highway 22 from Aynor towards my mother in Myrtle Beach.

There was, though, the way he twisted me in ways I'd only heard mentioned or alluded to in books where they talked about the dusty Southern landscape and dirty people who did it dirtily in dirty sheds and dirty cars, and always without having taken a shower beforehand, and generally without taking one after it was all done.

That's how he got me to agree to go with him. Doesn't it always seem to end up that way? In the books and movies, I mean. There's a beautiful and wise man, a simple one with hands dirty from working hard and not just from dirt and germs—from everyday living, you understand?—but he's clever too, the cleverest man you've ever met, and he's touching you, your hair, doing all those things that beautiful and wise men seem to do with their fingers and whatever else. Then there he is on top of you and maybe it isn't love, but it's something firm and different, something that feels like a secret gift when remembering it, something that is simple and sure. (Or was that difficult and uncertain? Either way, the kind of thing that leaves you trembling.) And during he isn't saying anything, at least not out loud; he isn't meant to be that kind of man, and you wouldn't want him if he were. Afterwards, with a cigarette and a sweating can of beer, the two of you are actually languid, just how you've always felt they try to describe in the books. He looks at you, with those perfect teeth half-lit by moon and ember, and he says, "Well, let's get to it, then. Let's go," and at that moment he is so certain and calm.

I'll admit here what I would never admit there on that couch—at first I didn't remember what he was talking about. Those were the days of the summer after I graduated from college, days that bled into each other, days and nights of promises and

whispers, days and nights of sharing everything and taking nothing away except a full and heavy gut.

So I said, “Okay then,” agreeing, so matter-of-factly, to move with him (as if I were agreeing to another beer) to a small town outside a small city in a big and rolling southern state more big and empty than the one I was already in. Once I did remember, I knew it couldn’t be so bad, riding off toward a blurry sunset in a rented yellow truck, following Jackson to a house worth living in.

\*

A week later, I told Mom the news as we sat in her big, cream-colored sitting room. She and Roy, her third husband, owned a house on a golf course, though neither of them golfed.

Mom shook her head so hard her dangly earrings danced around, smacking into her cheeks. “Jo,” she said, “I just can’t believe that this is what you’re choosing for yourself. This is what you’re going to do with your life now? This? Just take off to God knows where—do you even know where you’re going? Because I sure as hell don’t.”

She stared at me for a long second—her eyes squinted, her forehead scrunched up—before she let out a long breath. “And, honey, he’s nice—I really think he is, and I knew his mother years and years ago, so I know what he comes from, and I have nothing bad to say about him. I just don’t see how this can be what you need. I just—” And for as long as she sat there without saying anything, that was how long the room echoed with what she was not saying.

“Well, Jo, I just thought you wanted more.”

For a woman who had never been—at least not visibly—disappointed in me before, she had a way of acting as if it had been a rather common occurrence, a way of acting as if she were not actually acting at all. That head shook just as if it had always been doing so. I am always awed by how people assume new roles and new lives as if they were nothing new after all—people newly married or out of a relationship, people in new apartments, in new careers. Where is the sudden start, the panicked jolt, the “Wait, how did I get here? What do I do now?”

“You stayed in college for two extra years because you didn’t know what you wanted to do with yourself. And now you suddenly know, three months out? You want to run off with some man—how old is he, thirty-three, thirty-four? God, I can’t believe my daughter is running off with someone and I don’t even know how old he is.”

“He’s thirty,” I said. “He turned thirty in June. You know this.”

“In June,” she said. “Two months ago. You have known this man for two months. He is a nice man, but you’ve known him two months.”

I didn’t want to hear her talk because I knew I couldn’t stand to hear anything she had to say. She was saying things that were true but were also not true and one was as bad as the other. I thought about yelling, ran through everything I could yell at that moment. But I didn’t want to yell anything, so I just looked at my mother. She’d been born Martha Crews, becoming Martha Case when she’d been married to my father for five years before taking back her maiden name. She made the cycle a second time when she married and divorced Jim Dranger. She and Roy Kellan had been married for five months, and I’d barely heard mention of him before they got married. She was 45 and beautiful and had never had money for any extended amount of time. She was

always stocking up—on groceries, clothes, jewelry, love—as if in anticipation of drought.

I didn't know what she wanted. I tried to tell her it wasn't a big deal, it wasn't like I was *getting married*, but she just kept shaking her head. Where was her disappointment at being disappointed? Why did she seem to enjoy it so? What was up with the head-wagging and pursed lips? I thought maybe she was just expressing some long-held frustration, that surely one action on my part couldn't have brought all this on. And that's how I ended up being the one disappointed in her, in her lack of imagination and play, even after she gave me five thousand dollars out of her new savings account to help me move and get settled in, or come home once I realized it was a huge mistake. I felt like a fake taking it, but what else was I supposed to do? Say no?

\*

We moved into a town called Carterdale—one of many dales off I-20 in the middle of Alabama—in the middle of August and, right away, my skin started to age, growing hard and flaky. I noticed lines around my mouth, my eyes. The skin of my hands and feet began to crack, leather up. I pulled out all the unopened bottles and jars of face cream my mother had bought me over the years—bottles and jars I'd lugged around with me from one undergraduate apartment to the next because I couldn't stand the idea of getting rid of anything—and lined them up in neat rows in the medicine cabinet. While Jackson went to work at a buddy of a buddy's construction company, drawing up plans for houses, building things, I stayed home making home, smelling like lavender and roses, freesia and ground-up pearls. It wasn't an easy job, either, what with the apartment being in the basement and half the walls made of cement.

I put country half-curtains over the small windows in the bedroom and bathroom—the ruffled ones of Grandmas’ kitchens. The full sized windows of the kitchen and the living room got ginghamed. Onto the concrete walls I poster-taped prints of flowers in vases, teapots on trays, and ladies lounging in gardens. I didn’t pay full price for anything except bath products and groceries.

And oh! did we have a time, especially those first few months. Jackson would come home from work, dirty and worn out and like a real man. There it was, the movie of dreams and fantasies: bath water splashing over the rim of a tub; dark hair, wet against a long neck; a skirt apron, clinging to the inside of a thigh; open mouths, gripped hands; popped buttons bouncing along a bathroom floor. Then we’d eat dinner and listen to records and smoke cigarettes and drink really cold beer and go to bed, where we’d make lots of noise and sometimes get the upstairs neighbors to bang on their floor.

“Hon, you know you make this all worthwhile,” he once said afterwards, turning on his side, gleaming as always. “You know that, right?”

“Baby, you make life worthwhile,” I breathed back, passing him my half-smoked cigarette, not paying much attention as he rolled over to put it out. I wish now, though, that I’d looked at his face at that moment, and could know how my face looked to him. I’m certain that there was something there that night, something right then that predicted the unfolding, and I was just too dumb to be any better.

\*

Around October it started to get a little colder, things stopped being fun. Jackson started coming home more and more worn out, stopped wanting to drink with me, to go out and make friends. He got this pinched and worried look, started to preface and end

statements with “God willing,” sometimes adding “and the creek don’t rise.” He started going to bed early and the bedroom talks began petering out. He even quit smoking.

“So, what, you’ve quit smoking or whatever?” I asked him after he again refused the after-dinner cigarette I’d offered.

“I pretty much quit when I was twenty-four,” he said, clearing up the crumbs on his side of the table. “I like to still have one occasionally but, God willing, I don’t have it in me to become a fulltime smoker again. I should quit while I’m ahead.”

Apparently he’d just quit, cold turkey, just like that. The day after his birthday, never bought another pack again. Went years standing outside at bars and parties with big groups of smokers, his hands in his pockets, never tempted to start up again until he started sleeping with me. Took to loving his lungs, runner-ready. He’d never, not once in all the months I’d known him, told me that.

“So, that was, like, the most prideful moment of your life?” I couldn’t have looked like I believed him, because I didn’t. I felt my mouth, felt the way it pursed, slanted, felt my eyebrows shooting up my forehead before they folded over my eyes.

He thought I was so funny! He actually smiled and said, “There have been other proud moments, but something like that. I smoked for seven years; it definitely wasn’t an easy thing.”

It wasn’t that I got disappointed or heartbroken at all the changes in our life. I just figured surely he’d come home one day and suggest an end to it all, say the joke was over, was getting old, and now it was time to get back to another kind of life, maybe one less out-in-the-middle-of-nowhere. I understood that he was pushing thirty-one and surely had to be getting tired of such playacting, that a kind of real life ought to start

soon. I couldn't even begrudge him for wanting those things. Who didn't want something more? Instead he came home and walked right into the bathroom, and stood over my bath and did not take his clothes off.

He asked me why I hadn't paid any bills recently, why he was getting late notices. Wasn't that kind of my job, here where I didn't have a job? Why did I keep buying bath products when I already had plenty covering the shelves as it was? Why was I drinking so much? And seriously, for Christ's sake, did I really need—what was that?—both Rainwater and Rainy Day soap? He didn't exactly say it in those terms.

I told him the truth. "Yes, absolutely. One's a bubble bath. One's a body wash. They're completely different things."

"Are you joking?" He said as he picked up bottles, squinted at the labels. "It's water, it's soap, and there are only so many things soap can be."

I got a kind of rush, took a perverse pleasure in it, and wanted more. I stood up in the tub and grabbed for a towel. "What's crawled up your ass today, Jackson?"

He shook his head, running long hard fingers through his hair. (Was it thinning? It couldn't be.) "I don't know. I'm not trying to be confrontational. Sometimes I just think you don't actually think about what needs to be done around here. It worries me. Can't you see why?"

"You better not be thinking you're going to control me," I said, my voice going up an octave, the words coming out too fast to hear. "I'll buy whatever I want to with my money, and don't you forget it."

I thought that maybe he'd forgotten that he'd gone to college, too. I thought maybe he was taking the simple life a bit too far, because I knew he, at least at some

point, used to be a feminist of sorts, getting in fights with his friends when they were acting like dicks to their girlfriends or mothers. His dad had died when Jackson was young, leaving him to grow up around a bunch of women. I knew he'd been progressive, used to feel sorry for his mother who worked hard but never had much of her own.

Had he forgotten all of that? First he stopped smoking and now here he was, a full-on misogynist. I knew thinking that was unfair. I knew just thinking about something didn't make it true. But you can't just stop making yourself think the things you think. Thinking something isn't like deciding to take a second bite of someone else's cake; it's more like the way you have to swallow it once you've realized you've already chewed it all up.

“Jo, that doesn't even make sense. This isn't about any of that, control or money or anything more than just getting things *done*. I mean, we have to have electricity, hot water.”

“And what are you, the fucking master of the fucking universe?” The truth is I had sent the checks off that day, full of remorse and guilt for forgetting, and would have just told him that had I not been so naked and exposed.

“Hon, you can be in control of your own crazy all by yourself.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. I stood in the bathwater and gripped my towel in one hand and the bridge of my nose in the other. He opened his eyes, looked at me, and said, finally, loudly, “I'm not even kidding. This is crazy.”

If he hadn't sounded so angry, if he hadn't yelled at me, I wouldn't have done it. But I swung at him, dripping water everywhere. Didn't hit him, wouldn't have dared, and not because I thought he'd hit me back but because that hit would have made the whole

thing something it wasn't. But it was our first fight and, afterwards (or was it during, still?) he said he loved me and I just felt tired.

\*

And then we'd been at it—living in sin, if you could even call it that, we lived like such an old married couple—for four months. We'd gone through November and we'd had a lonely Thanksgiving, and I'd never felt so young and so old at the same time. I hated all our neighbors; they were all either mean or way too nice, glaring at me as I walked home from the gas station down the road with my arms full of beer, or wanting to help me carry it in. Their kids all screamed in the street. I lay on the couch all day, staring at the glossy magazine covers cluttering my coffee table and watching the Travel Channel, feeling jealous. I finally just started hating it all, starting with the entire world, then narrowing in on the South and then all the women who created beautiful homemade wreaths and knew, or at least wanted to know, the best soil for planting tulips and the best way to keep hydrangeas fresh. Jackson and I stopped talking about things that at least seemed to matter; I was moody and he was tired. Sometimes I thought that if I were to walk out into the street outside our apartment and get plowed over by a moving van I wouldn't mind for one minute. We were no longer a wild couple gone to the road; we were driving nowhere. I didn't even have a bike. I couldn't even afford one. Something needed to happen, and fast. It wasn't that I wanted out, I just wanted something else.

“Hon,” he said after dinner one night. “What do you do here all day?”

“What do you mean? I mean, the place is clean, right?”

He shook his head. “No, not that. You know I don't mean that. I was just wondering if you'd thought about getting a job, something to get you out of the house?”

The table needed to be cleared. I hated clearing the table.

“Why? What would I do? I don’t have a car.”

“You know you can use the truck whenever you need to, whenever I’m not at work. Or when I am at work; we can figure something out.”

“Oh, like, work at night?” I started clearing the table. “That’s the only time, ever, the truck is here. And I’m not going to work some crappy third-shift job just because I don’t have a car.”

“I just thought you’d like to have something to do, have your own money. And with your school loans and all...It wouldn’t hurt us to save up.”

“Us? For what?”

“A house, maybe,” and I began to interrupt him, but he went on. “Or another car or maybe a big fancy piece of jewelry for you.”

I must have looked confused because he went on. “A ring, maybe.” He even smiled.

Now, I’d never decided whether or not I believed in marriage, or rings for marriage. But if I did, I sure as hell wouldn’t want one I had to pay for myself.

“A ring? As in, a matrimonial ring, or something?” I started running water for the dishes as everything got quiet, dull, far away, as if I were in a sauna with a bloody nose.

“I’ve always thought that, with time, things would go that way. Haven’t you?”

“You mean, buy it together?” I half turned toward him, one hand in the sink.

Then he went on about how he’d always figured, believed, hoped; relayed an anecdote his grandmother had told him about the One; that he hadn’t meant to imply that I’d be buying my own engagement ring, of course not that, it had all sounded far more

romantic before he'd actually said it aloud. What it came down to, in the end, after several minutes (Hours? Weeks?) of words was that he wasn't going to just toss me away, that he hadn't forgotten his promises from that night in the middle of summer, it was just that money was needed to make things real, that he felt maybe I was feeling stifled, that money could help us all, that he'd never forgotten how lost his mother had always looked and could never stand to see me look that way.

“And, while the company's getting more jobs every week, it will be some time before I've saved up enough to start up my own, move it elsewhere. So we'll be here a while. Might as well start building a life here.”

My skin felt taped-together tight and a hand to my cheek proved the flakiness had reared its ugly head once again, had once again made me ugly; it could not be stopped, no matter how the lotion was slathered on. I'd taken to moisturizing all day, and would have still been doing so had I not used the last of it just before dinner. That afternoon I'd ransacked all the cabinets, pulling out bags of cotton balls and make-up sponges, bottles of hand soap and shampoo, like I was an alcoholic in a made-for-TV movie: a woman gone mad. I found a jar that had some lotion in one corner, just enough to hydrate one reptilian cheek.

And there I'd sat, in the middle of the bathroom floor, staring at every toiletry item—sans a single bottle of lotion—ever made by a man, woman or child. When my vision began to blur, I'd leaned back against the cold floor, and begun humming the theme song to every show I could think of. I could only think of four, and so cycled through those over and over. Once I could see again, I sat up, put everything away, and went to get ready for dinner.

I said, “And you plan on staying here, then. For quite some time, at least. Like, this is a real thing you’re going to do.”

Jackson nodded a concerned nod. “Well, yes.”

When someone nods that way, there is compulsion. You are compelled to nod back and say, “Oh, well, of course.” And you nod again, skin tight and pained, knots and kinks and aches in your neck and throat and head, your heart beating so fast you don’t know how your chest can keep it in, and say, “I guess I just didn’t realize it was all like that. I guess I didn’t think,” and you trail off, because what was it you didn’t think?

How to tell a man who loves you that it may not be enough? How to tell, yourself, whether or not it is enough? A body makes decisions and the mind makes its own, but there are so many decisions that neither can easily make and especially not together. (Oh, why couldn’t parallel worlds exist! I knew that I could be happy with any life, no matter how unappealing or ordinary it seemed, if only I knew that out there, somewhere, loads of me were living truly different lives—awful ones and complicated ones and boring ones, but all *different*.) I was overwhelmed with visions of The Great Wall of China, of the Pyramids, of the hidden world under Istanbul, those Druid places. And then there was a house, a lovely one, a real one, and a life that was not for play. There was a baby, a husband, a mother (Me? Mine? His?) who was finally pleased and approving. And I led myself into thinking that maybe, in that life, too, there could be a Great Wall, ancient graveyards made of stone and wood—a life that watched the Travel Channel and actually went. Somewhere out there, hotels took up entire islands, hotels built out over the bluest, cleanest, clearest water a person could imagine. Are they better seen by a body uncertain and standing on a precipice, or a body calm and well loved?

How to know? I knew nothing and suddenly knew that. And I didn't feel wise the way it had always been promised when I was in school. *Just acknowledge that you know nothing, and you could know everything.* So I blushed and I smiled and I garbled and I asked Jackson to take me to the Dollar General; I believed they were hiring.

\*

And here I am, standing, aching, dying in a long line of badly dressed people, wondering if I just got engaged, if I've signed on for a life of bliss, or whatever. I stand here, awkward and insignificant, guilty and angry, feeling betrayed and ugly. The magazines on the stands promise the secrets of preventing wrinkles, of keeping your breasts from drooping and your ass from hanging, but they never promise you the secrets of how to keep living a life after all your own promise has skipped out on you.

I place the bottle of lotion on the counter and a young man named Daryl punches buttons on the register and asks me if that will be all, nodding his head toward the wall behind him, stocked with cigarettes and batteries and cold medicines and condoms. Because I feel so old and ugly, I point to a box of off-brand cigarettes that I now have to smoke outside of our apartment in the cold because Jackson has officially quit.

Daryl's a smiley one, my age or younger. Shaggy hair and a small, lean body. He looks promising even though he's the one behind the counter at a store that smells like a retirement home, or a rest stop bathroom.

"And, well, didn't I see that you're hiring?"

"Oh, sure," he says, nodding, smiling. "They're always looking for new people. I've been here a while, assistant manager, but I'm leaving in a few months."

He hands me the application in exchange for my ten and I say, “Oh, yeah? Are you switching, um, careers, or—?”

“I’m still waiting to hear back from some schools about financial stuff, but I might be going out of state to college. Either that or just moving. It’s time to travel some, you know?” His teeth are perfect, small and shining. I nod to him.

He points to the application. He says, “If you went to college, make sure to put that on your application. Or if you’ve had any experience with cash registers.”

“Oh, yeah, I did. Go to college, I mean. I got a degree and everything. I might go back but, you know, I’d like to do something else before then.”

He smiles and nods again. “Good. That’s really good.” He hands me my change. His fingers are lean, fragile, his wrists so thin. I think I should tell him I’ve also had experience with cash registers, but it would be a lie. Besides, he’s greeting customers coming in, saying goodbye to those leaving, and already ringing up the one behind me before I’ve gathered my bags and made my way towards the automatically opening door, the application growing sweaty and crumpled in my wrinkling hand.

\*

Sometime before it all, before Alabama, before the packing and the fighting and the cement walls, we lay in his bedroom that looked out over flat, swampy land. It was summertime and we were still new and in South Carolina. Crickets sang through the open window; the salt-air was balmy and Jackson’s fingertips clung lightly in their steady climb up and down my arm.

Because I knew how he would answer, I asked, “Can you remember the last time you actively believed in God?”

His fingers never paused and his voice was calm, echoing somewhere in all that deep muscle of his chest, rumbling my ear. “I’m not quite sure. Can you?”

I nodded. “I was seven. I had a solo in the second-grade concert and I was afraid my father wouldn’t come—my mom and I lived two hours away. She told me to just pray real hard every night and that maybe God would grant me my wish. As if He were a genie or something.” The crickets and frogs got especially loud, and I stopped as Jackson and I both tilted our ears toward the window.

I said, “But I prayed everyday, when I went to bed and when I woke up and before every meal. ‘Thank you, Father, for this food, bless it for our bodies, forgive us of our sins and please let Daddy come and see me sing. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen, Amen, Amen.’”

“Then he showed up. He was just there. He brought me some stupid stuffed animal and took us out to dinner and listened to all my stories and drove us to the school to hear me sing. I was sure it was the prayers that had done it. And then I thought my parents would get back together. They both tucked me in that night.”

I shook my head. And even though he couldn’t have known it was coming, Jackson softened his body against me, as if he knew what was coming. I said, “Of course, they started fighting pretty much right after they left my room. About child support, and vacations and visitations and all that. But before he left he shouted that he knew he shouldn’t have come, that he didn’t know why he’d let her guilt trip him into it. I guess I figured I’d used up all my wishes.”

The fingers became a full palm cupping my arm, a massage. His voice rumbled my ear again, lulling me to sleep. “I never quite got it myself—always thought it was all

pretty strange. My grandmother was religious—real religious, you know, almost one of *those* types. But she was private about it and didn't go out in the streets or to the clinics or anything. She didn't seem crazy, is what I mean.”

He painted for me a picture of a quiet widow, who had lost almost everyone—her husband; a son, Jackson's father; a sister—all within a year, just like in a terrible movie. It was almost too much to even believe, but I couldn't think of a reason for Jackson to lie about that. He said her hair seemed to turn grey overnight, and her body shrunk, yet no one ever saw her cry or yell. She was an upright, quiet woman who visited the graves as often as a person would her best friend. She decorated them for every season and every holiday, planted flowers, weeded, sang over them.

Jackson said, “I asked her—I must have been nine or ten—why she went there so often, why she decorated the graves so much. What made her care—did she talk to them? Did they talk back? And she just said to me, ‘So that they will not be ashamed to look at me the next time I see them.’”

Outside a bird called and sounded small and lonely. When he spoke again, his voice did not sound shaky, did not sound weary. He sounded solid, sure. He had thought about things and he had tried to figure them out. It was all I wanted in the world, to be like him. I thought he would be the thing that changed everything—that he would give me a home, a family, a place, some clues about life.

He said, “How do you argue with that? I kind of have to think that, for her, a Heaven and a God have to exist. She gets through this world only because she will be with them in the next. It just wouldn't make sense, wouldn't be fair, for people like her to

be left alone for all eternity, not after that. There's got to be some kind of reward for those people, who make it through all this without turning into another horrible person."

We were quiet for a moment, resting there, listening to the nighttime and the rustle of trees and the beating of hearts. My stomach felt empty and my body heavy.

"Just believe in what you need to believe in," Jackson said. "Who knows what's at the end of it all, if other people have anything to do with it? Just get through it however you can."

I had nothing to say. As he kissed my neck and settled down to sleep, I felt a twinge, but of what I could not—would not—have said, not then. A person with nothing real inside her wants only to destroy all that others may have. But I should have known, I should have known.

## **Four Months to Life**

After six years away, she's ready to surrender, ready to finally come back to her hometown, to settle down, take a breather, realize what it means to grow up, to return to the familiar, to what best loves her.

Almana unlocks the front door to her newly rented house and steps into her brand new living room. Just outside the sliding door is the deck she's heard and dreamt so much about—steps from high tide, perfect for parties, or tea drinking, or nature writing. Inside, the furniture's large, bamboo, set off with net-like rugs. If she were the type, she'd swell right up with joy.

Her mother had found this place for her. One of the many beach houses no one had rented yet; the winter season in Cherry Grove was proving slow this year. It hadn't been necessary to hire movers, as she'd left most of the things—they were no longer hers—back in Boston. She'd insisted, however, on having her record player moved, as well as the collection of records and elaborate shelving for them. They weren't the kinds of things to bring on a plane, they wouldn't be carefully packed and tended to, they would slide and bang around and get broken. She found a discount on a moving truck heading south, and worried the entire time they'd been away from her. The shelves have already been set up against a free wall of the living room; she reminds herself to thank her brother again (again and again) for his help.

She wonders if she can make the lights flash on just by clapping; if anyone still had those things she remembers from infomercials as a child, it would be the people who own this house. She tries, but no lamp clicks on. She tells herself that this house was

never the place for absurdity. She tells herself that the house may be in Myrtle Beach, but that Myrtle Beach is not in this house. As she clicks on a lamp she thinks, again, this house is her promise to herself. *I am twenty-three years old. It's time I started making promises to myself.*

She couldn't even laugh at the room, lit finally with the glow of clear lamps filled with seashells, decorated in traditional We're-Right-by-the-Sea pastels. Above the plush sofa a painting in greens, blues, and pinks hangs straightly: the coast at dusk, limber sea grass waving towards an ocean glinting with the last rays of daylight and, in the distance, a long, thin woman in a flowing dress. If Almana were still the type, she'd sneer at this. Now, she will move it to her bedroom where she can see it first thing in the morning.

She has not only three bedrooms, but one's a master (Mistress? Madame?) and comes with its own bathroom: green, sea foam, muted and sponge-painted silvers and blues, small seashells edging the top and bottom borders. The counters are expansive, and cream, and clean. She thinks, *There are oysters in this world for me.*

She unpacks the small boxes filled with clothes, half-filling the wicker dresser with plain T-shirts and sensible underwear, blue jeans and flannel pajama pants. She puts the few nice dresses and delicate separates into the tiny closet, using the wooden hangers provided by the house's attentive owner. She places her toiletries on the shower shelves and in the little white basket next to the sink, places lotions and her hairbrush on the dresser top, as if this were the kind of thing she always did, as if this were the kind of thing she will always do from now on.

Four hours later, after she's hooked up her record player, after the suitcases are put away, the boxes broken down and stored, she stands in the middle of the living room

and looks around. She slides the blinds fully open, their loud *schhhh* echoing in the quiet house, and looks out over the deck and, just beyond it, the sea.

Her mother and Myrtle Beach proper are just five miles away. She could, but does not, recall how suffocating South Carolina had once felt, nor how swallowed-up and isolated she had felt in Boston, after chasing one boy up the east coast before finding out he didn't want her, after later finding Nick and never fully knowing if she wanted him or not. It turned out that it didn't matter one way or the other, in the end. She does not think of frying pans and fires.

She thinks of new things and of fixable things. She thinks that she will be okay. The world looks dreamy out beyond the deck and she begins to look forward to it. She's finally hungry.

It starts to darken outside and no sun glints on the water. She doesn't wonder again why she didn't take her hiatus somewhere else along the West Coast, does not mourn never getting to watch the sun set into the ocean. She knows, for sure, that the Atlantic in early November isn't the worst it could get, however dirty the stretch outside her house may be.

\*

How had Nick told her, finally, he was leaving? He was flippant, surely. He must have taken the four flights two stairs at a time before he burst into her tiny apartment, the door knob sinking into a hole in the wall, yelling, "Hey! I got it! In six months, I'm outta here! To Dublin!"

She was in the kitchenette, stirring something from a box, or a can. Had she paused, even for a moment, if only to add up all the exclamation points in his voice?

Whenever she heard him use that voice, she thought of that hole in her wall, growing larger, deeper—a hole that had once felt like it could be love.

After her pause, had she smiled and calmly kept stirring before she finally said, “Ah, laddie, I told you you’d get it, didn’t I?” She can’t remember, though she’s thought for so long that’s how it happened, all of it, that she could no longer convince herself otherwise if she wanted to try.

But how excited he’d been for her, a few weeks later, when she told him of her own recently plotted plan to get away! He’d even picked her up, spun her around, congratulating the two of them on their amazing skill and cunning, made some joke about the two of them taking over the world. Everyone agreed that she, too, could benefit from her own leave of absence from the city. While her plotted plan had mostly been a half-drunken fantasy of escaping the Boston she had come to understand as hard winters and harder people, she’d gotten the encouragement to sublet her apartment, to start saving money—which, it was implied, she might do by not drinking.

“Change will do you good,” everyone had said, her mother and Nick had said. *So good*, they implied, a world of it, really.

She would take off the winter months and spend them in the slightly warmer climate of South Carolina. This time of year they practically gave the houses away; she could, for an entire month, rent a lovely—if somewhat older, somewhat faded, somewhat chipped—house right on the beach for less than a dump five blocks back would cost during one summer week. Her mother found a fantastic place for her—“and beautiful, just absolutely beautiful.”

She worried, though. What would she do there? What could she possibly find to do for four whole months? Would she rot away in a beach house? Would she get fat and lonely, watching soap operas and talk shows every afternoon? Would she take up geriatric golf with all of the retired Northern couples on their winter getaways? Would they even want to be her friends?

“You can finally get started again on your research or whatever, get started on your grad school applications,” Nick had said, rubbing his hands together, his eyes going wide and slightly crossed. They sat pressed against one another on one side of her love seat, the other side piled high with sweaters and books and clean and dirty laundry. “And with all the money you’ll save over the next few months, you probably won’t have to work at all when you get there. Think of it as a grant you’ve given to yourself.” He was finally impressed with her, with her get-go and stamina, after the seven long months of their tedious courtship. But she wasn’t so sure that “finally” getting around to something didn’t indicate the joyful arrival to the thing as much as the prolonged uncertainty of it, and she wasn’t sure how to say that out loud.

Phone call after phone call, letter after letter, her mother said, “You can use this time to relax. Think about going back to school. Law school, maybe. I always thought you’d be a lawyer, you know, because, God, could you argue. This is your chance to be someone, honey, your chance to bounce right back on track.” Her mother had learned to use e-mail only to send out that mantra, day after day, to which Almana always wanted to tell her mother that she didn’t know her at all, that she hated to argue. And, how to say she doubted her ego was as yet—if it ever had been, or would ever be again—strong enough to withstand the cruelty of what she had heard of that life? All she could think of

to say was, *But I don't want to be mean*. And she knew that made her sound feeble, that even her own mother would not accept that. But it was the truth. She just wanted to sit and be quiet and still.

But, with everyone watching her and checking in, over the next seven months she'd done exactly what they'd told her she could do—worked hard and saved thousands of dollars. She opened an interest bearing account and cut spending. If she did occasionally sneak a few tallboys or a cheap bottle of wine—much easier to do once Nick had left town—then she'd just not eat that night. When she finally boarded that plane, thinned out and sober for the day, how determined she had been! How resolute she was to become refreshed! She had Nick, now two months gone, and his brilliant smile—however distant—firmly imprinted upon her. She had her mother's warm wishes guiding her. And she knew, with that kind of power on her side, she could finally settle down and open herself up to whatever goodwill that came her way.

\*

She unlocks her front door for the second time of the day, struggling under the weight of her groceries. She is so grateful for whatever it is that makes her feel so old now, so with it, so together, coming home with her skim milk, her wheat bread, her steamed chilled shrimp, caught locally right up the coast just over the Carolina border. She throws her bags and keys on the kitchen counters just like she had always imagined she could do, using books and movies as inspiration.

In the living room, she digs through a box of records, choosing Bob Dylan as if she's listened to it a thousand times, as if she's interested in learning all his sides, even this one. The truth is she's always hated Bob Dylan, his voice and hair, his lyrics that

always sounded the same. She'd bought the Bob Dylan record to placate Nick, who told her she needed to expand her "musical horizons." She preferred the oldies, the groups filled with voices working as instruments together, but Nick called them cheesy.

Turning Bob up loud—she doesn't have any neighbors, any roommates, any studious kind-of-boyfriend muttering to himself half in Gaelic and half in gibberish on her loveseat, reminding her of his impending exam that had, though she didn't realize it, nothing to do with Irish Studies—she sways back into the kitchen, wanting only to decide in which cabinets the bread and rice and pasta and spices will live for the next four months, and to which shelves the milk and orange juice will transfer, maybe for the rest of her life. She thinks these are these kinds of changes she should be making.

After, because it's what she figures one is supposed to do with them, she rinses the shrimp and dumps half the pound onto a plate, spooning a large mound of cocktail sauce next to them. She pours herself a glass of wine; at the store she thought she recalled seafood went well with white, deciding in the end to buy two bottles of each the red and the white, to decide for herself. As she bought them, she'd thought, *Here, here I don't have anyone to count my drinks but myself.* For the next four months, this is her house, her life. *I'll buy as many bottles of wine as I please.*

She sits on the floor next to the coffee table, turning the TV on for the extra light, the movement, but muting it for Dylan. She drags a box of records over, begins to sort them. She had not packed them until the very end, until all her friends and her friends' friends and the strangers from Craigslist had come and taken away everything else. It was not until then that she was certain she would actually be able to leave.

Her Boston life—there at the end, at least—had been like a movie in which she was only vaguely interested. It seemed a familiar story, which was both its allure and its major flaw—a girl who wears clothes that had once been nice, but are now a bit too old and too washed, accidentally sets some balls rolling or chips tossing and steps back and sees where they fall. It was like a fascinating accident, the way life happened, the way things came to her and went away and then snuck back up on her from behind or some other angle, without her looking for it, or expecting it, or wanting it.

Even once most of her things were gone and she looked around at a mostly empty apartment, she still did not think to pack up the rest until the sublettor had called to confirm that she would, in fact, be moving out two days later.

“Oh, yes. Yes,” she’d assured the voice on the other end, surprised that she’d remembered how to answer a phone, and to talk into it. “Yes, I’ll be leaving.”

And when the guy began to ask more questions, began to seem angry and pushy, she’d said, “And there you go. The keys will be at the front desk. I do hope you enjoy yourself,” and then she’d hung up.

Almana had sat on her living room floor of that tiny and empty apartment with her short legs folded under her, trying to figure out, finally, how she had gotten there. At twenty, she had graduated from the University of South Carolina. As she was finishing up school, a graduate student she liked had mentioned how excited he was to be moving to Boston after defending his thesis. With nothing else in mind, she’d moved a month after she walked across that stage, stumbling the entire way. Once she got to Boston, she’d seen the boy one time, in passing, and he had not remembered her name.

But was that how she had gotten there? Soon after she arrived, she had canvassed neighborhoods for generic progressive political purposes, but she wasn't very good at it, despite her general eagerness to, as her cover letter had said, "make the world a better place." She was expected to collect money, and she felt bad asking broke students and old people for it. Then she had been a secretary for a real estate office, and a waitress. The three years she was there, the only test she had taken had been the one to get her bartender's license.

Where had the aching come from? She wanted to know, so that she could make it stop. It hadn't stopped when she met Nick, a Harvard undergraduate, and it hadn't stopped when he'd left. It was like every day was the same day; whatever happened in one day was wiped clean at the end of it. Her life didn't seem like a life. Nothing seemed to lead to anything else. Sometimes she felt like she was floating and other times it felt like sinking but, after a while of this, she began thinking there wasn't much difference between the two because it was all still just a bunch of water.

\*

Her mother calls at ten o'clock as she pours her fourth glass of wine, still sorting the B's—The B-52's, Blondie, Bowie—and it is mostly to that glass her mother owes the thanks of her answering the phone.

"Hi," she says as she tries to shove the cork back into the bottle.

"Well, I almost wasn't expecting you to answer your phone. Thought you'd be tired from unpacking and already in bed by now."

She gives up, leaves the cork lying on the table. "Oh, I've just been sitting here, eating dinner and watching TV. How you doing?"

As Dylan ruins young women and her eyelids drop to half-mast, they make small talk about local seafood and long distance plans. She wonders if talking has always made her tire so quickly. It's been a while since she talked so much, so she can't remember. Pushing away her half-eaten plate of food, she asks her mother to thank her brother for getting the shelving for the records up so quickly.

"Well, I wouldn't let him have the money you sent until he got it done, so that made him eager to get it done in a hurry."

Her jaw and her heart harden. She had wanted to forget that she had to bribe her older brother with money in order for him to help her. She thinks, *The world is an unloving oyster*. "Right, I bet."

The small talk is over. Dylan insists, "No, no, no," and never apologizes. Her mother asks about law school.

"Don't forget that you came here with a mission, honey. Don't forget that you have things to get in order."

She swallows the last of the wine and picks up the bottle. "I've been thinking about all that but haven't decided yet. I've just been here a day." She decides against a fifth glass only because that bottle is empty.

"Well, don't wait too long now, sweetheart," her mother says. "You want to make sure you're on top of things, don't you?"

"That's true," she says as she plays with her thick and winding hair. *Your hair holds so many secrets*, a boy had once told her, but now she can't remember his face. "I want that."

“It’s so good to have you back close to home,” her mother says. “You know, you left so young to go off to college, to go off all over the place. That sure was exhausting, wasn’t it? I bet you’re glad to get back here, too, to regroup, to be home. Sometimes people just need to go home to be able to figure out all this life stuff. I sure understand that. You just left so young.”

“That’s all incredibly true,” she says. Though she wouldn’t have said that going to college freshly seventeen was the bad part; the hard part had been being finished at twenty. The hardest part had been coming back here at twenty-three. *Regrouping. But alone. What group?*

“Baby, I’m going to let you get some sleep now, but I’ll come on over tomorrow to help you settle in. You go on to sleep now, okay? And have real sweet dreams.”

She’d like to imagine that once she crawls under the covers, adjusting the cold-crisp sheets and fluffy pillows around her, she’ll fall straight away into a solid sleep. In the end, though, it’s never that easy, and she spends what feels like days lying on her back, the room spinning, her chest in such spasms you would think she were sobbing.

\*

The first two months she runs up and down the beach some mornings. Then she sits on her deck and waves to people who walk by with their dogs. Sometimes she sits on a blanket in the sand and waits for the dogs to run up to her. But the beach in Cherry Grove is not that busy, and most often older couples walk by holding hands, and do not say hello to her. Or they do speak, and she finds out they are from up North, and she is compelled to lie and say she’s never been above North Carolina.

“A bumpkin, you know,” she says. “I never go no where.”

“No,” they say, “a homebody. You just know what you like and what likes you.”

She visits her mother and brother a few times a week, forcing herself to sit across from Gary at the dinner table as he grunts over the food and informs them that “it tasted better last time.” Sometimes her mother comes to visit the beach house, and Almaná hides the wine.

After a month, her mother goes into Belk and runs into the mother of a girl Almaná knew in high school. After a series of missed calls and confused plans, she meets up with a group of girls from high school who graduated from the College of Charleston or Clemson or the University of South Carolina and moved back to Myrtle Beach and now spend their evenings drinking at a local’s bar called Sloppy’s. They were the girls who did well in high school not so much because they were smart but because they were pretty and well adjusted. Now they are thin and tan and still mostly well adjusted. They love themselves and each other. The other girls have so much fun, and try to catch Almaná up on everything she’s missed and don’t ask a lot of questions about where she’s been, which she likes. She tries so hard to be energetic, because she wants to be energetic, and she gets too drunk too fast. No one minds; they invite her out a few more times because who knew that Almaná could be the life of the party?

Then it becomes so easy to let one day turn into the next day, too easy to wake up still drunk and to spend the rest of the day doing nothing, too easy to start it all over again. It’s a joke between friends, and comforting.

“Oh my god, was today rough,” she says.

“No joke,” someone says back. “Bottoms up.”

She kisses a boy, tells him that she just wants to get a job somewhere, maybe adopt a dog, and then feels terrible and guilty and never speaks to him again.

International calls to and from Nick go mostly unreturned. She keeps her house clean and invites people over. She wakes up and there are her new girlfriends and their friends passed out, with their hair caked from their midnight swims. Someone makes eggs and someone else helps her clean up.

She feels like she is preparing for a hurricane, one that's coming straight for her. She stocks up, hunkers down, thinks that she'll be okay as long as she just sits tight. Hurricanes blow over and it isn't like there is a lot to lose. She doesn't ever think maybe it's a tornado.

\*

Two months later, her perfect house closely resembles the cramped one bedroom apartment she'd left behind. She's closed off all the rooms she doesn't use. There are days-old dishes in the sink, the clean ones forgotten in the washer. In the bathroom, her dirty laundry lies in a heap in the corner, the clean laundry half-folded in multiple baskets and arranged like an offering around the too-large bed. Her money's run out, she doesn't know where it all went, she can't believe she's going to have to bring it up to her mother, she can't find a way out of it. She sits at the perfect patio table on her perfect deck, wishing she had it in her to take up smoking, wishing it didn't make her heart beat so fast that it made her head ache. She sits on that deck every day in an ugly bathrobe her mother gave her, drinking coffee she's never liked, considering. *Everyone is going to be so disappointed. Everyone is going to be so sad, so disappointed.*

Nick had finally called her from Ireland, from his studies, from his exciting vacation, and admitted to what she'd figured all along, that it was over.

"But maybe once we both get back to Boston, we can try it again. It could be different, and better. We could try, that's definitely a possibility. You're such a great girl; this has nothing to do with you not being a great girl."

She wasn't drinking, she hadn't had any alcohol in her house in days, but she pretended she was because it made it so much easier to talk to Nick. "You've just been wanting to get rid of me. Even there, you were just waiting. Why did you take so long?"

He said, "Ah, lassie, no," and she thought, *In breaking up with me, he has referenced a television dog. The reference must be to the television dog, because he is really not Irish and I at least think he knows that.* He said, "I've never wanted to get rid of you. Not once. I've only ever wanted you to be happy. You know that."

"I *am* happy. I am fun; I am having fun. I hang out with all these people here."

"Of course you're fun. I really miss you sometimes; I couldn't miss someone who isn't fun. And it's hard, ya know?"

She mouthed *hard, ya know?* to herself, to see what that sort of phrase felt like coming off lips that had no idea what they were saying. It felt just like a phrase, which was what she'd expected.

He said, "It's just not fair for us to be so far apart and splitting up our times and energies. Don't you think we should just live where we live, ya know? But I still remember all those times, all that fun we had, running around the Commons, laughing at the musicians in Harvard Square. You remember that weird guy with the one-string

guitar? *Ping, ping, ping*, same note over and over, as if he didn't even know he could move his hand up and down the frets."

The guy with the one-string-one-note guitar had broken her heart. She'd wanted to give him all her money so that he could go and buy himself a full set of strings. *A guitar player ought to have six strings for his guitar.* When she'd said that to Nick, began pulling money out of her pockets, he'd laughed and stopped her. *That's just how he wants to be*, he'd said, *he doesn't want your help.*

"Laughing at people isn't fun," she said. "There isn't anything fun about a person who can't get six goddamn guitar strings. There isn't anything about sadness that's worth laughing about."

"Sure there is. There has to be. 'Nothing funnier than human misery,' and all that. Beckett, you know."

"I don't like that. He's got it all wrong."

Nick had laughed then, mocked her, repeated her: "'I don't like that,' she says. 'He's got it all wrong,' she says. You can't not like Beckett, Almana."

*I am the fun one*, she thought. *I have to be. If Nick is more fun than me, if he's the one who's got it right, then I might as well just die right here on this deck.*

"I can hate anything I want to," she said.

"Sure, sure. Have you been drinking? You sound like you've been drinking."

"Yes, I am completely shit-faced."

They'd gotten off soon after; it was expensive to call from so far away and he'd made his points. He promised to write, but wondered why she just didn't get Internet. *What is it, you getting all bohemian over there?* She didn't tell him she would never go

back to Boston. She didn't tell him she'd sold all her belongings, that she rarely regretted doing so. Didn't say that when she did regret doing so, it could keep her in bed for a whole day, missing a coffee cup or a lamp. Didn't say, either, that once she stopped missing the item, she would still stay in bed, hating herself for missing something that was nothing. She didn't tell him those things because she could not let herself fully think those things.

Tonight she is dressing up. Tonight she is going to have fun. She is going out with the girls.

She puts on heels, nice underwear. She pulls, from a wooden hanger, one of the few nice dresses she brought with her, a black one, fitted close to her curves, with a red polka-dotted collar. She puts on her make-up, uses her hair products, her lotions. She goes out to the car her mother loaned her and heads to the bar.

Tonight she is going to find herself a stunning Country Boy, one with tight jeans and cowboy boots even though she's never once seen a stunning boy in Myrtle Beach wearing honest-to-God cowboy boots—only un-stunning boys, or only hunting boots. She will talk to him about old country music, about sweet hunting dogs, and how Southern things will always be better than Northern ones, especially the people. She will fascinate him, will make him think all sorts of new things about the world. He will love her hair, her furtively held beliefs. He will believe in her. He will want to take her home to his mother. He will buy all of her drinks, hang on to her every word. He will take her home with him, lay her down in his bed, touch her, make her come, and then she will never need to see him again.

\*

Halfway to the bar she pulls the car over into the parking lot of a junk house when she starts having trouble breathing. The yard is covered with license plates, garden gnomes, old tire rims, and other original versions of the replicated kinds of decorations found in diners and Cracker Barrels. She rolls up her window, hopes the air conditioner can take away the salt smell in the air. She sits there, the engine running, the radio tuned in loud to the oldies station, and tries to catch her breath.

Because she's never had a real and consuming love, she can now believe Nick was it, can now believe she's the reason it all failed. Because she and Nick never had a song of their own, she now hears every old love song as if it had been, as if it could have been. Because she and Nick had never danced to any songs, she now imagines the two of them holding onto each other on a crowded dance floor as "Crimson and Clover" plays from large PA speakers, her head on his shoulder, one of his lean hands placed firmly in the middle of her back, stroking the warm skin just above her collar. Because she has only seen photos and movies of a prettier time, she can imagine herself wearing a tailored linen dress with a full skirt, her hair curled high. Because she's never gotten anything she's always wanted, she could just let go, just drive herself into ruin with her want, drive herself straight into that filthy ocean.

## Inside Loss Itself

When Joanna said to him, “I’m scared I might be pregnant,” Jackson started thinking of names. If it was a boy, he thought perhaps she’d be willing to name him after his father, Harrison, who had died when Jackson was twelve. On his Saturday off work, Harrison had gone to help a friend shovel mulch and then came home and had a heart attack in the front yard. And if it was a girl—well, Jackson didn’t figure Joanna would want to name her after his mother, Beatrice, and certainly not after her own, Martha, with whom she was always fighting. But he figured they’d come up with something great, together, because they were a creative couple.

Then Jackson realized that Joanna had said she was scared, and he stopped thinking about names and creativity. Joanna never just got scared. She got irate and frustrated and disappointed and just plain pissed off, but she never got scared. Everything she felt had a physical response; she would always do something even if that something only led her to walk around the block for hours. Sometimes she yelled; sometimes she rearranged furniture; sometimes she looked at him as if she could break a chair over his head—but she had always moved, always tried to get something settled inside her. When he looked at her, then, Jackson could tell that it would take a lot to move her from her seat, if anything would move her at all.

“Well,” he said slowly. “Have you taken any tests?”

When she looked at him, he hoped she would look furious with him for asking such a stupid question, *Of course I have, you dipshit*. But she looked broken. “A few,” she said. “Five. Two yes, three no.”

“Nothing definitive, then,” he said, hoping for a *No shit, Sherlock*.

She shook her head.

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They’d met at a party—his birthday party, in fact, his thirtieth—eight months ago in June. Joanna knew a girl who knew a girl and then there she was walking into Jon-Scott’s house, all tiny woman and a mess of hair.

He’d wanted to talk to her immediately, but was nervous to do so, mainly because he wasn’t sure how old she was—he wouldn’t have been surprised to find out she was just eighteen and far too new to mess with him. But when she walked up to him and wished him, a stranger, happy birthday, the uncertainty on her face had set off something inside him. So he introduced himself, just so that he could hear her say her name, which he already knew from asking around, and when Joanna hadn’t seemed like she was eager to run away from him to another corner of the house, he began pulling the rest out of her. She was twenty-four and a recent graduate from the University of South Carolina at Columbia, the same place he’d gone to school. She’d just moved back in with her mother and largely absent step-father (“But only for a second, if that’s possible. The woman would drive a dead saint insane.”). She’d drawn out her schooling, throwing in minor after minor, and two cognates, because the school had paid for her first four years and the government gave her money for the last two and because she couldn’t stand the thought of not being in school. She figured it was the only thing she’d ever been good at.

A few weeks later, when things were more settled between them, he told his older sister, Sheila, all about Joanna. Sheila was seven years older than he, and had three children and a husband. Sheila had said, “You sure you want to get mixed up with

someone like that? People like you get hauled into all sorts of crazy shit by thinking you must be something special to get someone to give up those big secrets in themselves, but everybody knows that anyone who offers that much of themselves so early ain't nothing but crazy."

Jackson tried to tell Sheila that small bit of information was all Joanna had been willing to give him over a span of several hours, that none of it had seemed like she was telling him some big secret.

"Maybe so," Sheila said. "But there's more than one thing a decent girl makes a guy work for, and her problems is one of 'em."

Jackson didn't care, didn't listen. Within a few months, he got a job as a foreman with a friend of a friend's construction company in Alabama, and moved Joanna out with him. As far as he could tell, she never hesitated. He certainly hadn't.

\*

On Wednesday, two lonely days after Joanna told him about her worry, Jackson's sister called to tell him their grandmother had died.

"Mom's having a rough time with it, especially since it was her who found Gram this morning," Sheila said. "She just died in her sleep, sometime last night, we're guessing, and Mom found her when she came to pick her up for their hair appointment this morning. The viewing will be Friday night and the funeral on Saturday."

Gram was his father's mother and her real name was Hazel. She and his mother had been best friends ever since Beatrice married into the family, and especially so after Jackson's father died. It was almost as if, after everything that happened, Hazel became Beatrice's own mother, as both of Beatrice's parents had died when Sheila was very

young, before Jackson had even been thought of. When Hazel's other son, Gary, had died in a boating accident, Beatrice literally became Hazel's closest living relative.

When he got off the phone, having told his sister of course he'd be there, no question, he'd be there tomorrow, he sat at the kitchen table looking at his hands. He sat there for a long time before he called and booked a flight for the next afternoon. Joanna was taking a bath, and he ached to crawl in there with her. There had been a time, just a few months ago, when he would come home from work and find her in the bath waiting for him, the door open. It was closed now.

He knocked softly at the door, holding his breath. When she called for him to come in, he closed his eyes and breathed out.

She was sitting in milk colored water that just covered the tops of her thin breasts, and she smiled sadly, sweetly, at him. "Do you want to get in?"

He didn't take his eyes off her as he undressed. He crawled in behind her and leaned his head into her neck. He wrapped his arms around her and settled his hands on her stomach. They both tried to ignore it when she tensed up.

"My grandmother just died," he said against her neck.

She breathed in sharply. "Oh, God. Jackson."

Jackson thought about how his grandmother had explained love to him, long ago, when he was a little boy staying with her during the summer. Both his mother and Sheila worked during the day, but Jackson was too young to be by himself.

He and his grandmother had finished lunch and were settling down in her den to watch their stories, which he never really understood. The constant marrying and falling in and out of love was both boring and confusing.

“They don’t really love each other,” he said.

“No?” his grandmother asked. “Why do you think that?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “They don’t seem very nice. How does anyone ever know if he loves someone?”

“When you look at someone, a person who seems strong and sure, and you can see his—or her—flaws, and love them for those flaws, then I think you know,” she’d said. “It can be hard to do that, for the one to let others see their flaws, and for the other to love another for them. People have such worries about themselves that they keep hidden. They come into this world with all sorts of problems—they come out scared and crying and feeble. They’re not sure what they want, and even less sure how to ask for it. All you can do is help them, I guess, and love them as they try to figure it all out, go stumbling out into the world. I think all love is like that.”

Moving his hands to Joanna’s slick arms small as sticks, he said, “I’ll fly to South Carolina so that you’ll have the truck here for you.”

“You don’t need me to go with you?”

“Well, you never got to meet her, after all,” he said, wondering why he’d never taken Joanna to meet her. Then he felt he hadn’t said enough. “It’ll be okay.”

“I’ve heard a lot about her, though,” she said, speaking slowly, as if weighing it all out. “You might need me there. If you think you’ll need me,” she trailed off.

“I’ll be back Monday,” he said finally, not thinking Joanna could handle a funeral. “You should make a doctor’s appointment, if you haven’t already.”

She shook her head. “I haven’t.”

They sat there together, Jackson breathing slowly against her back, until Joanna turned and touched his face, and then climbed out of the tub. They hadn't made love in a week and a half. They had never gone that long.

They went to bed early that evening, after thinking about eating for several hours. Neither wanted to cook, and they waffled back and forth about ordering in. They finally just went to bed. Jackson felt emotionally ravaged, as exhausted as he would have been had he been physically building houses all day instead of just looking at plans for them.

Jackson slept in fits and starts that night. He was usually a good sleeper, falling asleep and staying that way straight through to morning. He tried to keep still; he didn't know if Joanna slept, but he didn't want to wake her if she'd actually been able to fall into a solid sleep.

Lying on his back, arms at his side, he tried to not think of why she was so scared, because he felt he already knew the reason. He'd always felt that, one day, she would just leave once she found an excuse good enough. The night they met, she'd come to him so hesitantly, looking at him as if she were looking deep into him for everything that could be awful about him. It had been hard to get a smile out of her, but he'd gone and found something stupid enough to make her laugh.

"Jon-Scott is a great guy," he'd told her, leaning toward her as if he were telling a dark secret. "I just don't think people want to admit to it because he's so weird, what with his doomsday philosophies, thinking the whole world economy is going to collapse at any moment. You know he wants to move up near Boone, build a log cabin deep in the woods, and start trying to live without electricity, right? Because he thinks it's just a matter of time before everyone will have to live that way and he just wants to get a head

start. He figures once he knows how to do it, he'll be able to barter his living skills for food or livestock when the world comes crashing down."

Wide eyed, she shook her head. No, she said, she didn't know that about Jon-Scott. All she knew about Jon-Scott was that her friend Carla had once slept with him on a rebound—his or hers or both Joanna wasn't sure—and was now furious that he hadn't called her again.

"Well, it's true," Jackson said. "He's nuts. Sees conspiracies all over the place."

He looked at her face, trying to memorize everything about her face because he was certain he'd never see that face again.

"Besides," he said, scrambling for anything. "He has that terrible haircut."

Then her laugh had come, at the most inane comment, a full, throaty laugh that caused her to tilt her head back and close her eyes, and that was it. And now here she was, surprised and scared, and Jackson was terrified to move. He figured if he willed it so, that time could pause and that he could forever lie there next to the small and worried woman breathing steadily beside him, her back curled toward him. If the light were on, he would be able to count every knot down her spine. He had a sudden fear that if he actually left the next morning, that he would come back and she would be gone, that she would have simply vanished into the Alabama winter. While he was gone back to South Carolina, Joanna would turn twenty-five, but Jackson wasn't sure she even remembered. She said she'd stopped counting at nineteen, because "all the good stuff has already happened. What's so great about getting any older?"

"Why do you feel you're so old? And you hated being a child—how could you already think all the good stuff's happened?" he asked her, trying to get her to say that he

was part of the good stuff. “I don’t know if you could ever be old, you’re like the thing that should exist but never will—the perpetual puppy, always small and always curious and always promising.”

She’d looked hurt at that. “I never said I didn’t want to grow up,” she said. “I just don’t want to be old.”

And now she was a cashier at the Dollar Store, making just above minimum wage. She used her money to pay her student loans and the phone bill, to buy groceries. Jackson paid the rent and utility bills. They lived as if they were extremely poor, though they were not so bad off. Joanna did not let Jackson buy anything for her that she could not afford on her own.

\*

Jackson drove to the Birmingham airport the next morning, Joanna sitting next to him in a thin cotton shirt that hung off her frame. Joanna looked out the slightly opened window, picking at her lower lip, her long hair whipping across her face. Jackson reached across the seat to try to capture her hair in his hand and tuck it behind her shoulder. The hair flew immediately back to the window. She shook her head.

“Don’t bother,” she said. “It’s my own fault.”

“You could try keeping the window closed.”

She gave a disgusted look. “No, I can’t,” she said. “The seat cushions smell too much of old cigarette smoke. I almost can’t stand it—it makes me both really want one right now and also makes me need to throw up. This air is the only thing helping me.”

Joanna stared out the passenger side window. Jackson stared down I-20, wondering what would happen if he just kept straight on the road, riding it all the way to

Atlanta, then on through Augusta, around Aiken, past Columbia, to Florence, where a body lay in anticipation of goodbyes. He thought, with no doubt, that he'd drive that truck all the way to the coast, if it were possible. He would keep driving until the land ended and turned into the ocean, and then maybe he'd keep driving then, too, until he came to land again. He thought Joanna would like that, being in another country. She loved to watch the Travel Channel, especially when she was by herself. Sometimes when Jackson came home from work or a drink with a buddy, he'd find her watching specials on places that were just becoming fashionable to visit, her eyes wide and wondrous, sometimes as if she could burst into tears. She would, every time, turn the channel as he walked through the door, as if she were embarrassed by her secret passions, as if she felt guilty for wanting a little more than she had.

Joanna had begun talking again, her face tilted closer to the window, taking in deep breaths. "I should have never let myself do it," she said, holding her hand to the top of her stomach.

"What's that, hon?" He tried to sound casual, as if he'd caught her worrying over something inconsequential.

She looked surprised, her hand pressed against her stomach. "Should never have smoked in here," she said. "I've probably ruined the truck, all the interior. You'll probably never be able to sell it for anything, as gross as I've made it."

Jackson laughed. "You don't need to worry about anything like that. I'm driving old Beaufort here until he completely kicks out on me, and then I'll take from him what parts I can still use and put them in the next one. No one's getting this guy. He's an organ donor."

Joanna was horrified, and it took Jackson a moment to realize what he'd just said, that he was talking about death, and talking about it as if it were nothing. She shook her head again, talking to herself worriedly. "It's like I'm completely ruining your life," she said. Jackson knew to say no more, that she did not want to hear any protests, did not want to hear him say, *That's ridiculous. You've completely made my life.*

"Besides," he said, "way more cigarettes have been smoked in this thing than the few you've had in here. Maybe I ought to be the one apologizing." At the airport, where a flashing traffic sign told them that the terror alert was low that day and everyone drove around it.

Jackson drove to the departures gate, pulled close to the curb. There were only three other cars at the gate. He got out of the truck and pulled from behind the seat his suitcase and the garment bag that held his suit. Joanna slid across the seat of the truck and took position at the wheel. The seat was high enough that Jackson could lean in towards her and rest his head against her chest. Joanna rubbed his sandy colored hair.

When he took his keys, he asked her to be careful driving back to Carterdale, that I-20 West was covered with road repairs and speed traps and motorcycles and all sorts of things that could make her a panicked driver.

"No, you be careful," she said. "There are worse speed traps between Columbia and Florence, and you know that. And I told you about that time the hanging interstate sign just fell down on that tractor-trailer and cut it in half. Those people there don't know how to build shit. That's what you should be worrying about—the damn interstate just crumbling down around you."

She said, “And don’t worry about calling. I mean, call if you want to or need to, but don’t worry about calling to check in on me, or anything. I’ll be right here when you get back.”

They said their goodbyes and shared a small kiss. By the time Jackson had crossed in front of the truck and made it to the curb, Joanna was pulling slowly back into the traffic.

\*

Jackson’s plane arrived in Columbia without any delays. He rented a car at the airport, and they gave him a brand new Pontiac Firebird with 384 miles on it. As he once again pulled onto I-20 headed to Florence, he marveled at the car’s pickup, 35 to 65 in a few seconds, no pull from its motor. Beaufort, the truck he’d left with Joanna, was an old rusted thing from the 1980’s he’d rebuilt with his Uncle Gary after he graduated from college. He loved that truck but he thought maybe he should buy Joanna a car, perhaps a new one. He thought he should find her one the second he got back to Carterdale, and that he would tell her that there was absolutely no way she could say no to it.

“Have this car instead of that baby,” he thought he might say to her, even as he knew that would be stupid and horrible.

Of course she wasn’t ready to start a family, he knew that as sure as he knew anything. While away from her, while barreling down the highway, he could think clearly for the first time in days. It was not the right time for her to go through all of that; she was too young, too uncertain about what she wanted. She had every reason to be scared, and he knew he should be scared there right along with her. But he wasn’t scared, at least not of the baby, if there was one. Being a father wasn’t something he had seriously

considered. He'd always known, however, it was only a matter of time as soon as he met the right girl, and he felt he'd found her. No, he wasn't scared of starting and being a family. He was scared only of waking in the middle of the night to find she'd simply vanished, that he would wake to find nothing but the faint scent of her on the pillow next to him. And that was not a fear he could share with her.

\*

That first night, the night they met, her friends left her at Jon-Scott's when Jackson said he could give her a ride back to her house. He'd been trying to get drunk, but had been unable to get it going. Joanna, on the other hand, had managed the job pretty well. As he came out of the bathroom, he found her waiting, smiling and reaching for him. Kissing him, she pulled him into an empty room, not bothering to turn the lights on. They stood just to the side of the open doorway, clutching at one another, kissing with too much tongue.

When Jackson pulled slightly away from her, he could see Joanna's face in the bit of light from the hallway, her pretty face flushed in embarrassment.

"What?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, his hand at her waist, pulling his head back a bit more to see her face. "Really."

"Something with me? Something with you?"

"Something with me, I'm sure," he said.

She made a low growling sound, angry and frustrated.

“I’m just worried you might be too drunk to remember this tomorrow,” he said, touching her face. “And, of course, I’d remember it all. Then I’d just have to feel damn embarrassed the next time I saw you.”

“Well, what if you never saw me again?”

“Then that probably would just be even worse.”

He drove her back to her mother’s house, and they kissed again in his truck.

“God, I hate trucks,” she said. “They always seem so ancient. I guess I wouldn’t mind the big seat.”

He was silent, staring at her dark, glassy eyes. Behind her, her mother’s yard was filled with small patches of flowers and flowering bushes, a tall and crooked birdhouse stuck in the middle.

“Am I going to see you again?” she demanded.

He took a moment to respond. “Do you want to?”

She sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“We’ll just have to see how it goes then.”

She rolled her eyes at him as she opened the door. “Fine, whatever.”

Jackson did not see her for another two weeks. Sometimes he felt pissed off at himself for not having just slept with her there, in Jon-Scott’s guest bedroom. He would have been forgiven; it was his birthday, after all, no one would have accused him of taking advantage of her.

Then he saw her at another party, and kept his distance. As far as he could tell, Joanna didn’t even notice when he was in the same room, and he guessed she had been too drunk to remember it all. He wasn’t sure if he figured that it was a good thing or not.

He'd just said goodbye to everyone and gone out to his truck when he heard footsteps behind him.

"I thought you said you were going to call."

He turned and stared at her, narrowing his eyes.

"Well?" she asked.

He rubbed his forehead. "You said you didn't know if you wanted to see me again, Joanna. Besides, you never gave me your number."

"And you don't know anyone who might would have it?"

"I have no idea what you want from me." He took a deep breath. "I have no idea what you want out of life. Also," he said, "I think you might be kind of crazy. You're all over the place. I can't figure you out."

"Would knowing any of that make any difference?"

"Probably not."

She laughed and walked closer to him. He felt both weary and overwhelmed.

"I heard you have a cool house," she said, her voice becoming lighter, sweeter. "I heard you built it yourself."

"That's not exactly true. I put in some walls and added a sunroom. But I didn't build it."

"Either way, I kind of just want you to show it to me."

"What, right now?" he asked.

"Sure."

He took a moment, as if he was taking time to consider his options, though he wasn't considering anything. It had been determined, from the moment he heard her

footsteps behind him, that he would do whatever he had to do to keep her talking to him. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad one, but it was simply how it was.

He sighed and tilted his head to his truck. "All right," he said. "Get in. I'll show you my damn house."

\*

His sister Sheila had one boy and two girls, and the youngest girl was six and had started kindergarten the previous fall. Jackson hadn't seen Cassidy since she'd started school—he and Joanna had not made it back to South Carolina for Thanksgiving or Christmas—but he remembered her as a sweet, good natured kid, always positive, always excited and moving, as if she knew she had so much life ahead of her and was eager to get to all of it. As he sat in a weakly cushioned chair along the wall in the funeral home the evening of the wake, watching people walk in and out, offering their condolences, he saw Cassidy standing by herself along the other side of the room, leaning against the wall, one ankle crossed over the other. Across the room and in the middle of several people, Sheila gave him a look and a few tilts of her head, which told him she was commanding him to either help her talk to people offering their condolences, or to sit with Cassidy. He got up and went to the girl, sitting in the last chair of a row close to her, and called her to sit with him, which she did obediently. They sat quietly for a moment.

"So you started school this year, huh?" he asked. "I bet that's been exciting."

She swung her legs, stretching them out as if trying to reach the floor, and nodded slightly, her face giving no emotion away.

"I bet you've been having lots of fun. I bet you've been learning all sorts of things," he said. "I bet you're the smartest one out of the whole bunch. And I bet at recess

that you're the fastest one." She nodded a third time, though she looked up at him from the corner of her eye, trying to hold in a small smile.

"Don't worry, there's no reason for you to be so modest about it. I wish I were as smart and fast as you. What's your favorite part of school?" he asked.

Cassidy looked back down at her swinging legs. Though she was silent and appeared as if she'd not heard him ask her a question, Jackson could tell that she was thinking. "I like the tests," she said finally.

"Really?" he asked, trying not to sound too surprised, worried that might in turn make Cassidy worried about liking the wrong things. "Why is that?"

"I do good on them," she said. "I always get the questions right."

Jackson was quiet for a moment. He thought back to the night he'd met Joanna. *I figure it's the only thing I've ever really been good at*, she'd said, a note of loss in her voice. He worried what kind of woman Cassidy would grow into; he thought her optimism and positivism might be lost, might already be lost, might be replaced by loneliness and people who only dragged her down. He understood that Cassidy always did well on the tests because the tests were never good enough for her. What challenges would she face as she grew up? How would she react when her tests finally became entirely too hard, or right out impossible? What panic would overtake her, then, when she realized she'd never been asked the hard questions and had never been made to prepare to answer them? Jackson looked hard at Sheila across the room and, for a moment, tried to blame her.

"I like taking care of the hermit crab the best," she said, her brow crinkled. "But we take turns feeding him, and it won't be my turn again until next week."

Jackson tried to smile, said, “Maybe we’ll just have to find you a way to get your own hermit crab, huh? To feed all by yourself every day.” Cassidy smiled and kicked her feet again, and Jackson began worrying about how disappointed she would be when Sheila said, “No way in hell one of those nasty tanks is coming into my house. Absolutely not. I’ve got enough to clean up without having to clean up after pointless animals that aren’t even animals.”

Jackson tried to backpedal without disappointing Cassidy. “Or, maybe we’ll have to take you down to the aquarium in Myrtle Beach. They have great animals there—really big crabs. They’d probably be more fun to look at than a hermit crab, and they’d probably let you feed those.”

Cassidy seemed to like that idea, too, and Jackson felt relieved.

From behind him, then, he heard a vaguely familiar voice call his name. He turned and saw Joanna’s mother standing behind him, remembering then that she had gone to school with his mother, though Joanna’s mother was younger. Everyone had known Beatrice, the girl who’d had a baby right out of high school with someone far older than her.

Jackson stood up quickly and walked to her.

Joanna’s mother gave him an awkward hug. “I’m so sorry,” she said, pulling back and looking up at him. She was taller than Joanna, but just barely.

“Thanks for coming, Martha,” he said. “That’s very nice of you, but you really shouldn’t have driven so far. Calabash is like two hours away.”

“Oh, it’s no problem at all,” she said. “I’m glad to be able to be here, though I wish the circumstances were happier, of course.”

Jackson nodded.

Martha looked over the room quickly. “I guess you didn’t want Joanna coming with you.”

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t think she’d do well with it. She’s had a lot on her mind lately, been under the weather.”

“Well,” she said. “I should have figured as much.” She pursed her lips. “I brought her a birthday present, though I’m sure she doesn’t want to celebrate. It’s in the car, maybe you could give it to her when you go back to Alabama?”

“Of course,” he said. “Would you like me to get it now? Or would you like to say hello to Mom?”

When an anxious look crossed her face, Jackson figured that she would have no idea what to say, and spoke quickly. “Or, I can tell her later you came by. I’m sure she’ll like that. She’s kind of overwhelmed right now. I think Gram’s entire church is here.”

She relaxed. “Yes, it certainly seems so. She was a wonderful woman.”

They walked out to her car together, a shiny new car. She opened the back door and pulled out a small gift bag. “It’s nothing big, just some lotion I know Joanna likes,” she said, handing him the bag. “I know she doesn’t like a big fuss over her birthday. That child’s always been a bit weird like that.”

Jackson felt a rush of anger and clenched his teeth.

“What is she doing these days, anyway?” she asked. “Is she working at all?”

“She’s done a bit of work here and there,” he said, feeling ashamed to name the places she’d tried to work: the pizza place, the grocery store, all places he’d tried to talk her out of, places that had depressed her and made her feel stupid. “She wrote a couple of

restaurant reviews of local places for the newspaper.”

“Really?” Martha asked. “She told me about that, but I thought she was stretching the truth. She has a tendency to exaggerate things, as you know.”

“No, I wasn’t aware she did that,” he said, clenching his fists.

“Well, maybe she’s changed then,” she said. “Maybe you’ve been a good influence on her. How is she doing, how’s she sleeping?”

Because he’d had no one to share his worries with, because no one else had asked how Joanna was doing, because no one else seemed to care about her, and because Martha finally seemed concerned, Jackson said the thing he knew he should never say.

“She’s scared she’s pregnant.”

He instantly wanted to take it back, wanted to get into the Pontiac and drive into the ocean. And as he watched Martha sigh deeply and nearly roll her eyes, he half wanted to get in the Pontiac and drive right into her.

“I guess I was right,” she said, shaking her head. “She certainly does still exaggerate things.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said. “You don’t know anything that’s been going on these past months.”

“That may very well be true,” she said. “But I do know that Joanna was diagnosed with endometriosis when she was a teenager. That can make it nearly impossible for her to either become pregnant or carry a baby to term. And she’s always been so thin; it’d be a miracle if she were even having her period as she ought to.”

He didn’t know what to say. He was both furious and furiously sad. “Does Joanna know that?”

“Well, she knows she has it. I never told her she could be infertile.”

“You’ve always known? And you never thought to tell her, never thought it was something she ought to hear from you and not from some doctor down the line when she might want children and not know why she isn’t having any?”

“You must actually not know her,” Martha said, looking at him sadly. “She never really wants something unless she knows she can’t have it.”

\*

After the wake, Jackson and Shelia went back to their mother’s house. Sheila’s kids sat in the living room with Beatrice, and Jackson and Sheila went out on the carport to smoke a cigarette. They sat in rocking chairs that had been bought at Cracker Barrel, one white one and another painted garnet and black, a tribute to the Gamecocks, which Jackson’s father had loved, though the team was always so bad when he’d been alive.

“I thought you quit,” Sheila said, handing him a cigarette and the lighter after he asked for one. “I thought you quitting was the big moment of your life.”

Jackson stared into a corner of the yard where a cat and a squirrel were having a standoff in a small amount of light from the carport, hissing at each other, their backs arched. As he exhaled, he said, “Is Dylan coming down?”

“He’s flying into Columbia tomorrow morning,” she said. “He couldn’t come today because of the tour.”

Dylan, Sheila’s husband, did sound for various big name alt-country singers. His company was based in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he lived as he prepared for tours.

“I don’t know why you don’t just move up to Raleigh,” Jackson said. “I don’t know how you can stand being away from him so much, or how he can stand being away from y’all.”

“Who would watch out for Mom if I moved to Raleigh?”

“She’s a big girl,” he said. “She’s in good health; she’d be all right. She’d probably want you to, you know.”

“You think it would be so easy for me to leave her? You have the luxury of being a man; you can go off to make your life and no one thinks any less of you. It’s different for daughters.”

“I just don’t see how staying away from your husband, how keeping your children away from their father, is the best idea, and I can’t see Mom thinking that’s the best idea. And the schools up there are so much better than here.”

Sheila stood up and walked to the edge of the carport, ashing her cigarette into the yard. “When you and Joanna, or you and whoever, have your own kids, then you can talk to me about what I do with mine.”

“Give me a break,” he said. “I don’t have to have my own kids to know that kids should be with their whole family when it’s possible, when their parents are still married and still love each other. And I know kids should be in the best schools possible.”

Sheila turned around to face Jackson, her chin squared in anger, her cheeks slightly sucked in. “You don’t know shit about my family, or what’s best for them. You don’t know anything.”

“I know that Cassidy is suffocating in that school she’s in. She’s going to be completely lost before you know it, because that’s what all children like her end up being—lost. I don’t have to know everything in order to know that much.”

Sheila took a few steps toward him. “Well I’ll tell you something, little brother. I’ll decide, with my own husband, what is best for this family. I know my kids, and they’ll be where I think they ought to. You don’t get the luxury of both flying off to wherever you want to as well as coming back here anytime you please and tell us how to live our own lives, or even act like you’re a part of any of it. You don’t get it both ways.”

She took a last pull off her cigarette and flicked it into the yard. “So, you just go ahead and leave after your work’s done here and go on back to your successful career and your half-crazy girlfriend and just enjoy your life, all right? Just try to let Mom know that you’re sorry for her loss sometime before you leave.”

She let the screen door slam behind her on her way in. Jackson held his burned out cigarette, rocking in the chair and looking off into the yard. The cat won the standoff, just as he figured it would.

He wasn’t sure why he’d tried to start a fight with his sister, but it had been a while since he’d felt so angry. He thought again about Joanna in school, thought about her inability to let anything just go, and realized that she must have had some idea that she couldn’t get pregnant. Had she just forgotten it, in her panic at missing her period? Or was she willfully ignoring it for some other reason? What did she want from him? He felt his love getting complicated, hinging on something. He thought again of names—the names of flowers, Greek and Roman gods, constellations.

He sat out there staring out into the yard, and wondered about all the things that people could learn, and the things they could never be taught. Jackson knew he had learned so many things in his life, from how to solve for  $x$  or write in cursive or bite his tongue, but he had never once learned how to understand the *whys* of anyone else, and perhaps not even himself. He could never know why another person needed one thing over another. He could work his way through the steps for getting through losing a thing, but could never learn how to live inside it, how to rightly lose it.

Later that evening, after Sheila left with her kids, Jackson made a fresh pot of coffee and drank a cup with his mother at her kitchen table. It was a tiny kitchen with wood-paneled walls and spotless green countertops. She decorated with figurines of ducks and milkmaids and bottles and vases made of milk glass, though most of the decorations were now hidden behind all the food people had brought the past few days—pecan pies and deviled eggs, bar-b-que and rolls, casserole upon casserole. Jackson was starving, but felt it would be improper to actually eat.

His mother looked much the same way she'd looked since he'd arrived to town the night before, confused and out of sorts. It was the first time they'd been alone since he'd gotten there, though it had also been even longer than that. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been alone with her.

“Will the coffee keep you up tonight, Mom?” he asked after a few minutes.

“Oh, honey,” she said, shaking her head. “I don't reckon there's anything that could get me to go to sleep other than some kind of pill.”

“Do you have any of those?”

“I sure do,” she said, laughing out something that didn't sound like much of a

laugh, but more like a moan. “I got some booze in that cabinet over there, too. That helps sometimes. I keep it hidden, though. Sheila would jump out of her mind if she saw it, would have me right down to Columbia to admit me to that Three Rivers clinic faster than it would take to pour it all out in the sink.”

Jackson asked if maybe she wouldn't like him to pour her a drink. She gave a nod that said, “Took you long enough,” and pointed him toward a cabinet to the right of the pots and pans, told him he was welcome to a drink if he wanted it. He got two glasses and found the bottle.

“Scotch, Mom?” he asked. He imagined he would find something that mixed well with juice, or perhaps a cheap bottle of white zinfandel, but never did he think he'd find an expensive bottle of Scotch under his mother's sink.

“It's what your father always drank,” she said. “So it's the only thing I ever knew how to drink, scotch with a splash of water.”

He made their drinks and sat down again at the table. There was something awkwardly satisfying in watching his mother, who he had never seen drink more than a sip of champagne or a mixed drink at a wedding, take in a sturdy mouthful of liquor and not make a face. She drank it, held it.

“Don't you look at me as if you never saw a grown woman take a drink like she knows how to. Your grandmother used to come over here some evenings, too, you know, and stay and have a nightcap or two with me.”

He tried to picture it.

“Hazel was a such funny woman. She's the one who encouraged those nights, you know. Long time ago. Said she'd never given a real stab at drinking and that she ought to

give it its chance before the end of things,” she took a sip, and looked out into the distance, her eyes squinting as if she were trying to remember the look of a memory. She finally nodded and said, “She had a good time with it, too, I think. That woman could tell a story.”

Jackson thought back to when he was a little boy sitting at his grandmother’s kitchen table in the summertime, helping her snap her summer beans. His throat tightened and, as he clenched his jaw and tried to swallow deeply, he looked at his mother, whose own chin had begun to quiver.

She blinked her eyes rapidly and finished her drink. She placed the glass back softly on the table, and closed her eyes, biting her lower lip. Jackson looked away and finished his own drink, giving her a moment to compose herself.

She sniffed once and then stood and pushed her chair back from the table. She reached for his empty glass.

“You made it too weak,” she said. “I’ll pour them this time.”

They drank that drink, and then they had another, talking the whole time. He told her about the apartment complex he was working on. He told how the first night he and Joanna had spent in their own apartment one or the other of them had unknowingly kept the bathroom sink faucet on and how that sink had a hard time draining. They woke to a flooded bathroom. His mother told him about the first time she and her husband—who was not yet her husband—drove up to Gatlinburg with his parents and how the car had blown a tire halfway there on the side of the road up in the mountains. Neither Jackson’s father nor his grandfather knew how to change a tire, and she and Hazel had to do it themselves. Hazel had, all in good fun, yelled at her husband and son the whole time,

shaking tools at them and wondering aloud how she'd managed to make a family of inept men and questioning Beatrice's sanity into wanting to marry into that. Eventually a state trooper pulled over, thinking she was a crazy woman straight out of St. Albans getting ready to beat in some heads with a tire wrench. When she told this story, Beatrice stood up and made the same wild gestures that Hazel had made all those years ago, and imitated Hazel's accent in a near pitch-perfect way, but was unsteady and embarrassing on her feet.

Jackson began to feel awkward seeing his mother like this. She'd never been so vibrant and talkative when he and Sheila were growing up. There was something sad about watching his mother's eyes go foggy, hearing her speech get slurred. He suddenly wanted out.

When they finally headed to bed, the sadness struck again as they remembered how awful the next day would be, all those people in all that black, wearing sunglasses at the graveyard as if it were important to protect themselves from the sun. Jackson used the bathroom in the hallway that he and Sheila had shared as kids. None of the tiles or fixtures had ever been replaced, and Jackson was struck by how the things once most familiar to a person can become odd once you return to them. But he found that, if he stood real still, he could almost see himself as a little boy in that bathtub, and as a young teenager standing in front of the mirror trying to shave off a beard that didn't exist, his older sister pounding on the door and calling him names "Two Hairs."

He began to cry. He cried for a long time; he wouldn't have been surprised if Sheila would have come pounding on that door again, telling him he'd been in that bathroom for days. He missed Joanna and wanted to wrap himself around her, to feel her

thin bones pressed against his. He missed his father whose face and movements he had not been able to remember for the past fourteen years, missed the people he'd never met, and he missed the mother who didn't need to drink herself to sleep.

He thought of the things that Sheila had called him when he was younger, names that now sounded like nothing more than the most innocent of insults, nothing more intense than one would find in a G rated movie. But he could remember her voice, furious and high pitched, almost incomprehensible and so unlike her anger tonight.

Remembering that former anger made him laugh; Sheila had been the kind of girl prone to stomping her foot and crying in anger. He made himself laugh because he knew that if he didn't laugh there was a distinct possibility that he'd stay in that bathroom for days.

He washed his face and brushed his teeth. As he left the bathroom, he saw that a light in his mother's room was still on. She was sitting with her back against her headboard with her reading glasses on and an unopened Bible in her lap. Her eyes looked as red as his had looked in the bathroom.

"Try to get some sleep, Mom," he said.

She said, "I'll do what I can."

He stood there in the doorway, just looking at the flowered border his mother had around the top of her room. Every flower matched up perfectly. He'd never noticed it before, and knew his mother had done it all. He wondered if she could ever do it again.

"Well, goodnight," he said, beginning to turn away.

"Oh, honey, I meant to ask you if you saw the lovely bouquet Joanna sent. I don't know if it'll be out tomorrow, but it was just so lovely."

Jackson hadn't, but desperately wished he had. He wished for it so much that he made himself believe he had seen it. "I did," he said. "I hadn't known she was going to, but I do know she was upset she couldn't come."

"What a sweetheart," she said. "I like her better than all the others."

\*

Joanna was waiting in the truck when he came out of the airport. She slid over into the passenger side as he climbed in. She gave him a hesitant smile and told him she was glad he was home. As he drove out of the airport, he pulled her across the seat against his side. She smelled like vanilla and sugar.

"I always knew there was something good about the big seat of trucks," she said.

He headed back to Carterdale. They sat in silence for a while, but it was a completely uncomfortable silence.

"How was everything?" she asked around exit 114, ten miles from their exit. "Are you feeling all right?"

He took a moment before answering. "Yeah," he said. "It wasn't easy, but I'm all right. Your mother came by." He wasn't ready to tell her about what he had said to her mother, but if it was going to come out, he wanted it out.

"Oh, God," Joanna said. "I'm really sorry. I talked to her on the phone after you left, and told her about it. I didn't think she would actually go there."

"She didn't call you after she saw me?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Well, I mean, she did call, but I figured once in one week was enough and just never answered her calls. God, I can't believe she actually went there."

“It was fine,” he said. “She didn’t stay long. She gave me a birthday present to give to you, though, some kind of lotion, but I didn’t realize they wouldn’t let me on the plane with it. They took it at security. I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” she said. “Well, I guess it’s her own damn fault. She should have known I didn’t want anything.”

At the house, she carried in his hanging bag that held his suit. When they walked into their apartment, he took in the beer and wine bottles gathered on top of their kitchen table and counters, and the trash bags piled in the kitchen that were stretched out from more bottles.

“I’m sorry for the mess,” she said. “Some people at work yesterday found out it was my birthday and wanted to come over to celebrate. I told them I didn’t want a big fuss made, but they brought it all over anyhow.”

Jackson kept looking at her as he gripped the suitcase handle. “I’m sorry,” she said again. “I’ll clean up the rest of it, really soon. This afternoon.”

He walked into their bedroom and set his suitcase on the bed. He stood there, looking around. The bedroom looked pretty much the same as how he’d last left it. The same sheets were on the bed, the piles of clothes in the same places along the wall. He felt a mix of relief and anger. Once again he heard her footsteps coming up behind him.

“Jackson?”

“You were so scared when I left,” he said. He couldn’t look at her. “You don’t seem that much now.”

“I know,” she said. “I went to the doctor on Friday.”

He tried to think of something to say, but all he could think of was, “Oh,” and he did not want to say that.

“It’s all fine,” she said. “She just said I didn’t weigh enough.”

She laughed. “So I was all silly and dramatic for nothing. I should have known, really. I mean, I took all those biology classes. I should have known. I’m sorry for putting you through all that.”

He turned to her then, and she was smiling at him, and pushing her hair out of her face. As she walked toward him, her arms held out, the part of him that wanted to tell her to go to hell because he knew she didn’t really need him, would never need him, did not win over the part of him that saw her smiling and knew she would not be leaving any time soon.

## The Day Before She Leaves

Alice doesn't know that tomorrow will be the day she leaves Corey and their airy Boston apartment; it is not something she has been planning. Of course, she's thought about it from time to time, but it's been the kind of fleeting thought that comes when a girl wonders what it would be like to drop everything and run into the middle of the woods and have baby after baby and grow all her own food, or when she thinks—not even for a full second, not really—that she could set out a bowl full of hotdogs and radiator fluid for her awful neighbors' awful dog. It's often in that moment of panic that comes as she's in the middle of a bath, the water turning to an oily, murky chill around her, when she knows, suddenly, that she needs to leave Boston or she will die a painful death that drags on and on. It's a dramatic thing, melodramatic maybe, that's all. A thing that's slunk out the door almost as soon as she's thought of it. It has never been a plan.

She's thinking about what she'll make for dinner as she walks out of the Copley Place mall. It's Friday, it's 3 o'clock, and she's fresh off of work from Victoria's Secret, wearing all black, a pink measuring tape still hanging from her neck. She always forgets that she's wearing it, even when she reminds herself that she always forgets. Her coworkers always let her walk out with it, too. She tries to believe it is all in good fun, that it's just a funny and friendly poke at one of her flaws. Sometimes she wonders if she forgets it willfully, as if by forgetting her possession of the thing that measures other women's breasts, she also forgets that what she does for a living is measure other women's breasts. Or what if it is the other thing—that some part of her wants to keep near her always the thing that finds definitive information about other women's bodies?

Boston doesn't smell very good today—smog and old grease—but she'll take it over her own stale smell of the bouquet of Victoria's Secret perfumes and body mists she's been walking into all day. People had been especially excited to try every sample.

She pauses at the sidewalk, even though the *Walk* has been blinking for five seconds, because there are always those three cars that will want to race to the next red light down Dartmouth Street, where they can sit and honk until the light turns green again. Pavlov's bell. As forgetful as she gets, she never forgets that. As she remembers the things she never forgets, she's reminded of the measuring tape running down her chest. She cusses to herself, a long, vulgar stream of consciousness that would infuriate her parents. About two yards away someone slams on his brakes, and Alice turns her head to the sound and the world almost stops.

She has waited nearly thirty-one years for the world to become this still. All thought comes to a halt. At this moment there is only the immediate world: senseless, awesome, and final. There is an older woman standing just off the curb. And then a sleek silver car, fast, then fading into slow, blurred motion as the front bumper makes contact with the woman's thin body. Shopping bags from expensive clothing stores float up and away, dangle just above the woman's open, raised hands. Then the world speeds to catch up with itself, and the woman blurs until she lands, bumps up, lands again right in front of Alice. Behind the woman, the bags land and roll, tossing out delicate camisoles and an exquisite silk robe that look sad and ridiculous against the dirty street.

It is so like a movie that the first thing Alice does is look around for the cameras, the man with the cut sign, another with a tray of small glasses of water, someone else standing to the edge with a can of hairspray and a brush with its tips powdered pink. She

has one split second to think that this is all for her because why else would she be the only one here without a clue about what's going on?

Then the man climbs out of his car, and other people climb out of theirs. Doors slam and people rush toward Alice and the fallen woman. All Alice hears is *God God God*. Everyone is on a cell phone.

It is just like a movie, just like a lie, how all the other sounds fade and it's only Alice and the woman on the ground looking at each other. She smiles up at Alice with her eyes half closed, her fingers twitching against the asphalt.

"So this is what it's like," she says, and it is just a breath, but Alice hears perfectly.

"What is?" she asks, sitting down next to the woman, folding her legs under her Indian-style.

"Dying," the woman says. "Dying with a stranger next to you."

"Oh, yeah?" Alice asks. "It is?"

Immediately, Alice hates herself. She didn't know what else to say; obviously, she doesn't know what it's like to die at all, or even think she might, and she is kind of curious. Alice isn't sure that the woman is dying, anyway, but she hates herself for thinking that, too. She thinks, *What if this woman heard sarcasm in my voice? What if she dies right here, thinking she's wasting her dying words on a sarcastic bitch?*

"I'm Alice," she says. "I think you might be all right. Really, I do. What's your name?"

The woman whispers, "June. But isn't everything broken?"

Alice looks over the woman carefully, but the truth is that not one single thing looks broken. And there isn't any blood; Alice always thought there was blood in times like these—a dark glittering pool around the head, thin bright streams sliding off in their own directions. And June stares straight at Alice—there isn't the expected foggy gaze toward the sky, none of the harsh and ragged breaths. June doesn't say anything else, but she keeps her eyes to Alice. They are large and exotic eyes, eyes that are meant to keep a man guessing if he is wanted or not, eyes that are never kind enough to finally tell him yes or no. She isn't as thin as she had seemed while flying through the air and tumbling down the street like an elegant, broken doll, but Alice thinks she is beautiful and put together. The thinnest of wrinkles creep out from the corners of those eyes, but they don't help Alice determine if June is older or younger than her own mother.

“I don't think everything is broken,” Alice says. “But don't try to get up or anything because I'm no medical professional. I just sell underwear.”

June doesn't die there on pavement next to Alice. Despite the speed of the car and the smallness and general delicateness of her pitiful human body, June seems fine. Quietly, she lies there until the medics come and push everyone away, snatching the moment, and say June appears to maybe have a few broken bones, and they're going to take her down to MGH to check everything out, but it's a miracle, really, how fine she seems.

Everyone has a lot to say and Alice, climbing slowly back to her feet, hears only small portions of the collective conversation: *It really, really is, just came out of nowhere, stepped so suddenly off and then... Just think! So sorry, miracle, a miracle of*

*sorry Son-of-a-bitch, someone looking out for you up there or what? the only excitement I'll have all week. Sorry sorry sorry. I'm a lawyer and would love to represent—*

June groans. She just looks so tired now. “Oh, Jesus,” she says as medics strap her to the gurney. “I don’t want to think about that. I just want to go home. I don’t want to go to the hospital. I just want my home.”

Then she’s gone, the whole event having taken up less than fifteen minutes of the long, long day, gone in an ambulance that doesn’t even need sirens because everything is so fine, not even an emergency. Today was nothing; it won’t even get a mention in an on-line newspaper. Alice has been pushed aside, doesn’t even get a chance to say goodbye.

Alice, with an aching feeling of uselessness, crosses the street when there are only a few seconds left on the timer. She holds onto the railing as she takes the stairs down into the train station, not even caring how nasty it is, how sticky. She stands in the middle of a swarm of people waiting for the T to scream to a stop, hating herself for not knowing what to say when she seemed needed, for not being the only one there, the one to record the event in a deep place in memory, for not knowing what to have for supper.

\*

On the T, she grips a pole but cannot see her hand, cannot see the hands touching hers, doesn’t know to whom they belong. She couldn’t pull her hand away from the other hands if she wanted to, and she is starting to want to, the longer she stands there thinking about touching people she doesn’t know, and cannot even see.

Her most intense sexual fantasies have been of masked lovers, of finding pleasure in dark rooms. The first guilty kisses of her adolescence happened in the laundry room of her cousin Max’s basement. The twelve seventh-graders at their first co-ed parties had

tried to cram into a closet the couples matched together by dares and bottles and drawn numbers, but the closet was too small and smelled of old people's clothes. The girls had to be cajoled into the laundry room. They were certain the rules called for a *closet*, or at least a place they had never been in before. It wasn't about reappropriating a familiar place for lascivious activities; it was about discovery.

"Then the laundry room is fine," the boys said. "It's new."

"My mom just had it redone," Max said.

The girls hadn't known how to answer that, because the laundry room wasn't that new—how many loads had they been held responsible for?—and they knew it would only get older, so each girl just took a turn in the room with a boy, leaving the lights off for three minutes, leaving the other girls to eye the remaining boys. Alice had been surprised at her boldness that first time in the windowless laundry room, with a boy from another school. At first, the smell of clean linen and dryer sheets had made her uneasy; she didn't think it right to force together the scents of grandmas and moms with those of two anxious adolescent bodies being touched for the first time. But once the boy—she can no longer remember his name, but she knows he wasn't even cute, wasn't the one she actually wanted to take in there—put his shaky hands on her hips, she opened her eyes to the darkness, pressed her lips to his, and nudged him until he took the hint and began to move those nervous hands over her body.

But she cannot turn anything about this ride on the T into something sexual. No one here is interested in anyone else, herself included. She wishes she had better balance, so that she would not be here thinking her hand might as well not be her hand, for all the control she has over where it is, what it grips, when it can stop gripping.

Alice feels a slight tug, and looks down to see that a young child—three or four, male or female, she has no idea; she’s never been very good at determining those things about children, especially unabashedly androgynous children with not a stripe of blue or pink anywhere—has taken hold of one end of the pink measuring tape around her neck. With her free hand, Alice tries to pull it back, but she’s no match for the child’s fierceness and tenacity.

She used to be feisty, Alice did. She feels certain she used to be. She can remember when it was one of her most obvious character traits. In her head, she sees it all—her whole life in movie-flashes, a lush self-narrative. She’d been seventeen and sneaking weekends away, taking the train up to the city from Weymouth with a group of girls to stay with older boyfriends they’d met at clubs and on the Internet. She’d fight with her parents when she got caught, and find a wiler way out the next time. When one or another of her boyfriends had tried to make her do things she didn’t want to do—go down on him, or play Beirut, or go to bed early—she was unafraid to walk around in the dark until he came to find her and apologize, or until her friends sobered up and joined her for the trip back home. Even now, as a child jerks her around by the neck, she sees that as frisky, and no one could convince her that it was as stupid to do then as it is stupid to fantasize about now.

She sees the rest of it, how she’d write it or film it if she could do either of those things: she’d been twenty, fighting with bouncers about why she should be allowed in clubs underage. She’d been vibrant and irritating and successful. She’d had close friends and bitter enemies, what seemed like epic wins and debilitating losses. She partied too much in college and failed classes, and then busted her ass, won department scholarships,

and dropped out, having felt her point proven. She took a couple business classes at a community college, fell in love with Corey, then set her sights on a tenure track position at Victoria's Secret; *I'll be a manager before long*. She thinks feebly, *It could still happen*. She talks to her parents at least once every week and sees them often—she loves them now, they are her friends, they are just a half hour away, still in the house she grew up in. She can catalog her life, and it seems to make sense to her. She thinks it all—her past life, her life right now—seems like it should be right and regular. But she can't remember to take off the pink measuring tape and can't even wrestle it away from a child. She can't think of any points to prove.

She stands still until her stop, staring at a space between her feet, trying to forget about her hand and her ribbon. Once the doors open up at Porter Square, she reclaims her hand and rips the ribbon from the child, who starts screaming. Alice doesn't pause to see if the kid is okay. She's walking toward the exit gate as the train's doors close, the child still screaming, its mother shushing loudly. It is a small victory.

\*

Corey's face makes Alice happy. He is five years younger than she is, an infectious mix of child and man: shaggy hair, dirty tennis shoes, a neatly pressed shirt, and a firm handshake. He does not have a very grownup job—he spends his time collecting memorabilia from decades past, video games and dolls and board games and porcelain figurines, that make people nostalgic for their childhoods, and then he sells it online—but he has a grownup approach to money, having made a lot of it selling Ataris and Cabbage Patch dolls to the wealthy middle-aged and newly retired. He's invested and saved well. He is twenty-seven and not too immediately alarmed by the way business has

slowed down because he never thought the economy would stay steady, never thought there'd be an bottomless pool of customers. He has no credit card debt. He is tender and the most surprising lover Alice has ever had. She feels safe.

Left to his own devices, Corey prefers to eat microwaved meals for dinner, and plain cheese sandwiches for lunch. He still favors the watery beer from his underage-undergrad years. Alice has begun to learn to cook, shopping for rare and odd ingredients, making things for the first time, despite her own proclivity for boxed pastas and foods heavy with high fructose corn syrup, thinking she can take charge in at least one area. She prefers to make things neither of them have ever eaten—or even heard of, where possible—so that the first taste is *the* first taste, their first taste. When things are good, they are very good. Of course, approaching food in this way means that she leaves herself open to many disappointments. Corey is usually a good sport about it and, when something comes out especially awful, he'll heat up the frozen dinners.

She's bent down in front of the open refrigerator, as she's been doing for five minutes, when Corey comes out of his office.

“What's going on, babe?” He kisses the back of her neck and taps her hip three times, just like how she used to tap her dog's rump.

“I don't want to cook anything weird,” she says. “I don't know how to combine any of these things in a way that won't be weird.”

Alice stands up and slams the door. Turning around, she leans against the refrigerator, looks at Corey, and begins to cry. He tries to comfort her, rubbing her head, and her back, pressing her face into his neck.

“You don’t have to cook anything weird,” he says. “You don’t have to cook anything at all. I can just—“

“Goddamn it, I don’t want to eat frozen food either. I just want something that makes sense, and I just want it to be in there now,” she says. “I don’t want the crap my cooking usually turns out to be half the time, but I really don’t want that shit you eat.”

Corey’s eyes go hard for one moment; he opens his mouth and then closes it. Alice’s back and her palms are firm against the door, her chin tilted down toward her chest, eyes steady on his. It is such a brief standoff that it almost isn’t one at all. He touches her shoulder.

“Just go on and do whatever you were doing,” she says, “and let me worry.”

She isn’t planning on leaving Corey. She isn’t planning on leaving their apartment, either, with its high ceilings and updated kitchen with laundry and a parking space. When she leaves tomorrow, she won’t even think about what she leaves behind. She will just be on the train, and then she just won’t be getting off where she usually does. She’ll be amazed at how simple it is, to just not do anything and have all these things end up happening. She’ll keep not doing it until it’s done.

\*

She sets a plate of stir-fried vegetables and a glass of milk in front of Corey. She smiles an apology, and he rubs her hand in forgiveness. Realizing that it is not even five o’clock, she gets up and pulls two of Corey’s cheap beers out of the fridge, because she does not feel like herself, like her own age, if she sits and eats vegetables and drinks milk on a weekend night before it is even five o’clock.

They eat in silence for a few minutes, tilting their heads toward the open windows through which they can hear the comings and goings of the neighborhood. Alice thinks, *It is almost summer, and it is only just now starting to seem like spring. In a few weeks, it will be sweltering, and the sweet weightlessness of this weather will be forgotten. Already—people are already starting to take it for granted; they are not even carrying their lightweight coats anymore, just in case. It is only just now starting to seem like spring and no one is thankful anymore.*

Her downstairs neighbors come outside, letting the door slam behind them, and talk on their first-floor porch under the window; the air is so still that it sounds like they are standing right there in Alice's kitchen. She can hear them inhaling their cigarettes, can hear beer bottles clink against teeth, fingernails scratch against denim. They talk about some drunk girl doing drunk things to another drunk girl's almost-boyfriend.

"And I bet he wasn't drunk at all," Corey says to Alice in a low voice. "He was just trying to get them all riled up." He hasn't touched his beer. Alice hasn't touched hers, either. The bottles sit in little, billowing pools of their own sweat. Soon, Alice thinks, the pools will grow so large that the bottles will begin to float, one centimeter at a time.

"I almost saw someone die today," she says.

The neighbors' dog starts barking, throwing his small, strong body against the front door to be let out. Corey asks questions, *What do you mean, What happened, Where, How, Why, Whoa.*

"What I mean is," she says, "I saw someone *almost* die."

Corey drinks to that, and Alice does, too.

“She was hit by a car—just flew through the air like a volleyball. But she didn’t even end up breaking any bones or anything.”

“Well, that’s good. She’s lucky, then,” he says.

“I guess so. She seemed kind of disappointed, though,” Alice says. “It was like part of her was really excited for it to be something bad—like part of her kind of wanted that to be how she died, getting plowed down by a BMW or a Mercedes or whatever.”

The neighbors yell at their dog to shut up, start kicking against their front door as the animal’s barks reach a fevered intensity, coming out in ragged cries.

“I kind of understand it,” she says. “I can see how it could be disappointing.” Corey raises his eyebrows. “Don’t freak out,” she says. “But I can see it. She thought something exciting was happening to her—even if it was awful, and the end of things, it was something. But then it wasn’t anything, and she was just the dumb woman who sauntered out in front of a rich man’s car and got thrown twenty feet. I don’t think that’s so hard to understand.”

Corey drinks his beer; his glass of milk sits nearby, a lonely finger of watery skim milk fogging up the bottom of the glass. “I don’t know, Ally,” he says, too quietly. He says something else that Alice can’t make out, and she shrugs her shoulders to indicate maybe he ought to try again, or just drop it.

Outside, the volume reaches such heights that they both cringe, and Alice covers her ears. The dog is whining, barking, almost screaming while its owners kick and yell at the door, and people on the street yell at them. It sounds like they are all standing there in the kitchen with Alice and Corey. He gets up and slams the windows closed, then comes back to her, leaning down and wrapping his arms around her from behind.

He raises his voice, competing with the noise outside. “I’d imagine she’s just pretty fucking happy to be alive.”

Alice isn’t thinking that she wants to leave him; she isn’t thinking she wants to leave anything. The things that finally break a person aren’t the ones that happen just before it all finally goes to shit, even though it seems like it at the time. She’ll realize this later, that it’s all in the details. Now, though, she thinks she wishes she liked dogs more, that she enjoyed cooking more, that tomorrow she can remember to leave the damn measuring tape at work.

\*

Most nights, they watch *Jeopardy!* together. They never yell out the answers, but they confer, putting most of their efforts toward the Daily Doubles and Final Jeopardy. They open a window to get a cool breeze going through the apartment, so that they can be chilly enough to be comfortable under the flannel blanket together. Corey slides his hand under her shirt, under her bra, and runs his fingers back and forth over her nipple, making it hard. She doesn’t like how it feels—manipulative, somehow, sneaky—but she doesn’t stop him tonight. The throw blanket has just been washed, and she pulls it tight under her chin, closing her eyes and breathing in the smell of fabric softener. Her breathing deepens, as if she’s waking-sleeping, and maybe she is.

“You sleepin’ over there?” Corey asks, flexing his hand a little around her breast.

“No,” she says, her eyes still closed.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Sex,” she says. “And laundry.”

“How can those two go together?”

She laughs. “That’s what we tried to tell them, that they would go together and then it would always be weird. *No*, they said. *You’re being crazy*. We tried to tell them. Better cramped basement closets and mothballs. How often do we smell mothballs?”

Corey has never heard the story, but doesn’t ask.

“And now how many of us are there, turning off the lights when we go to wash the clothes, getting excited at the thought that someone might jump out at us, and then being disappointed when it doesn’t happen? Maybe smelling mothballs and thinking of sex would be a little weirder, but at least it wouldn’t happen as often. There’s always someone around wearing clean clothes.”

And then Corey wants to have a conversation about how weird sex is, and sexuality, and *so much of it gets developed when people are kids*, and *how weird is that, when you think about it*, and *how unavoidable*, and *what is there to do about it*? “Sex is weird,” he says again in conclusion. “Do you want me to jump you in the laundry closet? There isn’t a lot of room in there.”

With her eyes still closed, she asks, “How come you never ask me if there’s any memorabilia I’d like you to find for me?”

He says, “I guess I didn’t think that there would be anything like that for you. I didn’t want to assume anything.”

“Your entire company is based on assuming people want these kinds of things. Alf dolls and old copies of *Playboy*. Everything you do is based on an assumption that everyone is a nostalgic idiot.”

“No,” he said. “That isn’t true. They aren’t idiots.”

“They want twenty-year-old stuffed animals. It isn’t your fault they want stupid things. We all want stupid things.”

“Is there something stupid in particular you’d like? Whatever it is, I’ll find it.”

Tomorrow, Alice will get herself lost. Then, she’ll come up out of a station, go to a bank, and withdraw all of her money. She’ll take the Chinatown bus to New York City, and then a cab to JFK, and then a plane to the first city she sees listed, and another bus, maybe a bike. It’ll feel like a whim, and it’ll feel easy. In a few days, when people are really looking for her, the clerk will tell everyone *but she seemed fine, she was smiling and joking, everything seemed fine, I didn’t think I was doing a bad thing, she didn’t look like she was going to take off, she seemed totally normal—happy, even*. Before she walks into the bank she’ll wonder to herself if she can do it, just go. And then, she’ll find she can. Then there is just another thing and another and then she’ll be across the country. Connect the dots.

But tonight, on the couch with the man she loves, she doesn’t know what there could be for her to want. She wants the big draping tree she saw once as a kid when her parents took her out for a Fall drive in the country, with a hammock strung between two low and sturdy branches, but that isn’t a thing that can be sold on the Internet.

Already, on the couch, waiting for Final Jeopardy, that glimmer is there, a promise of something. It’s something only her body knows—some kind of animal inside her, no language. But there it is, the part of her that already knows. While that part flickers alone in some dark place, Corey asks her again what it is she wants, she says, finally, “It’s too much of a secret.” She pulls her hand from under the blanket and strokes his soft round face. “But it’s okay, really. I think it’s okay.”

Tonight, in the dark, their sex will turn rough, frantic. Alice will bite Corey's neck, his jaw. After, they'll roll to different sides of their bed, too sweaty to cling to each other afterward, their pinkies touching. In the morning there will be scratches on his chest and light bruises along her hipbones.

"How did that happen?" he'll ask right after, still catching his breath. He'll fall asleep quickly, but she won't be able to sleep. She'll lie there, thinking about that hammock in that tree. She'll think she could find it herself, if she really tried, and promise herself that she'll have it before she dies. She'll swing in that thing, and then be still and half-asleep, sunlight warming her body in leaf-shaped patches.

## Something Lost

I walked down the aisle towards the man my sister would marry in the next hour, holding onto the Danny's cousin's arm only for show. I did not let his arm guide me and didn't feel it as an arm; it was more of a vague limb I held, like a branch of a tree. I knew the camera was watching us all and, to keep the anger at bay, I looked only at Danny, my sister's fiancé. I prayed I didn't look like a woman in love. Danny did not look nervous; he looked only happy. I thought maybe he only looked happy, that he didn't mean it. I was eighteen and walking down the aisle toward him and he smiled his easy, open smile and I looked only at him.

Of course I knew there was something wrong with being in love with him. More than that, I knew on a basic and distant level that he would not love me. I knew, also, that no one could ever know. It was shameful, but it was also exhilarating.

Danny's cousin, DC, squeezed my arm before we took our places on either side of the altar. I'd not planned on looking at him, but that arm squeeze tricked me. He winked at me and I wished I'd not looked. He'd introduced himself to me at the rehearsal dinner the night before, and I would have immediately forgotten his name had it not been a convenient abbreviation for his place in Danny's life, distracted as I was by the fact that DC had Danny's exact eyes, blue and honest and thickly lashed. Over dinner, DC had told me just about everything there was to learn about him, though all I'd heard was that the two had been close growing up, and that Danny had always been an amazing guy, just like a slightly older brother "but really awesome." He told me all about his amazing suite at the hotel where the whole wedding party was staying, where the reception would be

held. He said, “I’m not quite sure how I lucked out so much. I think I just registered too late for a room or something, and I got this huge-ass place with this extra room attached with fluffy chairs and shit.” And then he said, “You should check it out.” As I looked away he stuttered out, “I mean...I don’t mean...come on.”

As I took my place alongside the other bridesmaids, the maid of honor approached, holding her single calla lily. We all stood there with the calla lilies and the teal- and cream-colored bridesmaid dresses and the dangling crystal earrings Cassie had given us and watched my father walk her down the aisle.

It had gone swimmingly, despite the fact that Cassie had to bring in most of her wedding party from the outskirts of the family—she’d lost all of her girlfriends from high school in college. Nothing else had been lost, nothing had been late, everything and everyone arrived just as they were meant to—or as far as we knew, because our parents had hired an outrageously expensive wedding coordinator. The weather was beautiful for Cassie’s beachfront wedding at the resort just south of Myrtle Beach. She had picked a bridesmaid dress that had made each of us look beautiful—the fat one, the skinny one, the one with no chest and the one with too much. We all looked beautiful, and most of us had never, not once, looked beautiful before. People would be talking about the perfection of her wedding for years to come. “Never in my life,” an aunt would say, “have I ever seen something so glorious. God himself did truly bless that couple with that day.”

“His love saved Cassie,” everyone said. Two years ago she’d come home from her junior year of college a failure, a brief shadow, a lost and wandering woman. No one else knew exactly what had happened that year, but Cassie lost a boyfriend, twenty pounds, and most of her tuition. She came home and met the young man who’d just

moved his parents in down the street. Danny was a beautiful boy, calm and sure and good. No one knew what he had done or how he had done it, but they all knew that he had saved her.

My father delivered her to the altar, a canopy of white roses. The reverend spoke of God's love for all his creatures. He spoke of our communal love for this young couple who stood before us, asking us to bless their love, to make it a holy and precious thing. Our presence there with them, these brave children of God, made their love the real thing.

"A love in shadows," the reverend said, "cannot be a real love. A love in secret cannot be a brave love. We are here to sanctify this union, to bring it wholly into the light, to make it brave and true."

The cameras were on us all. There were lots of cameras—a videographer and two photographers; no money had been spared for this day, and many jokes had been made that I'd better elope whenever it was my turn. The other bridesmaids were sniffing, smiling, clutching their hearts. I looked at a spot just above their heads, and saw, instead, a day just over two years ago when I was fifteen and first saw Danny moving his parents' furniture into their new house.

\*

He was beautiful in an obvious way—tall and broad and blond-haired, he moved so easily that it was if it were not that he existed the way he did in spite of his body, but because of it. In other words, I'd never seen anyone truly live inside and own his or her body before. My own almost sixteen-year-old body had never seemed to do what it ought to, and certainly never did anything in line with what I felt. It sweated when I was cold; it shook when I was still and quiet inside my head. When I was confident in what I wanted

to say to someone, or some point I wanted to prove, my tongue always disengaged. I could not talk with my hands; they flopped feebly around and missed all the points entirely. Danny's hands moved purposefully, lifting something, or pulling something else. He talked with his hands only when he had a very important point to make, and his hands talked as well he did.

He had recently graduated from college and, if he was outside working on his parents' yard, would talk to me as I walked past from the bus stop. He would talk to me about books and class, and what I thought about current events that I knew nothing about. I would tell Danny, too, I didn't know what he was talking about, but that I would start looking them up. He began to bring me newspapers and articles to read, and then we'd argue about them and learn things from them. We did that almost every day for the last three months of my sophomore year. We learned where I stood on various political issues. I didn't know what most of it meant, but I figured I learned quite a lot when Danny told me the biggest thing he'd learned all spring was that I was "going to be one hell of a girl. You're going to be the girl who goes to college and talks big fat circles around the seniors in all your classes."

I rolled my eyes and then wished I hadn't put my hair back in a stupid ponytail that day; it made me look fourteen. "Yeah, right," I said. "Even if I do make it all the way through high school without dropping out, I doubt I'll want to go to college." I never mentioned my sister, who had gone to college and had a bad run with it. I never mentioned her at all.

"Well, Lorna," he said. "That would be a really sad thing. See, I knew girls like you in high school, who were way smarter and prettier than they knew. Hell, more than

anyone knew. Those girls become, like ten out of ten times, even hotter and smarter. Everyone notices. And everyone wants them.”

He squinted when he looked at me, as if there were some other point he was looking to make, some question he might ask. He tilted his head and there was a moment when I thought he was looking at more than just my eyes, that he was looking at something that someone might want. But I wasn't sure, so I didn't say anything. I just stood there dangling on some edge between exhilaration and disappointment. I felt like I'd been standing on that edge my entire life. And, though I'd often tilted one way or the other, I'd never fallen all the way off. I'd always bounced back. Nothing ever took me somewhere else than where I already was.

He sighed and something was lost. He said, “And assholes like me, you know, who were popular and stupid in school—well, we just sort of stay that way and those girls just walk on past us.”

I got an inkling of the compliment Danny was giving me, but I wanted nothing to do with those girls who would walk past him. He was twenty-three and knew things about the world that he wanted to share with me, and I believed he could be the thing that opened everything up. I said, “No way.”

“What part do you doubt, Lor?” he asked, and he smiled easily. I could not smile without thinking on it for a long time. “It's all true, I swear. Just get through this part. You're going to be so excited once you see what's just been waiting for you to get to it.”

And then, just like that, the world became fresh and the universe thrummed. I smiled at him and I was excited.

\*

I smiled my way through the kiss and the pronouncement. Holding flowers made it difficult to clap very heartedly, but I gave it my best shot. They sashayed back down the aisle together as a tinny stereo played “Going to the Chapel.” I wouldn’t believe it to be true if it were not for the video that proved it.

I walked back up the aisle with DC.

“Can you believe this?” he asked, tilting his head toward the stereo, and a camera caught me almost smiling. My mother would later put the picture on the mantle.

\*

They announced their engagement just before I graduated high school, almost two years after they’d met, after we’d met. Danny gave Cassie his grandmother’s engagement ring that had, in turn, been her husband’s grandmother’s engagement ring. Cassie sat on the couch for long stretches of time, looking at her hand. Sometimes she laid the hand in her lap, sometimes she held it up, moving the fingers as if she were picking out a simple line on the piano, casting small lights across her face.

“It’s a wonderful thing, isn’t it?” she’d sometimes ask if there were others in the room with her. “The way love works, I mean.”

Once she left the ring on the bathroom counter. I went in after her and saw the thing lying there, glittering and looking important. I thought of touching it, trying it on, but could not bring myself to do it. I slid down to my knees and knelt there eyelevel to the counter. It was not as large as I’d thought, the stone was not as clear as I’d believed it to be. But it was still large, still glittering, still historic and important. I blew at it. It was also strong, weighty.

I stood, covered it up with the hand towel and took my shower.

She didn't panic when she realized she did not have it. She knew where it was; she didn't have to tear the house apart to find it. She knew she would never actually lose the thing.

\*

Joanna was the only girl friend I'd been able to keep to senior year—and we had been friends for ages, since the third grade—but she was not a friend I'd carry with me through college even though we'd both go to the University of South Carolina. I suspected this at the time but couldn't envision how it might happen.

“Do you think Danny and Cassie already slept together?” she asked, pulling an ugly sweater out of my closet and holding it up to her chest.

“Who knows,” I said. “And who cares?” I sat on the bed, doing the daily crossword from the local newspaper, a thing Danny had encouraged I start doing, to get a head start on keeping my mind alert for old age. They'd just gotten engaged and I was cleaning out my closet in preparation for college.

“I'm just saying,” she said. “I'm sure they have. I mean, wouldn't you?”

“Come on,” I said. “He's marrying my sister. Plus, he's almost twenty-six.”

Joanna winked at me over her shoulder, dropping the ugly sweater on the floor and reaching for the next one.

“Whatever,” I said.

“You're telling me,” she said, “that if he came to you, all drunk and sexy, with his sexy eyes and sexy hands that you wouldn't even think of it?”

“You want to know if I would consider being with someone who only wanted me when he was drunk?”

Joanna didn't say anything, just dropped another ugly sweater to the floor.

“I don't hate myself that much, yet,” I said. “And I'm not at all interested in sex.”

“Everyone's interested in sex,” she said, rolling her eyes and turning back to the closet. “I know you're hiding something, Lorna, but I'm not going to push it.”

Down the line, we would not have a dramatic falling out but, rather, a sudden halt of contact. But the truth is that it started that night when I found myself unable to look her in the eyes and tell her either the truth or the lie.

Late one April night, a few weeks before Cassie finally came home prematurely from college, she called. Everyone picked up a phone, though I kept the mute button pressed on my end.

She was laughing and crying all at once, slurring her words.

“Hey, Mom and Dad, what would you do if I were pregnant?”

There was a pause as my parents tried to decide what to say, who would say it.

“Well, sweetheart, do you think you are? You know we love you no matter what,” our mother said.

“As it just so turns out,” Cassie said, giggling, “I'm not, but I thought I might. And I wouldn't have even known who the dad was! Does that make me a slut? You can tell me the truth.”

My father cleared his throat, and Mom said his name in a warning tone.

Cassie said, “I mean, that’s what everyone says, right? I bet you aren’t even surprised. I’m just sitting here, with my hair all falling out, and everyone just watching, watching, watching. I bet you already knew all this. You have all those cameras here.”

I set my phone down—I’d heard a variation this conversation before and now my mother would spend ten minutes trying to convince Cassie that there were no spies or cameras—put on a pair of blue jeans, and went out of my room. My father stood in the hallway against the wall, holding the phone with the mouthpiece in the air, so he could only hear and not be heard. He never saw me leave.

Down the street, Danny was hanging out in the hammock on his parents’ side yard, the ground under him littered with beer cans. I stood by the curb, watching him, until he noticed me.

“Oh look, it’s little Lorna,” he said in a loud whisper. “Come on up here, get out of the road, you’ll get yourself runned over.”

I stood awkwardly next to the hammock for a while, watching him drink beer, then went for it. “Well, move over there, then. I don’t want to stand here all night.”

And there we were, side-by-side, feet dangling over the edge, looking up into the drooping tree.

“Are you drunk?” I asked.

“Do you think I am?”

“I didn’t know you drank.” I wasn’t sure how I felt about it, but I liked being close to him. He didn’t smell very good, but he was so warm.

“It happens,” he says. “But don’t let it happen to you. Don’t you let some drunk asshole get you hammered.”

“Okay,” I said. “I won’t.” We rocked in the hammock for a few quiet minutes before I asked him, “Have you ever called a girl a slut?”

“Never when I felt proud about it afterward.” Then he turned slightly toward me, making the hammock sway. “Why? Did someone call you that? I’ll kill ‘em.”

“Oh, God no,” I said. “Not that. I mean, I’ve never...”

“Never what?”

If someone told me the same story now, I’d laugh at how corny it all was, my first kiss. The kiss itself wasn’t disappointing, even though he tasted like stale beer and quickly stopped, pulling his hand back from my hip like a slingshot.

“Your dad would kill me,” he said. “This is all kinds of illegal.”

“I don’t care,” I said. “I won’t tell anyone.”

He looked into my face, touching my hair, and then looked down my body. His eyes fogged over and he sat up and bolted from the hammock, almost tossing me out. “Sorry, babe,” he said. “Gotta puke.” He went inside, and I waited for him for a while before I figured he wasn’t coming back.

The next time I saw him, I had to remind him that I’d seen him in the hammock. He said he didn’t remember me being there, that he only remembered being very drunk before being very sick. He was embarrassed, and said he hoped he hadn’t scared me. I didn’t tell him anything else.

I still thought of being with Danny, of course, though not in any graphic detail. Once Cassie came home and took him, I still thought of what kind of conversations Danny and I could have in the night, when the lights were off and everything was quiet and still. I wondered if he was the kind of person who needed a light on in the night, if he

needed white noise to fall asleep, or if he slept best in absolute silence and total dark. I imagined what position he slept in, wondered if he sprawled out in the middle of the bed or if he slept curled on his side on the far edge. Did he sleep best wrapped around another person, or did clinging company disturb his sleep? I sometimes imagined him there, and tried to leave him room in my twin bed, pushed a pillow to the side for him to sleep on. I imagined sleeping with our backs touching, imagined curling my body into his. Mostly I imagined the way he'd looked at my face and my mouth that night before his eyes glassed over.

I saw them together once, after they'd been dating for a few months. Joanna had dropped me off after a late movie and all the lights were off in the house. I didn't have my keys, and I figured everyone was asleep, and so went around to the back porch, which was usually left unlocked. I stopped when I saw them up through the porch rails. The only light on was one of the neighbor's floodlights. She leaned against the side of the house, one leg bent with her foot resting against the wall. He was pressed up against her, his right hand under the bottom of her shirt. They talked with their faces close. She said something and Danny laughed, leaned in and kissed her. It was when he slid his hands down from her waist, gripping her hips and pulling them towards his, that I left. I went around to the front of the house and started pounding on the door for someone to come and let me in.

\*

I sat next to DC at the reception. He kept asking me if I was going to get something to drink.

"No, I'm all right," I said, over and over.

“Do you want me to go get you one? I can sneak it past your dad,” he said, as if that were the issue, as if he hadn’t seen my dad pass me a glass of champagne.

“No, really,” I said. “I’m fine.”

He said something about respecting girls who didn’t always get trashed, but encouraged me to give it a try at least once in my life.

“It does you good, you know?” he said. “You have to at least learn what kind of drunk you are.”

Except I already knew what kind of drunk I was—the kind that sat in the corner, getting embarrassed as she watched her roommate turn into an insecure idiot.

“Are you mad at me?” my roommate, Rachel, would ask the other girls in the room. “You know I love you, right?”

I hated that college had been such a disappointment. I’d enrolled in political science classes, and literature classes, never anticipating they’d be filled with nearly a hundred students who never talked about anything. I learned very little but dates and theories and names; I talked circles around no one. Despite all this, I never faulted Danny, but assumed that I’d just heard wrong, not that he’d ever lied to me.

DC asked me to dance. A disco song was playing over the PA, and it was a remix. Cassie danced with the friends she’d had in high school, and when lyrics rhymed something about love with something about sex, her girlfriends laughed and opened their eyes wide at her. In another corner of the room, Danny talked with some older man, seeming to explain how cell phones work. He looked at the phone determinedly before smashing a button with his finger and showing the man. He talked quickly, the man nodding his head and pointing, and a toddler, running in full-speed toddler-circles around

the cheese and fruit table, bumped his head against Danny's hip and fell down. Before he could cry, Danny had grasped him and thrown him up in the air, making him laugh.

"Maybe I'll dance later," I said to DC.

\*

"Can I speak with you for a second?" my mother asked, tilting her head toward an empty conference room.

I followed her and walked to the middle of the room. Everything was smooth, and dimmed; my mother shut the door so lightly it seemed that nothing had happened. The door was so new, the carpet so thick, it did not make a sound as it clicked into place. It seemed there was no difference between open and shut, between here and there, there and not there.

She turned to me. "Are you feeling ill?"

"No," I said.

"Then what's wrong with you, Lorna?"

"Nothing at all. Why?"

"You're behaving rather ridiculously, you know, standing off in corners, smiling horribly for the photographs."

"Mom, come on," I said. "I've never been able to smile for pictures, you know that better than anyone."

"Your sister is too wrapped up in her day to notice, but I've noticed and don't you think other people haven't noticed."

I shook my head.

"People will talk," she said. "If they aren't already."

She stared at me, squinting. She wanted me to say something, I knew, but I did not know what I could say. She stood where she stood, and I stood in my spot, and I wasn't sure what the distance between us actually was. Was it space? Time? Was it merely a matter of a heartbeat, or a breath?

"Look," she said. "I don't know what's been going on with you since you've started college, maybe you've had a breakup, but this is not the time or the place for you to act like a sulking child."

I tried to take a breath, sigh out a laugh. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not being childish. I just don't take good pictures. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to actually be out there. This is your sister's day, and she needs you out there for her."

"She has everyone out there for her on her day," I said. "And I was just out there, too. I've held her dress for her when she had to piss. I'm here, and I'm here in this goddamned dress." I waved my arms in wide sweeping gestures as if that illustrated the dress. "What else can I do?"

"You watch your tongue," my mother said, her voice going sharp, her hands balling up. "You amaze me. This is her day and you, you who mean so much to her, are letting it all slip away. You are going to hate yourself for missing out on this happy day."

I felt something inside me break. Or maybe it swelled. Or maybe it shrunk, but whatever it had been before, it wasn't the same. My stomach lurched, rose, fell, then rose again. I felt a sweat break out onto my forehead. The room got brighter and then, as quickly, became dark. The corners of the room were in a fog. My mother stood there, staring at me, looking for something, her head shaking, her face disappointed.

“A happy day?” I asked, trying to keep still.

“Yes,” she said. “And not just for her, but for all of us. We all should take joy out of a day such as this. This is a gift from the Lord and, yes, it’s a happy day.”

My whole body shook. “No.” I shook my head because I couldn’t not shake it. I stopped breathing because my body could not seem to remember how to breathe. I looked at my mother’s still beautiful face and, in her, saw my sister with her even more beautiful face. It was a face that could have had the world—any world, and it was the face that had taken the one I thought I would have. No, that wasn’t true, I’d never actually believed I’d have that world; it was just the only world I’d ever wanted. And that face that had that world stood there with her beautiful body in her white and beautiful and terrible dress and I could not look away. “No, it is not.”

“It isn’t?” she asked, taking a step forward.

“No,” I said, looking into my mother’s face that was now my sister’s face. “It was supposed to be mine. I saw him first, and it was supposed to be mine. It is not a happy day. It is the worst day, and I want to die.”

The room came back into focus; I pulled in a ragged breath and the sound shot out and then vanished into the plush furniture. All was still. My mother’s face was still, her eyes narrowed in thought. She tilted her head the other way, and looked hard at me from that angle. Seconds passed, the longest seconds, longer than any seconds I’d spent with Danny in the years since he’d met her. I tried to breathe again, tried to make it look like I was not trying to breathe, trying not to make a sound, as if by being still and silent it could all be taken back.

“I see,” she said. With a smile almost on her face, she took a few steps closer, her dress sliding over the carpet, and stopped about a foot away. I didn’t move. I couldn’t move.

“I see,” she said again, so low it was hard to hear, so low it was almost a sigh. And then she said, louder, “You’re mad because she married your first crush.”

“He wasn’t my first crush. He was my first—“

Her eyes widened. “Your first what?”

“Nothing,” I said quickly.

There was a cough from the doorway. A great aunt stood at the doorway. “I’m sorry,” she said, pulling the door shut. “I thought there was a bathroom.”

I stared at my feet as my mother said, “Oh, Aunt Myrtle, I’m so sorry. There’s a restroom right down the hall.”

When the door slid shut again—it seemed much louder this time—my mother looked at me, lifted her hand towards me, as if to slap me or stroke my face. Then she dropped her hand and moved closer to me. She wrapped her arms around me, pulled me into her hair. She and my sister wore the same perfume.

Her face close to my ear, she squeezed tight and said, “Don’t worry.” She said, “I won’t tell anyone.”

I could have told her the truth, but the truth that she already knew was bad enough and, in that moment, I hated her for getting it out of me as much as I hated myself for telling it.

She stepped away from me and went to the door. As she opened it she said, “I wouldn’t come out to see them away if I were you. If she ever asks, I’ll tell her you were too buried in the crowd to find you for the pictures.”

I did not watch her leave. I stood there with my hands clenched at my sides, my wrists sliding against the silk of the exquisite bridesmaid dress, my jaw trembling. I knew then that I would always be looked upon with disappointment and suspicion whenever I came home for family gatherings, whether I came alone or with a man. My mother would seat me far away from Danny at dinners, would never leave me alone in a room with him. When I got married, she would look upon me with relief and pity—relief that I’d been able to bury something, pity that I was marrying someone who was the exact opposite of what my sister had.

I thought, too, that maybe someday she would be too busy to notice where I was sitting, or that it would become some family joke. *Do you remember the time when Lorna couldn’t stop looking petrified toward the door Danny had just gone out of, as if she were scared he’d never come back?* And, knowing it could go one way or the other, I couldn’t decide which was the more depressing outcome.

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DC was resting against the wall close to the archway, holding a full glass of wine. I reached for it and he let me draw it from his hand.

“You’re in the mood for celebrating now?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“That’s more like it,” he said, picking another full drink off the closest table.

The room came to a hush when my sister stood in the middle of the room, clinking her champagne flute with a spoon.

“Danny and I just wanted to thank you all for being here with us today,” she said, beaming. “We believe that a love like this can’t become real until those most important to us are here to see it on its way.”

There were calls of “Hear, hear!” and “I’m just here for the booze!”

She laughed and said, “I promise this isn’t going to be one of those tacky, drunk-bride speeches.” Someone in the crowd said, “That’s the only reason I came!”

“We just want to say thank you,” she said. “Thank you so much for coming to help us celebrate this special thing—even if you did come just for the booze, we feel infinitely blessed to be in your presence on this day.”

She looked around the room. “Love can save us,” she said, looking at Danny, at our mother and father. “It really can.”

Everyone raised their glasses and cheered. My mother caught my eye from across the room, and I looked away quickly and clinked my glass against DC’s.

\*

As the couple prepared to leave the reception to catch their plane, DC and I hung back against our wall as guests started filing out, some still holding wine glasses, wet beer bottles, or both.

“Don’t you want to go out there?” he asked. “Blow some bubbles?”

“We could,” I said. “But there are so many people out there, they wouldn’t see us anyway. I doubt we’d even make it in the pictures.”

He looked at me, a small smile, pulling in his lower lip to wet it. He moved along the wall closer to me until his shoulder was against mine, his chest turned towards me.

“All right,” he said.

We looked at each other for another moment. I tossed my head and drank the last bit of the wine I was holding. When I looked back at him, he had not moved.

I twisted my shoulders and looked away. “Well,” I said. “I guess you could show me that fancy room of yours.”

“I could do that,” he said, still nodding.

He took a bottle of wine from a table and slid his other hand to my back. He smiled a wide, easy, toothy smile that made my heart ache, and led me out of the room.

\*

We tried to sit in the plush chairs in his sitting room, but soon realized that it was just too much, too fancy, too intimidating. Then we sat on the edge of his bed, holding our delicate glasses from the hotel bar and finishing the bottle of wine. I can't remember what his major was, but I remember that he was going to be finished that semester. He said, with a few exceptions, that college had been some of the worst years of his life.

“I don't want to scare you, though,” he said as he leaned back on one elbow.

“Because those exceptions were just so good. And maybe it'll all work out to be some of the most average years of my life. Who can complain with that?”

The way he leaned there, the way I was turned toward him, the more I thought that this was how this sort of thing happened, two people acting obviously nonchalant. And, because of that cooperative indifference, the thing itself became all the more certain, all the more important simply because it had to happen but hadn't yet happened.

It was merely a matter of being the first one to move, I thought. *Perhaps this is how life just works—two bodies close together, a curiosity, something that makes your heart race and your breath become shallow.* I didn't know yet all the things in life that could cause that reaction.

I leaned down toward DC and kissed him. We dropped our glasses and we lay on our sides on the bed. I unbuttoned his shirt and he kissed my collarbone. When I unzipped my dress, he pulled away from me.

"I think that would be a bit much," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, *wedding, alcohol, family* members who know each other."

I sat up, pulling my dress around me and zipping it back up, and then started to cry, though I tried to be quiet about it. And my goddamned dress got watermarks on it.

"Oh, god," he said, sitting quietly beside me. "I'm sorry."

I shook my head and thought about pressing my fingers to my forehead, or temple, as if trying to ward off a headache, or an aching heart, but didn't do either.

"But I'd still like to sit here with you," he said. "And it isn't that I don't want to touch you."

He reached out for my elbow, and I let him pull me back down to the bed. He talked some more about school, but all I could hear was *most average years of my life*. He finally kissed me again. Then he pulled his shirt off.

"Just because we can't do it all doesn't mean we can't do anything," he said. "Are you all right with this?"

I wasn't all right with something, but I couldn't name it.

“No, this is just right,” I said.

Now that all that was out of the way, DC seemed much more into taking my dress off. But nothing happened; it was all soft and slow and so much of *nothing* that it might as well have been just close-ups of eyes and lips. I didn’t feel anything from any of his kisses or his touches, and was so entirely bored. It finally died down when DC admitted that he was too drunk to have sex. I lay there next to him, wanting to hate him, or maybe love him—or at least *want* him—but I was only confused. *This is how it is, then*, I thought. *This is how it works out*. And it was a different sort of world opening this time around, a different movement of the universe, but it was there. *Once you see what’s just been waiting for you to get to it*, he’d said.

DC rolled off the bed and went into the bathroom. To this day I don’t know why I didn’t leave right then, why I stayed in that bed rather than getting up the same second he did, but I guess it happened that way because I just didn’t know that leaving was an option. And the bed was warm and the covers were over me. And because I felt there was still something else to do, to say.

Back in bed, DC started to laugh next to me. And if it had been a normal situation—sitting in a car with someone, or in front of the television, or at kitchen table—I could have asked him why he was laughing. I didn’t think he was laughing at me—I didn’t believe anyone could be that heartless to laugh at someone who’d gotten naked with him and was still next to him—but I also couldn’t think of one single thing a person could have found funny at that moment.

“Sorry,” he said, as if I’d looked at him with an arched eyebrow, or had even asked him why he was laughing. “It’s just kind of hard to believe, you know?”

“Yeah,” I said, though I had no idea which thing he was talking about. “It is.”

“I just think it’s kind of amazing to think about Danny actually marrying someone. You have no idea what he was like just a few years ago. Dude was nuts. He used to tell girls he was gay just make them want to straighten him out. And it worked almost every time. I think he just picked the dumb ones. Or at least the drunk ones.”

I couldn’t imagine Danny doing anything like that. It was just too pathetic.

“Oh, God,” he said. “Don’t tell your sister or anything. She’s really been good for him. I’m sure he isn’t like that anymore. Why else would he get married, right?”

“I’m not so sure he’s the one who got the best end of the deal,” I said. “It isn’t like she’s some kind of savior.” And then I said horrible things about my sister; I told DC about her nearly flunking out of school, about her calling up at one in the morning and crying on the phone for hours and hours about nothing, about all the medicines she was on and off of. I told him about she would sometimes drop off the radar for a while, and then call me up and just laugh like a crazy person. I told him that she stole from our parents, and our grandparents, that she had killed animals when she was growing up, that she’d once tried to drown me in the bathtub. Not all of those things were completely true.

Once I stopped talking, DC looked very sympathetic and said he would have never suspected that Cassie went through all that.

“She seems so happy and well-adjusted,” he said. “She must just be really strong to have bounced back from it all. Or maybe Danny is that good for her.” I felt worse.

He said he’d still like me to stay the night with him, that he thought there wasn’t anything nicer than having somebody next to you in the night, and that he really liked me and that, “Maybe in the morning we could...” In his sleep he wrapped his arms around me

and pulled me against his chest. It was hard to get away; every time I moved he gripped me harder. I would get one arm off, and the other was suddenly stronger. I would pull one hand away and, as I tried to get the other off, the first would find a new place to hold on to. I finally slid long-ways down his body and out of the covers at the foot of the bed. Once I was upright next to the bed he did not seem to notice. He sighed and turned over.

My bridesmaid dress was in some corner of the room. I felt around for it in the dark and pulled it on. I had lost an earring, the bridesmaid gift. I stood there a moment, and felt like a drunk, old, sad woman. I fantasized I was an old sad drunk in a tiny French café, wearing a ruined fur coat, drinking liquor straight.

I realized I could not yet be that old woman and so I took the stairs up two flights and let myself into the room I shared with a cousin. Caroline was not there; there had been talk of going with the rest of the wedding party to more bars downtown. It was likely Caroline would spend the night with one of the groomsmen. It was likely she would marry one. A large number of the women in our family met their husbands at other peoples' weddings—one of her sisters, her mother, my mother, so many cousins. It was just a matter of statistics.

I stood in the middle of the room in my exquisite dress, letting my wrists slide over the silk. My shoulders smelled like Danny's cousin's deodorant, and my collarbone smelled like his mouth. My hair smelled like someone else's perfume.

I went into the bathroom and ran a shower. I threw up in the sink and brushed my teeth with my finger. I stood in the shower in the dark, in the exquisite dress that didn't belong in water, and washed my shoulders and my collarbone and my hair with the hotel soap. I turned off the water and left the dress in the shower.

I lay down on the hotel bed and pulled the scratchy thin comforter over me. I smelled like hotel soap and I thought about sacred things. He had been my secret in the night; he had been what I fell asleep to. Though he had been hers, no one had known that in the night he had been mine. Before that night I'd thought he had been the sacred thing. But I knew then, in that hotel bed, that he wasn't it, that it had been the secrets all along. Now that they were gone, no matter what new secrets I would later find in life, no matter what might become mine—no matter what, the night would always be a lonelier place.

## **The Assistant**

Leslie Tearose was 29, single, an organizational maniac, and desperate to be named Employee of the Year. And not just any old Employee of the Year award—she had won the title at her branch for two years running—but Employee of the Year of the entire company, the entire country. She felt her life was getting out of control and she wanted—needed—something to help put things back in the right places.

She'd just come back to work after spending three weeks helping her mother try to make her dying grandmother as comfortable as possible. Her mother—who was in the best health of her life—had insisted that her own mother should be able to die wherever she wanted. The last three weeks had been some of the most horrific Leslie could ever have imagined. She had never thought that it would be easy to cater a death, but she had never imagined that dying of cancer would be so loud and so messy. She'd come back immediately to Columbia after the funeral.

Her desk was covered in stacks of papers, though someone had taken the time to put the papers in tidy piles. She was the main administrative assistant to a local branch of a national real estate company, and had been so for three years. She had become an integral part to the company, and she knew this because that is what the boss had said the last two years when he presented her with the branch's Employee of the Year award.

Behind her desk, she had her wall covered with spreadsheets, and various charts that were meant to help the real estate agents and the managers keep track of sales, rentals, and progress on deals. She had single-handedly invented a system that made her the glue of the entire branch. On her first day back, she settled in, organizing the piles of

papers, updating files and folders: things that were finished, things that were unfinished, things that were just begun.

Leslie had the honor of being the third generation of women to kill off a family name. Her grandmother had been born a Cupp, a dirty southern family in which none of the boys lived long enough to father any legitimate children, and had married the last in a line of Barrys. She'd had two girls. Leslie's own mother had successfully ended the Tearoses. Her parents had split up, but not before Leslie's mother had gotten her husband to get himself fixed.

Her grandmother, while still in good health, would occasionally say to Leslie, "You know, they can do all sorts of things now, with giving single women children. You could do one of those in virtue things, and have a boy so that your daddy has a male to carry on his name. You don't have to be like your mom and me. You can be different." Leslie knew that she was being utterly serious, and her grandmother would not listen to her when Leslie tried to correct her pronunciation.

"That can't be right," she said. "That doesn't even sound like English. No, they call it in virtue because it's *virtuous*. It's for women like you, virtuous women, doing the right thing."

Neverminding that, of all the generations before hers, Leslie had the least amount of desire to have children and, while she liked her name, she felt no attachment or loyalty to the father it had come from. Her parents had separated when she was very young, and the times she'd heard from her dad since then had no rhyme or reason to them.

As Leslie sat color-coding leads to hand out to agents, Peter, one of the managers, came over to her desk, guiding behind him a small, red-haired girl who looked just a few

years younger than Leslie. The girl was lovely, with a tiny yet sharply featured face—a pointy nose, defined lips, dramatic eyebrows—that made Leslie feel uncomfortable. The girl was dressed in brand new clothes that Leslie knew had to have been pulled directly off of the rack advertising BUSINESS CASUAL COME AND GET IT: thin khaki pants that were already wrinkling at the crotch, and a pin-striped button up shirt that still had perfect creases down the arms.

“Joanna,” Peter said, “this is Leslie Tearose, who I was telling you about. She’s the one who keeps it all going. She’s going to make you feel right at home.”

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Joanna knew she was dressed exactly like someone who had never had a real job before—which wasn’t that far from the truth—and she couldn’t stop feeling horrible about it. She’d almost turned around and gone home, instead of going in for her first day on the job, a day of introductions and smiling too much. A few weeks ago she’d seen the ad for “Assistant to Administrative Assistant” on Craigslist, and got excited by the idea of having an even less serious job than what she had anticipated finding. She’d been interviewed by an attractive 30-something manager, being told all about the woman she would be helping, a woman who was currently out of town because of a mysterious family emergency. She knew before she walked out of the office that the job was hers. She just wasn’t sure why.

All she wanted was something easy; she’d just moved back to South Carolina from Alabama, having reached the messy and yet still utterly anti-climatic ending of a relationship. There at the end both she and Jackson were saying the kinds of things heard in movies:

“I really do wish the best for you.”

“I regret the day I first saw your face.”

“It isn’t you. It’s—“

“Stop. Just stop. I’ll throw up.”

“I just need to find out who I am.”

“One day, you’re going to wake up and realize...”

No one was right, and no one was wrong. They were both the good guy, and the bad guy. They were reciting the same lines back and forth, with only sporadic moments of clarity thrown in that got further apart. In the end, Joanna hadn’t even felt like a human being. She took money from Jackson and hauled herself back to Columbia, where she’d gone to undergrad, to stay with some friends. When she applied to be an assistant to an assistant, all she wanted was something that would help her begin to feel like a human being again.

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“Peter, I just don’t understand.” Leslie thought she was going to have an asthma attack, and she had never had asthma. But she was certain her chest was going to cave in on itself, or burst out of itself, or do something, and she was pretty sure she had read about this happening to people who were getting ready to have an asthma attack, or die. “I thought I was doing everything fine.”

Peter’s office was a man’s office taken straight from some catalog: dark browns, strong woods, paintings of majestic wolves. Leslie had once admired and been intensely attracted to the type of masculinity that Peter’s office projected onto him, but after having

an assistant thrust upon her, she wanted to tear it down, tear him down. All she could do was think to herself how *stupid* paintings of wolves were.

“You’re doing everything great. Joanna is only here to help you,” Peter said, sitting behind his desk—blocky and important looking—smiling at her. “After what you went through the past few weeks, I thought you would appreciate this.”

She had only made Peter pleased for three years. Three years of met deadlines, of exceeded expectations, coming to work early and leaving work late. Three years of no sick days, no complaints—there had been the one time that someone had rearranged all the papers on her desk and all the charts on her wall, but Peter had hunted down those people and fired them—and for what? She’d worked here for three years, and only just within the last year begun to call Peter by his first name (though everyone else already did). She had to take care of someone dying and she was being punished for it?

All she wanted was for things to work, and she wanted to be integral to the process of making things work so that people would view her as good and important. Leslie faded under confrontation and criticism. She always heard the negative and she was terrified of people who had power over her. All of her report cards from Pre-School on said the same things, and Leslie had been working on her issues for years, repeating mantras and leaving herself positive notes around the house and convincing herself that other people were far too busy to worry themselves over her every little flaw.

“Of course I appreciate the thought,” she said, finally. “But I really am fine. I really don’t need any help. It’s all second nature to me now; I wouldn’t know how to break it down for an assistant, anyway.”

“Leslie, the truth is that when you were gone we got kind of lost there for a while. And for a company as large as this, we simply can’t let everyone take on all the work that you have. Everyone has to start pulling their own weight again—everyone except you, of course,” he said. “You have to give some of yours up.” He sat and looked at her for a minute, and Leslie tried to keep her body still. “All of us just want to help you,” he said. “These past weeks had to have been hard for you. No one could just come back to work after that.”

Leslie knew he was just trying to sound nice; she knew what he was really trying to say, or she thought she would know soon enough. She just sat there, nodding, smiling, the weight of his words in the back of her own throat.

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Leslie had not spoken with her mother in over a year when she called up to ask for help. They’d not had a falling out; they had just simply stopped talking, had seemed to have just faded from each other’s lives as if they were mere acquaintances, or roommates whose lease had finally run out.

But Leslie’s grandmother needed help dying, and her mother couldn’t do it all on her own. “I know I shouldn’t be asking you,” her mother said. “And I won’t ask you for help ever again—I mean it. I just can’t sit there all by myself waiting for her to die.”

Leslie didn’t even consider saying no. She’d gone to Peter, who seemed surprised to learn that she even had family members.

“It’s just something I have to do,” she said. “I know it’s a lot of time to ask off, but I haven’t taken vacation or sick days since I’ve been here.”

She'd been ready to threaten to quit, knowing that Peter wouldn't let that happen, but it hadn't come to that. She'd met her mother down in Beaufort the next day, and sat with her for three weeks, just watching someone die.

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Joanna was happy she got her own desk, at least, and her own corner. She'd worked before in places, all stuck out in the middle of everything, everyone being able to watch her. She hated being stared at, especially when she knew that she was so much on display (the very front register at the Dollar Store, for example) that a person couldn't help but stare—just like a person can't help but watch the TV that is on in the room, regardless of how disinterested the person might actually be in whatever is on. It was accidental staring; no, if she were going to be stared at, she wanted people to have to work to be able to stare at her. And that was why she was first so tickled to get her own desk in a corner.

But she could not figure out Leslie's system, and she was always being corrected. She didn't tag things correctly, or highlight things the right way, or file stuff in the right order. Even after she started trying to get it right, double-checking everything, she was still told she was doing it wrong. She was beginning to suspect that Leslie was changing the rules on her, but then she thought that couldn't be possible.

"I mean, right?" Joanna asked her roommate, Claudia. "A person wouldn't come up with this amazing system, or whatever, and then fuck with it just to mess someone else up, right?"

"A person would do anything, especially if she were scared."

To Joanna, Leslie looked like a woman who had gotten her act together. Joanna was almost twenty-six and felt like she had nothing to show for it but some worthless Bachelors degrees and awards for stupid things like “Best in Bunny Hop ‘94” and the time she came in third place in her fourth grade geography bee. Leslie had a job where people took her seriously, and nice clothes—not expensive, trendy clothes, but clothes that looked clean and good on her. People came to her with questions, and she was right around Joanna’s age. Joanna, who had yet to be asked a serious question.

Sure, there was the time that Jackson had sort-of asked her to marry him, but even that hadn’t been put in the form of a question (“Maybe we should start saving up money. You know, for like a ring or something.”). And as she was growing up, people often asked her what she was going to do with her life. A serious enough question, but not one that could actually be taken seriously. But when someone came up to you and wanted to know about the status of the Denisfold deal, and what else needed to be done—that was a serious question. Those were the questions that Joanna suddenly wanted to know the answers to.

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Sometimes, Leslie would still wake up to moans—agonized moans, or the sound of her mother trying to cry quietly in the bathroom, the stress of it all getting to her. Her grandmother was falling out of bed, rolling around too much in her sleep, crashing with the weight of a log to an old pine floor. The frail woman moaning feebly from her bedroom. The house was so shut-in, so dark—the blinds were always drawn, the lights always dim for the old lady’s eyes. Leslie would wake up in the quiet of her own house—clean, light, organized, and entirely *hers*—and be unable to go back to sleep, the quiet

was so loud. She'd bought the house through her company, and loved it from the moment she saw the single badly-lit picture of its living room on the MLS website. It was the calmest, quietest, and safest place she knew. Yet, after a week of being back in her own home, reorganizing all her closets and pantries, she had to turn the television on before she could sleep the night through. She would often still wake up. Even after a month, it hadn't gotten better.

It was nearing the end of the summer, and the end of the season for her company. Everything started over again in September, which is when the college kids began their new leases. She knew she had been doing a good job, had been staying on top of things, but she was still worried about not being chosen for the award. These days, it was all that was grounding her, that award. It didn't even come with a check—just a plaque for her desk, another for the office, and her name being sent out to all the people in the entire company. Her mother called infrequently on her own, and rarely returned her phone calls. She had few friends because the truth was she lived like an old lady: going to bed early, eating dinner early, hardly drinking. Deep inside her, she knew that the award wouldn't change anything; on a soley intellectual plane she knew that she needed to do something else. But it didn't matter. She wanted what she wanted.

And she felt passionately that Joanna was keeping her from it. The girl never came in early, and never left late. And she always seemed happy, or easy-going, at least. She did what was required of her—the menial tasks that Leslie gave her, making copies, re-filing years' old paperwork, shredding—but asked for nothing else to do. Leslie felt it took her hours to explain to Joanna the simplest tasks, that the girl was just barely there. Despite all this, however, everyone else seemed to like her, seemed to light up around

her. Peter was clearly a big fan; he was already joking around with her, sending her across the street to pick up coffee for everyone.

“How you doing today, Leslie?” he’d ask her on his way to Joanna’s desk in the corner. “Everything going all right?” Then he’d stay and talk with Joanna for entire minutes about who knew what—Leslie would try to find a reason or a way to eavesdrop on them, but always got afraid of what she might actually hear.

Everyone was just asking her pointless questions, questions that didn’t even deserve answers. She blamed her mother, blamed Peter, blamed Joanna, but mostly her mother. Everything had been fine and now it was all shit—and her mother wouldn’t even return her phone calls to try to make up for the fact that everything else was broken. She tried to think of a new way to doing her filing, a new way to be important, and could come up with nothing. She wasn’t slacking on the job; she was just doing the same thing, and then going home to the same house, cleaning the same dishes, doing the same laundry, watching reruns of the same shows and digging her fingernail into the same place in her palm, day after day.

One Friday, Joanna came up to her desk with a box of donuts. “Thought you might like one of these,” she said. “They were making them fresh when I went in, and Peter said to get whatever.”

Leslie began to shake her head, but saw Peter watching them from the front of the office and felt on display. “Sure,” she said, taking the most disgusting one she could find—something dripping with frosting, oozing bright red jelly from its sides. “This looks really delicious.”

“I’ve often wanted to ask you why you got into real estate,” Joanna said, looking awkward but sincere.

“Well, I’m not really in real estate,” she said. “I just try to help make life easier for real estate agents. I guess I’d be doing the same kind of stuff at any type of office.”

“So you just fell into it? Did you want to do anything else?”

Leslie couldn’t find a napkin to put the donut on, and kept holding it, watching the jelly begin to shake and tremble as it struggled to hold together and stay within the donut. It would lose, she knew. It would fall, squeezed right out of that vulgar-looking hole—she hated snack foods with holes in them, with cream and jelly and cheese and whatever else crammed in. What could she say to that question? Why wasn’t anyone asking her the questions she could answer?

What did it matter what else she might have wanted to do? When she was younger, she wanted to be an Olympic gymnast, ignoring the fact she was not at all flexible and much too tall. Then she’d had fantasies of being an actress, except she hated drama class, hated people yelling at her to do stuff over again, hated the idea of having to constantly try out for things, knowing that even if she had been accepted once she could always be—*would* always be—rejected down the line. She’d thought of being an FBI agent or of teaching English to little kids in foreign countries. What did it all matter?

Joanna kept on. “I mean, I’ve done a lot of things, a lot of dumb jobs, and I guess I just never knew how to find something that could matter. I never learned how to *let* things matter, I guess. Like, I thought school mattered and stuff like that, but there are other things that can be important.”

Leslie went ahead, pressed her thumb down, smushing it into her palm, sticky sugar dripping everywhere. “Oops,” she said. There was just so much to clean up.

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*What we are looking for are employees who move beyond themselves—we’re not looking for the person who has stayed the latest, or just taken on the most work. Our goal is to honor those who inspire those around them—and that can be anyone, in any position. When you send in your nominations for Employee of the Year, take this into consideration: Who do you look forward to seeing when you come into work? Who pushes you and those in your office to be a better person? Who struggled under something and still managed to pull through and give us a hell of a year? We can’t wait to read about all our fantastic employees all over the country!*

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The office was built not entirely unlike her grandmother’s house: dark brick, a wide front porch, a welcoming front room, a small and homey bathroom (though with the shower converted into a large storage space). What would have been the bedrooms along the sides had been converted into private offices and conference rooms: what might have once been a study, a nursery, an art studio. Who knew? Near the rear, several rooms had been gutted to become one large room with several desks, with Leslie’s desk right in the center. She’d often imagined that where she sat had once been someone’s dining room. But maybe she had it all wrong. Maybe it had never actually been a house; maybe it had just been built to resemble one.

She kept checking her e-mail for the announcement. *Congratulations! You’ve been nominated as THE BEST.* But it was never there, and the date and come and gone

and who knew who had gotten it, and the air conditioning kept failing, and the lights were getting dimmer and, always, the remembered smell of shit and piss and death kept waking her up. She adopted an abused cat to keep her company, became obsessed with how often it went to its litter box.

Something seemed to have switched in Joanna: she was suddenly awesome at everything, motivated, good-natured, an Answerer of Questions. Even her clothes were better. After just six weeks, people were beginning to call her *Little Leslie* and Joanna didn't seem to mind. She kept complimenting Leslie, admiring her, bringing her snacks.

"Is there anything else I can do?" she asked all day long. "Or any larger job I can help you with?" The answer always no, everything here is good.

"Thanks, though," Leslie said. "I'll let you know when something comes up."

She decided to visit her mother who lived an hour and a half away, who she had not spoken with in nearly two months. She knew she probably shouldn't take any more time off, and that her mother would most likely be fine, but went to Peter early Friday morning anyway.

"I think my mother needs me," she said. "I'm kind of worried because I haven't heard from her in a while and with everything that's happened..."

He was so understanding, it made her feel terrible. "Of course," he said. "We're all good here. Take all the time you need."

"I'll come in tomorrow, to catch up," she said. "You know, if everything's fine. I won't need a lot of time, otherwise. I'll come right back."

She was getting ready to pull out of her parking spot when Joanna banged on the passenger-side window, breathing heavily. She rolled down the window.

“Can you drive me to the gas station up the street?” Joanna asked. “I need some oil for my car. It’s such a piece of shit.”

“I was going out of town,” she said.

“That’s fine, I’ll just walk back. If you could just get me there.”

It didn’t make any sense to Leslie, but she didn’t really care. She shook her head and unlocked the door. “Whatever,” she said. “I’ll bring you back.”

“So, where are you going to?” Joanna asked. No, *if you don’t mind me asking*.

“Up near Greenville,” she said after a moment. “To see my mom.”

They rode the next few blocks together in silence. She would have liked to have put down her window for some fresh air, but it was early August, and as hot and sticky as a workingman’s armpit. She pulled into the first gas station, and pulled up to the door.

Inexplicably, Joanna asked, “Would you like me to ride with you to your mom’s?”

And just as bizarrely, Leslie nodded and pulled on through, headed over the river, down Huger Street, to the Interstate.

\*

Not since college had Joanna tried so hard to please someone, especially a woman. In college, she’d been attentive to office hours, bringing rough drafts of papers, questions and concerns. *Do you think it would be all right if I...* Whatever finished the sentence, it was something that showed her to go above and beyond, though she hadn’t realized it. She had been just so scared of disappointing someone, of not getting it right. She would stay late awkwardly after class, willing herself the courage to say *thank you thank you thank you*, ending up feeling like a crazy person.

She didn't know why she wanted to be around Leslie so much; she was almost certain the other woman hated her, but since Leslie never came right out and told her to go away, she kept at it. And when Joanna had seen her just sitting there in her shiny hybrid, her hand on her head as if she had a splitting migraine, she couldn't help but run to the car to ask to be let in.

Around the office, she'd heard the stories. After work, grabbing drinks with co-workers (Leslie never, ever there) being painted pictures of the differences between the *before* and the *now*.

"As far as anyone else knows, all she did for three weeks was stay in a house in the middle of Bum Fucked Egypt with an old woman dying of cancer," Peter said. "And then she just came back here after the funeral, like nothing had happened. My heart would break for Leslie, but the woman won't let anyone do anything for her."

Joanna liked the music that Leslie listened to: soft pop that made driving in a car feel like an experience. She felt like they were in a commercial for something, but wasn't sure what it could be advertising.

"Sometimes I hate her," Leslie said. "My mother, I mean. I just keep asking myself what the hell she was thinking when I went down there. And then I have to think that maybe she did it because she loves me, because she wanted to show me something about myself, that I can take care of people or be a real human being or something."

Joanna was glad they were on their own sides of the car, and that neither of them could see the other's face.

"But she doesn't love me," she went on. "We both know that. I keep remembering that. And then I think, what the hell was I doing? What did I think I was going to

accomplish going there? I thought I was just going to help her get through that, but it didn't work. Her mother died and it doesn't make any difference that I was there. Maybe I thought I'd show her that I care. It certainly didn't work, and now here I am."

Joanna said, feeling as awkward as she had felt in front of her favorite professor, "I think I know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I imagine you do. I'm sure they all do. And they all keep thinking I'm going to crack or something, because I saw an old woman die, and I kept thinking they were just being condescending. I don't know, now. All I know is that she won't return my calls. I keep thinking she's going to be dead. Even though she looks better than someone half her age—you've never seen a healthier-looking woman—it's all I can think about."

"Are you okay?" Joanna asked, turning toward Leslie.

Joanna knew Leslie wasn't okay, but also knew she wouldn't say so.

"Peter sent you out to ride with me," Leslie finally said, and Joanna didn't deny it. She pulled off at the next exit and parked at the first gas station. "I'm just so tired. I'm just too tired."

"We can go back to Columbia," Joanna said, and Leslie nodded. "I'll drive, and you can rest."

\*

At the last moment, the crucial moment when her grandmother passed, Leslie's mother hadn't been there. She needed air, she said, needed to get away for a minute. She got in Leslie's car and took off and was gone for the rest of the day. Leslie sat in the dark house, in her room right across the hall from the grandmother's room—the grandmother she had rarely seen growing up, and just a few times since she'd been an adult. And those

times, her grandmother had primarily been on a mission to convince her to get herself artificially inseminated and have a bastard child with her father's last name.

She sat in a soft chair by a lamp, a large book in her lap, and thought about how she might call into work, just to see how everything was going, even though she knew there was no cell phone service and she wasn't about to make a long distance call on her grandmother's phone.

Leslie imagined the office, what it must look like at that moment. It was 4:30 on a Friday, and people would be rushing to make final calls, final copies, get those faxes sent off to owners, landlords, banks. If she were there, she'd be right in the thick of it. Peter would stand in the corner like some dark tweed god, smiling at her. Maybe this would have been the Friday that she finally went out with everyone, trusting herself with just one glass of wine—she'd been practicing at home, liking the taste of wine. This could have been the Friday that—

From across the hall, a choking, strangled moan—a breath that sounded more like someone drowning, or growling like a monster. The air around her grew stale and heavy. Nothing else existed in the world except that moan and the suffocating air that was a string between her healthy, unloved body and the one across the hall. She stood, the book falling to the floor. She walked slowly across the darkness, stood at the doorway, and met the eyes of a woman who had killed an entire name, then watched her sad, gnarled hands turn into claws.

## **People You May as Well Know**

Almana had gotten off the train at Tappan Street, three stops before she needed to, because there were just too many people on the thing. Too many people pressed against too many other people. Too many headphones ill-equipped to handle top volumes blaring out too many kinds of music. Too many kids screaming and too many people talking too loudly and too fast in too many languages. Too many people standing alone, looking sad and wrong.

She had a good job downtown; she had good hours, decent benefits, minimal overarching responsibilities, her own work area. She sat in a corner by herself and typed memos and transferred phone calls. She made spread sheets of client phone numbers and organized things into neat piles. She could look out a nearby window and see the Prudential Center, tall and bright and ominous. It was not far from the train station and she did not have to spend a lot of time walking in the cold. It was just fine.

But downtown Boston was a long train ride from Brighton, and there were just all those people between one place and the other. When Almana was around them, the people, sometimes she could not breathe because she would start thinking of secrets and disease. She would look at a man, and feel she could see all his secrets sketched right onto his body. Almana would feel terrified and dirty at the thought that no matter how hard a woman might try to hide her fears or her illnesses or her secret lives, her body would always betray her.

It wasn't that Almana was psychic; she could never know the secrets of strangers, but she could always see that there were secrets being unsuccessfully kept. A man might

hide the reasons for being worried, or stressed, but it was right there, all over his face. It was in the wrinkles and scars and adult acne and black circles around his eyes. A person could lie about being hit, or about being clumsy, or about having been too drunk to walk the night before, but there were always the bruises there to call that person a liar.

And so, today, Almana had been around too many of these people with too many of these problems. She looked from person to person and, even trying not to, she saw the truths that the body always tells the world, whether or not the body's person wants those truths told. Feeling there were just too many of them, too many screaming secrets, Almana had pushed across the train, pressed between people's unkept secrets, and gotten off the train three stops early.

Just a few weeks before, the clocks had been set back, and it was nearly pitch-black at six o'clock. Almana walked a few blocks and the crisp air calmed her. For those few blocks, it was as if the universe was trying to take care of her: no one pushed past her on the sidewalk, no cars honked at any other cars the instant the light turned green, no one yelled at anyone else from balconies, no homeless people were curled up in the abandoned store fronts. For two blocks, everything was quiet and still and promising. She came upon the bar, its heavy wooden door propped open, its standing sign offering discounted drinks and food and warmth inside. She stood outside, looking in. It wasn't crowded, it looked warm, the music was neither terrible nor too loud.

She figured the universe was finally apologizing to her. *You can do this*, it was saying to her. *We've been too hard on you, and you've been a good sport about it. Here you go; enjoy yourself, for once.*

“Okay,” she said aloud. She walked in and sat at the corner seat at the far end of the bar and ordered a beer from the cute bartender.

\*

An older man buys another drink for Almana. They just met, though they have often passed one another on the street. Neither consciously remembers ever walking by the other, though sometimes one or the other will make some gesture that the other finds uncomfortably familiar. The bar has filled up with men and women just off work, standing in corners in small groups.

“If you could have me be anyone this evening,” the man says, “who would you have me be?”

Almana thinks he isn’t a completely unattractive man, as far as strange older men go. He looks like he has seen places, and that he has become a better person for the places he has seen. She thinks she has never seen someone who looks so whole from the outside. She has not once, since moving to Boston nine months ago, met someone who was born and raised in Boston who doesn’t sound as if he were. It’s a welcome change.

“Anyone?” she asks.

“I didn’t bracket anything into that question,” he says. “There are no rules. If you could have me be anyone this evening, who might I be?”

She thinks of the people a person ought to think of first—the dead grandfather she’d always heard nice things about, her long lost aunt, an influential artist or political figure. She thinks of her future selves, the children she may have, the Important Man she may one day meet. She thinks long and she thinks hard, and figures she doesn’t care to talk to any of those people at this moment.

“I’m fine with you just being you,” she says.

Harold’s drinking bourbon and water, and he drinks them quickly.

He finishes his drink. “That isn’t such a bad answer,” he says. He motions the bartender for another.

Almana isn’t sure why she’s here and, while she often tries to think of all the reasons why she’s here, on this earth—a huge cosmic question—she is most immediately concerned about what’s brought her to this bar, of all places. She thinks, though, that something in her life has to change, and she also knows she’s acting out some vague wish of the universe, though she hasn’t yet figured out the point. She’d never gone into a bar by herself, and certainly never let strange men plop down next to her and start ordering her drinks. She is certain, though, that Harold often does this; the bartender knew his name and knew exactly what drink to make.

“Harold!” he’d called to the man as soon as he walked in. He’d pulled a tumbler out from under the bar and reached behind him for the bourbon. By the time he’d finished pouring the drink, Harold had reached the end of the bar.

“Hey, Jim. I thought it’d be busy tonight with the Sox on.” He reached for his glass and nodded to Almana, who nodded back.

“Yeah, it’s not so much. Not sure why.” Jim shook his head. “Hey, Harold, I want you to meet Almana. She says she’s new here, but I’m not sure I believe her.” He turned to Almana. “This man, here, he’s real good humanity.”

Almana sat at the corner stool, and Harold took the chair catty-cornered from her. They sat a moment in silence, awkwardly but not uncomfortably eying one another,

weighing their options. “I would ask what brings you here,” he said, “but I’ve found too much of that can make a conversation either boring or too intense. What do you think?”

Almana thought he was odd, but thought she might just think that because all the people she knew were the actual odd ones. Tilting her head, she thought Harold might be the normal one. “Yeah,” she said. “I think I agree. One or the other, absolutely.”

So he’d proposed a series of open-ended questions. They needn’t be too political, too personal, or too polite. Either one of them could decline to answer, and either could ask follow-up questions, which could also be declined.

He encouraged Almana to take a few minutes to decide whether or not to partake. “It could get weird,” he said. “You never know what kinds of crazy things a person will ask, or say. Or it might be boring. It may be a waste of your time.”

He started to lift his glass to his mouth, then stopped to say, “And maybe you’re only here to watch the game, or look into your drink. That’s fine, too. Don’t feel compelled out of politeness to let me bother you.”

She thought about it. She looked down to the bar, her hands wrapped around her pint glass. She looked at Harold without lifting her head. He watched one of the TVs in the corner, which was muted on a sports news channel. She wasn’t sure how old he was; she figured he wasn’t old enough to be the father of someone her age, twenty-two, but that one could feasibly assume him to have a child of college age. From his clothes she couldn’t tell what he might do for a living, or what his social status might be. She’d never met a legitimately crazy person, but didn’t feel she’d be taking too much of a gamble with this one.

On the other hand, she didn't have much experience with strangers in bars. She did know, however, how people could go nuts in them. This was not knowledge she had gotten firsthand, but she'd had several roommates in college who had lots of stories to tell. And she'd heard enough from bartenders on TV of the sad old alcoholics who would come and sit in the same chair night after night, never saying a word until some obscure sad song came on and set them off. *It could get weird, she thought. And then it'll get all awkward and I'll have to sneak off, looking over my shoulder, and go home to my dark and empty apartment.*

Then, again, she'd have to go home to that dark and empty apartment regardless. All she had there were dishes to wash and clothes to hang up and a television to watch.

"All right," she said. "Why not?"

Harold smiled and lifted his glass. "There we go."

She lifted her glass to his. "But if it does get weird, then I'm just leaving."

"Done," he said, clinking his glass to hers and drinking the rest of his drink, signaling for Jim to bring him another.

\*

"Without making it too awkward and personal," Harold starts.

"This sounds promising," Almana says.

Harold holds his hands out in front of him, as if quieting a class of small children.

"Without making it too awkward and personal, what makes you the most nervous?"

Almana looks off into corner of the room. "Well," she says, drawing out the word. "I really hate things—television shows, movies, you know—that are based around series of misunderstandings."

Harold squints his eyes and makes a low humming noise, which Almana takes as a follow-up.

“You know, a person has the same name of another person who’s done bad things, or has the same car and the same shirt as the lover of some woman whose husband is on a revenge kick. The list goes on and on, but the whole point is that this innocent character is stuck in these horrible situations and the person watching knows what’s going on the entire time.”

She looks back to Harold. “It’s just awful. And everyone else is just sitting there and laughing at this person whose life is falling apart.” She shakes her head. “And then it happens all over again the next week.”

“Situational comedy, then, makes you the most nervous.”

“Well, yes. I don’t think it’s funny at all. I think it’s sad and unfair.”

They sit a minute, Almana feeling nervous and Harold feeling he’s lucked out this evening. *About time*, he thinks. *It’s about time someone’s had something to say.*

“Anyway.” Almana breathes out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding onto. “What about you?”

“Oh,” he says. “Olympic sports, I think. I feel I’m just sitting there waiting for someone to fall down.”

“Yeah,” Almana says. “That’s rough.”

\*

Jim watches the two of them from the other end of the bar as he cuts more limes. He thinks he has never seen two people have a more awkward looking conversation. He feels like he’s watching terrible actors auditioning for small parts on a television show

that has no chance in hell of getting picked up in the first place. They keep getting their cues mixed up. Where one says something that ought to be funny, the other looks heartbroken. Where one is earnest and sad, the other laughs. They look away from each other when they should be making contact, and keep staring when they ought to look away for a moment.

When he first started tending bar, Jim had been carrying around this silent torch for the art of the job. He had learned a bit about life and love and money from a whole slew of professional bar tenders. Rather than joining the Peace Corp or the Red Cross, he felt that him heeding the call of the life of the bartender was just as much an act of social awareness. He thought he would be fulfilling his own particular moral obligation to the Powers That Be, that he would be imbued with the power and strength to make peoples' lives better. So, when he'd flunked out of college eight years ago, three semesters from completion—most of his family assumed that it had been a willful sort of flunking out—he accepted his calling and took up bartending.

What a failure he'd been at that. He hadn't learned much at all about helping people out, hadn't helped a single soul find the reason for his or her existence, or learn anything new about themselves or humanity. He felt the only things he'd accomplished were giving one person after another a mean hangover and abetting unfortunate one-night stands.

He'd often thought, though, that if he could help any one customer, he hoped it would be Harold. The man came in regularly, sometimes for many days in a row. He didn't say a lot about himself, about either his past or his present. Jim figured the man had little stake in his own future.

Now, looking at the two of them, he wishes he could give a hand to Almana. She'd come in, as if she wished she were walking with confidence, and gone straight to the end of the bar. She'd looked around as if she were just taking it all in out of the joy of exploration, though Jim had a hunch she was probably just looking for alternate exits. And, as he walked toward her to check her ID and make her a drink, Jim's heart inexplicably swelled a bit.

Watching her now, it swells again. He doesn't know if it is just because he wants her or if there is something else. He thinks she has a sweet face that could be something if she ever smiled, and endearing eyes that could tell a person something important if she could ever rest away the bags under her eyes. And he thinks she might have an amazing laugh. There have been a few moments when he feels there is one on its way out, but her laughs always seem to turn into sighs. Part of him is waiting for the Powers That Be to let him know what scares her so he can take it away. And part of him is waiting for Harold to ruin it again so that the poor girl can leave this place and figure out what she is so lonely for.

Jim finishes slicing his limes and loads them into the condiment box. As he begins to make Harold another drink, Jim reminds himself that he is a failure, that he fails everyone he thinks of touching. He figures, in the end, that most people probably aren't looking to be saved, anyhow, and certainly not by him.

\*

Harold turns his head to sneeze into his napkin. Almana averts her eyes as he blows his nose, as embarrassed as if she had just caught her father crying. Her throat tightens up and she has to take a lot of deep breaths before she calms down.

“Jesus,” he says, wrapping the napkin in another one. “I just can’t seem to shake the thing. You caught it yet?”

She hasn’t. She thinks for a second and then leans a few inches in, mostly for effect. “I’ll tell you a secret, though,” she says. He looks back at her. “No one knows what I’m getting ready to tell you. If my boss knew, it would be pretty bad.”

“Well, of course,” he says. “I’m no snitch.”

She swivels her seat to the side and, looking just past Harold, says, “Well, the truth is, I never get sick.”

His face pulls together in the middle. “Never?”

“Nope,” she says. “Never. I mean, excepting eating bad food or drinking too much. But I don’t catch colds or the flu or have sinus problems or anything like that.”

“Well,” Harold says, looking down at the counter. “Really?”

“Really. So, I’ve sort of developed this ability to fake specific symptoms of vague illnesses. Otherwise, I’d never get a day off. Most of my family is the same way. No one gets sick until they die. Sometimes not even then. Sometimes they’re just healthy one day and dead the next.”

It’s a lie, and she isn’t sure why she told it, but Harold doesn’t seem to care either way, and she begins to feel lonely and embarrassed again.

\*

Harold tells himself to drink this one slower than the previous three. He knows that he tends to say inappropriately mean things when he drinks them too quickly. He does think that there are often appropriately mean things to say, but he has never been worried about saying those things.

“Is there anyone you would like to speak of?” he asks, watching Jim wipe off the counter at the other end of the bar.

Almana sways on her stool in a time different to the music playing over the speakers, her eyes closed. Her elbows rest on the bar, her hands clasped in a steeple, her mouth pressed to her fingers.

She stops moving and looks straight at him from around her steeple. “You kind of have a weird way of talking,” she says.

He nods, lifting the glass, changing his mind. “I guess you’re not wrong, though I’ve heard worse, of course.”

She is beginning to feel disappointed by this stranger from the street. She wonders why everything always has to be such a big disappointment, always so awkward. She knows she would have felt sad if she had gone home instead of coming in here first, but she’s beginning to think she would not have felt quite this frustrated. She isn’t sure what she wants from Harold, except that she wishes he were just someone else. She looks at his hands wrapped around his glass. She realizes now they aren’t good hands; they are small, worn out, swelled from drinking for too many years. One hand, shaking slightly, pulls the drink to his mouth, and she watches its ascent. He meets her look and does not pull away until he closes his eyes to swallow.

The things these two people have in common they will never know for sure, though they might guess at it. And isn’t that the saddest thing, when sad people find a match in another but can never know it? Not the sort of match that removes a person’s loneliness, but the kind that gives a person another’s misery to stand silent against. It seems it would be more depressing than being alone, and maybe it is.

Perhaps, though, in another world in another season, Harold and Almana could walk together down Beacon Street to the reservoir to feed the ducks. They could stand side by side on the bank, a basket of bread between them. They could take turns aiming for the ducks themselves, though never admitting they are actually trying to hit the things. They could hold their breath together each time a duck dives under the water. They would not need to ever touch. They would do these things, then slowly fade out of each other's lives, because these sort of people are not good at keeping in touch.

He finishes his drink. "So," he says. "You want me to leave you alone, or what?"

Almana looks at him and knows she's sitting with a crippled man who does not look so crippled from the outside. Even as he has small and weak hands, his jaw seems strong and his shoulders, too. She blames herself for not being kinder, more forgiving of people's most uncontrollable flaws. She blames herself for wishing that people just stay inside their secrets all by themselves.

She shakes her head. "You don't need to go," she says. "We can just sit here."

"And not talk," Harold says, as if finishing her sentence. When Almana doesn't say anything else, or look at him, he nods and says, "Fine."

"You know," Harold says, picking up the new drink Jim's just brought him and swirling it around. "I think my friend Jim may have a thing for you."

Almana looks down to where Jim stands, switching between sports channels, as if expecting to see him standing there, staring at her, holding a sign that says "YOU AND ME = MEANT TO BE." She isn't sure what she would do if he were holding such a sign, but she would most likely run out of the bar and then faint on the sidewalk. She's never once had a boyfriend she could keep; every one of her relationships has ended awkwardly

and uncomfortably, and most of them have been people she'd met on the Internet. It seemed most of the guys had seen pictures of her and assumed she was hiding some dark kinky side underneath her modest clothing.

She met one guy a few months after getting to Boston, Thom, who seemed nice. He dressed well—but not too well, not as if he'd tried too hard or had a girl coach him in what to wear—and asked polite and normal questions over dinner and drinks, never once monopolizing the conversation. He was smart and told funny stories, and laughed at hers. He'd grown up in Boston, and had the harsh accent, but she figured she could get over that. As they left the restaurant, Thom placed his hand at the small of her back and held the door open for her. When he asked if she would mind hanging out more, if she would like to come back to his place and listen to records, she genuinely wanted to, even as she was not naïve enough to take “listen to records” literally.

Almost soon as they'd gotten in, he began kissing her and sliding his hands up the back of her shirt, which she didn't mind. Then, pressing her against the wall, he tried to stick his hand down her pants.

“I don't think that's a good idea,” she told him, gently pushing his hand away.

“Seriously?” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “Seriously.”

“Yeah, right,” he said. “I know your type, you got a naughty nurse or a dirty librarian under there somewhere.”

Since she'd heard that before—generally from less nice-seeming guys—she wondered if maybe it wasn't true, after all. She had never tried such a thing before, so maybe it was true. Before she'd eaten Vietnamese food, she'd thought she wouldn't like

it at all. Once she tried it, she loved it. If she had the money, and didn't so mind eating alone, she could easily eat it every single day.

"You're thinking about it, aren't you?" Thom said as he pressed closer. "I know it'd be great with you."

And so she tried it. It was awful, of course. She didn't know what he wanted her to say, or do, so she started talking about overdue books.

"You're totally going to get your library card taken away," she said, bewildered.

Thom had really seemed into it, which Almana could not understand. When he finished, he made a horrible face and looked as if he might throw up on her, and he had such spasms she thought he was in the throes of a medical emergency.

"Are you all right?" she asked after he rolled off her, praying he was because she was positive she couldn't handle taking care of him. She thought if he were not all right she would just call 911 and bolt out of the door. Then, thinking that bolting like that did not sound so bad, she hoped he would need an ambulance, and fast.

"Jesus," he said. "That was so hot. You are so dirty."

She lay there in the dark until he fell asleep, her body completely still, her eyes wide open. As soon as his breath became steady and heavy, she put on her pants and bolted out of the door, still pulling her shirt over her head.

Harold says it again, louder. "Did you hear me? I think Jim has a thing for you."

Her face getting hot, Almana says, "Yeah."

"Yeah," she says again, her voice growing hard. "I heard you."

"I think you're just his type, too," he says. "I think he likes them quiet."

She takes a deep breath and an even deeper drink.

“I think you two could get on great,” he says, though she hears it differently; she hears *get it on*.

She looks at him, her jaw clenching. “That’s quite enough.”

“What?” Harold says. “I just meant you too could have a great time.”

“I mean it.” She grips her glass so hard her hand turns white and the veins pop out in her forearm. “That’s enough.”

“Christ, I was just trying to be nice,” Harold says.

Her voice raising an octave, Almana yells, “How many times do I have to tell you to shut up before you shut the fuck up?” It’s almost a screech.

Jim turns around, looking concerned, though not angry. He thinks, *Oh, Harold, here we go again*. He takes a step toward them when Harold starts sliding clumsily off his stool, holding his glass.

“Okay, okay,” Harold says. “I’ll just leave you alone, you mad woman.”

Jim assumes Harold’s foot gets caught in one of the rungs, because the man is out of sight and on the floor as suddenly as a dog’s neck is snapped back upon reaching the end of its leash.

Harold loses his grip on the full tumbler, which flies out of his hand, breaking against the wall. Though music is playing, the clinking of the ice cubes and the glass becomes a quiet melody scattered throughout the bar. The three of them hear it, and they all hear it as a song of failure. Almana cannot look away from the man at her feet, though she feels like she’ll begin screaming at any moment.

On his hands and knees, Harold gasps for air. He feels maybe he is having a heart attack, and part of him hopes he is. He thinks, *There are moments when a man, having*

*nothing else, ought to pray to God that something kills him, and fast. He thinks, There is nothing more rational to hope for, at moments like those. It is too much for the universe to keep us struggling so.*

He pulls an aching knee up to his chest, and slowly pushes himself to a standing position. Almana doesn't look at him, doesn't offer a hand, and he's glad she doesn't. He wants to say he's sorry for all of it, whatever it all is, but her breath is starting to slow down, and he doesn't want to upset her again. He bites his lip and walks to the bathroom.

\*

Almana doesn't watch Harold fumble with the knob to the bathroom door. She sits with her forearms and palms flat on the counter. Looking at her hands, she notices how ragged and worn out her knuckles look. She looks at Jim, who has turned away. She's embarrassed, but she likes Jim for keeping his distance, for not jumping at the chance to tackle human misery. He has a nice back and, from what she can remember of them, kind eyes.

Vaguely looking into the mirror along the wall of liquor bottles, Almana finishes her second drink and gently places the glass back on the bar. Looking into some unknown distance, she reaches behind her and unzips the purse hanging on the side of the chair, and pulls out some cash and a pen. Pulling two twenties out of the stack, she writes something on one, and puts the pen back into her purse.

She again places her hands flat on the bar in front of her and looks up. Jim leans against the register, rolling and unrolling a bar towel, looking dispassionately toward a TV. She slides the money against the grain of the bar to the clean space between where

she had kept her drinks and Harold had kept his, and lets them rest on the far edge. She stands up.

Almana puts on her coat; her hands shake too much for her to button herself in. She gets her purse and looks again at Jim. He is looking at her this time, and she cannot figure out what he may be thinking.

She tries to say something, but has no idea what one could, or should, say at this time. So, she moves her head in weird, faint motions.

“It’s fine,” Jim says. “It’ll be fine. Don’t sweat it. I’ll take care of him.”

“Okay,” Almana says.

They look at each other for the smallest of moments, and she is getting ready to step away when Jim says, “You’ll be fine, too. I know it.”

When she smiles at him and actually laughs, shaking her head, Jim knows that everything he thought about her was true.

“You’re funny,” she says. “Jim the Bartender, you’re going to get a medal for this ridiculous night.”

When she leaves, Jim picks the money off the counter and cashes out Almana and Harold’s tab. He puts the twenties in the register and slams it shut with a broad palm. Everyone leaves in a rush; over the next two minutes he settles tab after tab. It is not until after he’s handed fifty dollars worth of bills across the counter that he notices the twenty Almana had written on. As Jim opens his mouth and reaches back for cash, the customer drops the ten and spins away from the counter and is out of the door before Jim can get anything out.

Jim presses his hands to the counter and squares his shoulders, leaning into them. He watches the door, watches as just outside the guy crawls into a cab. He thinks for a minute and then straightens up, rubbing his forehead. He walks around the bar and goes to the men's room.

"Hey, Harold," he calls from the door. "Come on out."

Harold sits on the floor in the lone stall, his left hand resting on the floor, wrapped around an imaginary glass. "Did she leave?"

"Yeah," Jim says, stepping just inside the doorway. "She did."

Harold groans a bit as he stands up. Jim watches the man's feet shuffle around the corner of the stall. Walking to the sink, Harold says, "Good."

On her way home, Almana plans out a new life. She had failed this time. She'd failed a hundred times before this, and another hundred before all of those, but she now has an inkling that maybe she's been invested in her own special illness all this time. She knows her life is a very badly put together quilt of sloppy endings and aborted starts. It has never kept her warm. But she thinks she could try again. This time, she had almost managed an entire evening of awful and awkward conversation. That was a start. This time, she hadn't been the one to fall. That, too, was a start. She had written her number down. She can do this life thing. It's just a series of beginnings.

Almana is not a psychic; she cannot see into the future and she can only know of the past what she actually knows of the past, what she saw and what she did and she can rarely trust herself enough to know even that. She is all right with that, right now. In her apartment, she puts her phone down next to her and, standing in the dark, looks out her living room window. She will stand here in her hill top apartment on the outskirts of

Boston, watching the city stretch and rise before her and she will wait for her phone to ring. And, as she's waiting, she'll whisper to herself. She'll whisper to the darkness, to the city and, beyond all that, to the universe, without ever knowing she speaks aloud. Her whisper will be a mantra, a promise, an acceptance of constant failure and retrial.

“Next time, I'll do better.”

## Veins

Tamara had given up wishing she could sleep through the night years ago. She now celebrated the night, the quiet, the emptiness of rooms in a house usually filled with the voices of children and a confused husband, and their thundering footsteps up and down the hallways. Every night at dinner she took an over-the-counter sleep aid with her wine spritzer, and that helped carry her through the evening hours, through the bath times and the baby's last bottle of the night. By the light of pink lamps she read to the girls who were tucked into their pink beds in their off-white bedroom. Sarah, the oldest, was seven; Caroline was almost six; and the baby, Ben, was fourteen months.

After the girls were tucked in, and the baby was sleeping, Tamara loaded the dishwasher with the dinner plates, and washed and dried the pots and pans and cutting boards. Her husband, Dale, sat in his gray recliner, pretending to watch the news, but flipping to the celebrity gossip stations when he thought she wasn't around, wasn't listening. Tamara thought he got a certain thrill over hearing which young actress was drinking underage, or fighting with another young celebrity over a boy, or coming into her rightful sexual orientation. After she cleaned the kitchen, Tamara took another sleeping aid, checked on the baby and then went and sat next to her husband, asking him what was going on in the world.

"Same old shit, really," he said, nearly every day. Sometimes he would say, "Same bullshit as yesterday." This week he was very excited about the upcoming meteor shower they might see the upcoming Saturday, but then that would be all he would talk about, and Tamara preferred the silence.

Sometimes they talked about what their children had done that day—kids were always getting into something, fighting over something, learning something new, and their three weren't any different. But that stuff was usually covered at the dinner table; in front of the TV, they usually sat in silence, some form of a peaceful regrouping.

After an hour or so of television, Dale stood and stretched, yawning. He looked at the clock, and it was ten, as it always was when he stood and stretched.

“Well, I'm beat,” he said. “You staying up?”

With Sarah and Caroline she'd been able to sleep, once they'd been able to sleep. Since the baby, Ben, and since she'd turned thirty-four, sleep had always eluded her, at least at nights; she preferred to get her sleep a few hours at a time, in the early hours of the morning and mid-afternoon, even once he'd begun sleeping through the night. Since Ben's birth, Dale and Tamara had spent most of their nights apart, Dale sleeping soundly in their room, and her on the Internet, talking on message boards, enjoying the haze of these quiet hours, not even resenting that sleep itself never arrived. She talked with Anita, a twenty-four year old who lived outside of Atlanta, and Donna, a divorced mother of three who lived in Barbados. Tamara lived in southwestern Virginia and none of the three had ever visited the places where the others lived. Yet, they were all friends, and talked with each other about their lives, their wishes. They talked about the things they loved; Tamara always talking about her husband.

“This summer,” she typed, “he's going to take me and the kids somewhere great. He won't tell me where. He says he wants to worry about that part.”

Sometimes she said things that were not true, like how she was going to bed early to try to seduce her husband; she rarely tried to do that. Once he got to sleep, Dale was hard to wake up.

Tamara liked those times, though, sitting at the computer, typing to her friends, her head fogged, and her movements slight and smooth over her keypad.

Around three o'clock, Tamara brushed her teeth and washed her face. She put on a cotton nightgown and settled into bed next to Dale, who didn't stir. She lay there, thinking about tumultuous love and youth. She thought about the boy in her high school junior English class, Matt, who only spoke when called upon. Sometimes her thoughts were so like dreams, making her body so still, that she couldn't mourn not actually being able to sleep.

\*

Dale's alarm went off at five, and he got straight out of bed. He shut the alarm off quickly, which Tamara always appreciated; it was as if he worried about waking her. As he went in to take his shower, she turned onto her other side and closed her eyes again. It was a Tuesday, and on Tuesdays Dale fixed his own cereal, made his own coffee, got the girls up and fed, letting Tamara sleep. She dozed for another two hours and got up, feeling excited, as Dale was getting ready to leave the house.

She gave him a hug as he headed out of the house, which he distractedly returned.

"I got another voice mail from Cal today," he said. "He'll be coming over again tonight, probably staying the night. His mother's being difficult again."

Cal was Dale's twelve-year old son from his first marriage. He'd gotten married right out of college to Melissa, the girl he'd dated all through school. Cal was born a few

years later and then Melissa asked for a divorce. Often, Tamara wondered how it was possible that people grew apart that way, that a person could know someone else for so long and then just wake up one day and find it all had changed. In any case, the divorce still took a long time and Tamara had met Dale as she, herself, was finishing college, when Dale was twenty-seven. They married once the divorce was final. That had been ten years ago. Now Melissa was kind of crazy, and Cal didn't want to live with her anymore.

Usually Tamara got upset when Dale brought up the idea of Cal moving in with them. She liked Cal, thought he was a clever and handsome kid who looked a lot like Dale. She just didn't want to raise a twelve-year old right now, and especially didn't want to be the recipient of the late-night phone calls from Melissa.

"I know you're turning my own son against me," Melissa had said once at three in the morning when Cal had stayed with them for three days. "Don't you think for one second I'm going to let that happen. You aren't his mother. You aren't anything."

But today, this Tuesday, Tamara wasn't going to be upset. She was excited for this day, had been looking forward to it for weeks. She said to Dale, "Sure, all right. We'll order pizza. Or maybe Chinese. He likes Chinese."

"So does his daddy," Dale said. "Also, don't forget to keep Saturday open. We're gonna see ourselves some shooting stars." He'd been talking about the meteor shower for days, more excited than the kids, who weren't really sure what he was talking about.

After Dale left, she got the girls dressed and sent them out to the bus stop. She fed the baby, and got ready for work. She worked at the Red Cross in Roanoke, taking blood three days a week, on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. She was excited about this day because Patrick would be back today. The twenty-five year old had come every two

weeks for the last four months, alternating between donating platelets, plasma, and blood. He would give blood this week, and he always preferred Tamara to take it.

Tamara put on a skirt; nice, but sensible, shoes; and an extra coat of mascara. She dropped the baby off at the daycare at the Baptist church, and drove the forty-five minutes to Roanoke, trying not to think of Patrick. And, because she was trying so hard to not think of him, she didn't feel guilty for thinking of him anyway. It was just outside forces that made her think of him and, because it was so, she could not feel guilty for things beyond her control. It was like when Dale had almost tried to blame her for a tree limb falling down on their garage during an ice storm, that he had been saying for months that the thing needed be cut down, and that she just wouldn't listen. But she knew she didn't make the weather; she just lived with its aftermath.

She drove too fast, listened to music she'd mixed on a CD. The music was filled with heavy guitars, and male singers with a wide vocal range, and horns and strings and synths. She sang the heady part loudly, almost screaming. It made her feel alive and excited, knowing that things came but then they went, and then something else popped up to take its place, to take her other places.

She thought of the first time Patrick had come in, tall, tan, with the lean body of a runner. He had just run in the Boston Marathon the previous spring, and had run other marathons throughout the past few years for cancer and autism and all sorts of important causes that made her feel small.

Tamara did not wear gloves for the first part of the job; as she briskly turned over his arm and found the correct vein—a job she could do in her sleep—she familiarized herself with the soft pale skin of the inside of his arm. Even though it wasn't necessary,

she flicked her finger against the crease of his elbow, her breath catching as the vein pulled against the skin.

“Sorry,” she’d said, as she tied the tourniquet around his arm. “I’m sure that must be uncomfortable.”

He shook his head. “Not at all,” he said.

As she slid in the butterfly needle, smoothly, seamlessly, he looked up into her face and said, “Are you sure you’re old enough for this job? Especially to actually be good at it?”

“Oh, please,” she said, feeling her heart jump. “I’m old enough to be—,” she broke off. “Well, I’m old enough to be your older sister.”

“I always liked my older sister’s girlfriends,” he said.

For four months he’d come in, sitting in her seat, smiling at her. She figured she wasn’t too long outside the realm of flirting to know when a man was interested. Patrick smiled the same way Dale had smiled at her when they were first dating, the way she’d seen Matt smile at his senior prom date, the girl he married soon after graduation. Patrick asked her about her life, said it was practically a crime for her to look so good after having three kids.

“Well,” she said. “Once all the actresses start looking like supermodels again just weeks after giving birth, you know we all have to do the same thing.”

It thrilled her, of course, that someone noticed, just as it thrilled her to make that vein pump strong against his skin. All she wished for was that he had an endless supply of blood, that he could come every single day and tell her about his life, what he’d been

reading and listening to, what he thought she would like to read and listen to. He asked her questions, he listened to her answers, he teased her. He never stayed over an hour.

This Tuesday, however, she got to work and she waited all day and he never came. She worried he had been hurt, had pulled a muscle while training, had gotten run over by a drunk driver, or been bitten by a rabid dog. She wondered if one of his parents had died, or if they had moved suddenly over the weekend. She tried not to think that maybe he just didn't want to come in anymore, that he was avoiding her, but she thought it anyway, and it scared her. Then it made her furious, at him and at herself. *This is stupid, you are stupid*, she told herself. *He's just not here. He's out there somewhere, with better things to do than come here.*

She smiled at the old people and the pretty people and the ugly ones and badly dressed ones and the young women who had their whole lives ahead of them, all of whom came in to help other people, acting on the possibility of an emergency beyond their comprehension. As she stuck each one of their veins perfectly, she kept one ear always tuned into the front door and the front desk, thinking she would somehow be able to recognize his footsteps out of all the other footsteps, but he never came, though she thought each footstep might be his.

"You're so good at this, Tamara," they all said, the donors and the receptionist and the other nurses. "You make it look so easy, but Lord knows we all know it ain't always so easy."

She left at three o'clock and drove back the forty-five miles. She drove too fast and listened to sad songs in the car, and then angry ones. She tried to listen to soothing, mindless pop songs, but they only made her more upset. She cut off three drivers, and

almost rear-ended another two. She went to the church and picked up Ben, and could barely speak to the women there. She drove home, and called the neighbor who kept the girls after school on the days she worked. Sarah and Caroline liked playing with Susan's own kids, and the girls wanted to stay for supper with them. Tamara didn't try to woo them back over with the promise of their older brother and pizza or Chinese.

As if he knew his mother was about to break down, the baby was silent, looking around wide-eyed, content to be held. Tamara sat with him in a kitchen chair, rocking slightly, smelling his head.

"You're a good baby, aren't you, Benny?" she asked, pressing her cheek against the side of his head. "Such a good baby, such a good and quiet baby. Not an ounce in you to be disappointed by."

She got up from the table and poured herself a glass of wine. Since Ben looked sleepy, and since she was finally exhausted, she drank her wine quickly and took him back to the master bedroom. She put him in the middle of the large bed and surrounded him with pillows.

Watching her son, Tamara wondered how it was possible for people to bring others into the world. She knew how it happened, technically, of course, but deep inside her she wished she could have lived in a time—and there had to have been a time—when people were unsure where children came from, where they had not connected the dots between physical pleasure and procreation. Because the procreation was such a painful thing—when did they figure out that the pleasure brought such a terrifying experience? She thought about the first kiss, how exciting it must have been to be the first people to ever kiss, to be able to run back to the other people to tell of this thing they'd discovered.

How long before they realized the things a kiss could lead to? How long had they enjoyed just the kissing?

What about the time when it had all been a surprise that made itself known by blood not coming, by a queasy stomach, by various aches and pains that came to a woman as she stood over a kitchen sink or a rosebush or a field of corn? Not this planning ahead, the careful planning that required a person to stop drinking, to stop taking pills that could cause deformity, disease, retardation, death, to a baby. She wanted to look back to when it happened or it didn't happen, when people lived and died with no good explanation.

Tamara and Dale had met after he had already been separated for nearly a year. They did not sleep together until the divorce was final, did not even go on any dates. Tamara just knew that this was it, and she just sat and waited for nearly two years, seeing Dale in very public places, usually with others around, always on guard and hesitant in touching each other. Dale didn't want to be accused of being unfaithful, and Tamara respected that. She could have dated other people during those two years. Dale would not have gotten upset; he mentioned once or twice that she should still be keeping her options open. But, though they never actually mentioned marriage, she knew that's where it was going. There was a fevered intensity when they said goodbye at the end of those public dinners and an undercurrent of longing to the chaste E-mails they sent to one another, the way they looked at each other at the end of their dinner nights. They hugged only at the end of the night when others were around, when everyone was hugging each other. Sometimes they sat next to each other at dinners, their ankles pressed together.

The day the divorce was final, Dale showed up at the door to her cramped one-bedroom apartment. Seeing him there, and seeing his smile, she was overcome with desire, an animal desire deep in her gut. She wanted Dale to attack her, push her against the wall just inside the door, to do it all without any clothes coming off; she'd worn a skirt. But the sex was not satisfying; Dale was terribly slow in what he must have thought was a passionate way. He touched her without looking at her. He took her clothes off too carefully, too neatly. It was all wrong. After, Dale leaned into her, breathing heavily into her neck, murmuring things that sounded sweet, crying. *I love you so much. I love you so much.* Tamara lay there, her arms around him, and panicked.

*My god, she thought. Is this what it's going to be? Him just lying here night after night on top of me, crying?* She'd had more passionate sex as an undergraduate after Thanksgiving break, when she and the boy she was dating at the time had been apart for only four days. *Oh my god, she thought again when Dale started to tremble above her. Two years. Two years I spent, fantasizing about the first time I would touch him, the first time I would look into his eyes as he moved inside of me. My god. Am I supposed to cry, too? I probably could.*

Later it all got better; they touched each other in the right ways. While she was intensely relieved the first time it all worked out as it should, she also felt a surge of guilt. "Why couldn't I cry before?" she thought that night. "Why couldn't I just accept him as he was? Why couldn't his trembling have opened the doors to all this tenderness I know is inside me?"

She knew that Dale would not be home with Cal for another two hours and she tried so hard to sleep there, her body curled around the bank of pillows. It never came,

though Ben slept solid, his arms waving around in the middle of some dream, a dream she imagined to be without words, some dream of vivid colors and faces he was just beginning to recognize, things wild and new.

Dale was mad when he got home and realized the girls were not there. He made Tamara call them back home, and made them all eat Chinese food. The girls were happy to see Cal, but very unhappy with their mother. The older boy barely touched his food and didn't speak much to anyone.

After dinner, all the kids in bed, the celebrity news on, Dale told Tamara that he wanted Cal to move in with them. More than wanted, in fact—this was something that had to happen.

Tamara went to the kitchen for another drink, and her hand shook while she held the bottle over her glass. She tried to think of something to say, tried to make herself react the way she knew she ought to. *Of course he will move in here*, she ought to say. *There is more than enough room here, more than enough love here, for all the children of the world.*

She knew she couldn't say that and instead held her glass and leaned against the cabinet, willing her hand to stop shaking, willing herself to think of something to say other than *I didn't sign on for this, there is no way this is happening, what do you think you are doing to me?*

“You have nothing to say about this?” Dale asked in a low voice from the doorway behind her.

She looked over her shoulder to him, a gesture she used to make years ago, before

the children, when Dale came home from work and she wanted to make him want her. Before, her actions had led to love and babies; she wanted that man to move her and she wanted those babies and she knew how to get them. Now she looked over her shoulder because she didn't think she could move the rest of her body.

“Well, you said this was something that had to happen,” she said, turning back, keeping her voice low. “So what is there to say?”

“For starters, you could say, ‘Of course he’ll move in here.’ That would be a good place to start.”

“It’s a lot to spring on someone, is all,” she said. “It’s just a lot.”

“It’s family,” he said.

*It’s my body, she thought. Where is my body?*

He said, “This is your son, as much as he’s my son. It’s not just a lot, Tammy—it’s everything.”

“I know that,” she said. “God, I know that. But, *everything*. God, that’s a lot.”

Tamara couldn't turn her head toward Dale, knowing if she looked him in the face she would begin to cry, that she'd likely start crying anyhow.

“I feel awful,” Dale said.

He said, “I can't stand it, how awful I feel,” and Tamara thought he would apologize to her.

“I’ve just let him stay there with Melissa all this time. He won't tell me everything he's seen over there, and I don't even know if I want to know it all; I can just imagine. But she forgets to feed him—forgets to pick him up from school. Have you seen his shoes? You can practically see his toes through the soles. What kind of man would I

be, what kind of father would I be, to just let him stay there? What kind of man am I in the first place, to let him stay there for so long?"

His voice cracked and Tamara closed her eyes and bit her lip as if that would be able to keep her own chin still, keep it from trembling. It couldn't. She thought that nothing truly good could come out of her, but that tears could at least look like goodness as she turned around and looked at her husband who stood there vulnerable and beautiful in front of her.

"Of course," she said. "Of course. You are a good man. You are such a good, good man."

Later that night, at her computer, Tamara wondered why life was so hard, and then worried that maybe she was just doing it all wrong. It should be easier, she thought, to just love people. What was so difficult about it? It shouldn't have been difficult; a woman loved and wanted a man who loved and wanted her in return, and that was that. Love should be a simple thing, a giving and taking, a road that was straight and true. It was *love*, for Christ's sake, she thought, and what else was love but everything? If a person had everything, why wouldn't that person simply have everything she needed?

Sitting at her computer desk, unable to make herself enjoy it as she ought to—the talking with friends—she wondered again if she was just doing it wrong, or if she could justify herself in some way. A few weeks before she had found Cal at her computer, looking at pictures of half-naked women, touching himself through his pants. She hadn't said anything at the time, not to him and not later to Dale. She'd just tiptoed down the hall, and came back a few minutes later, making lots of noise to scare him away to his room. Now, from her desk, she could see the door to Cal's room, another room that

would no longer be hers, just as he would be a child she'd be responsible for who would still not be hers. If she went and told Dale now, she knew it would sound like a feeble excuse. "That isn't anything," he'd say. "He's a boy. Whatever. Just put a block on the TV and the computer then, if you're so worried about the girls." And then, when she told him that she'd already done so, he'd look at her and roll his eyes, and she figured he would probably be right.

A sliver of light slid out onto the carpet from the door's edges. She wanted to love the boy; she wanted to feel her heart swell and her throat to go tight and her eyes to get blurred with tears of understanding and patience, of love. But she looked at that sliver of light and resented it. She didn't want her life to change anymore—or, if it had to change, she wanted to be the one responsible. Then she felt bitterly ashamed of herself, and her throat got tight at that. She went into the kitchen and stood in the dark, far away from that sliver of light.

\*

Tamara did not dress up for work on Thursday, did not shave her legs or put on extra makeup. She pulled her hair back and wore her nurses' shoes. She drove at a rational speed to work and, once she got there, she was cordial, but not chatty, with her co-workers. She stuck veins perfectly and made minimal small talk.

Patrick came in halfway through her shift, and she didn't notice him come in. She just turned her head away from one patient for a moment and there he was, standing at the counter. She felt there was something wrong within her, that she hadn't somehow *just known* that he'd come in. That wasn't how she remembered things she'd had with anyone else—she remembered her hair standing up on the back of her neck, the trembling, when

the object of her adoration came into the room, the uncanny way she always *just knew* whenever that person was near. It had always been a physiological thing, even more recently with Patrick. It had always been there and now it wasn't, and she wasn't sure what was wrong.

Then she saw the girl. She sat in the red cushioned chair next to Patrick, and was beautiful, tall and lean and blonde like him. They talked quietly, tilting their heads toward each other as they eyed the other people sitting around them, and sometimes they laughed. She had a whispery laugh, a faint twinkle that traveled throughout the room. Others looked at her when she laughed, and smiled. Even the women who never smiled broke into a smile at the sound of her sweet laugh.

Tamara thought she must be Patrick's sister, the way they looked alike, the easy way they talked together, familiar, careless. She thought the girl looked like a Grace, and imagined when Patrick would introduce them.

"Here's my baby sister, Grace, though we call her Gracie," he would say. And Tamara would smile her own lovely smile to her, tilting her head. *So nice to meet you, you lovely girl*, she might say.

But Patrick then touched the girl's arm, rubbing his hand up and down before settling into the crook her elbow, and Tamara knew that was not the way siblings touched. Even as she tried to tell herself that it was, in fact, the way siblings might touch each other, she knew she was wrong as she watched the girl place her hand over Patrick's. Tamara hunted down the girl's forms, and learned her name was Carly and that she was not, in fact, Patrick's sister.

Tamara began to prep Carly, she thought maybe this would be the day when she missed the vein. It could not be purposeful, and perhaps it might give the other nurses a way to feel better about themselves, and all their own missed veins. But Carly looked so nervous and anxious, until Patrick sat next to her and began talking in a soothing voice, and Tamara knew she could never miss that girl's vein.

When he began to softly tease Carly, started talking about how difficult it had been to convince Carly to come and give blood—she had a fear of needles, he said, and sometimes got queasy at the sight of blood—Tamara began to imagine asking him to step with her outside. Tamara imagined saying, “Patrick, would you please step outside with me for a moment?”

Outside, away from the door, she would turn to him. “What are you doing?” she would ask. “Why would you do this?”

His face would be scrunched up, confused. Then, there would be a dawning, a tilting of the head, a narrowing of eyes. “What do you think I'm doing?”

“Coming in here with her, parading her around like that. What are you thinking?”

He would laugh, a mean laugh that puffed out from his nose. “What are *you* thinking?” he'd ask. “Why would it matter who came in here, with me or anyone else?”

“It wouldn't matter, if it were anyone else. But you—of course it matters. Of course it does.”

“You think something is going on here?” He would laugh again, a laugh that told her she was ridiculous, and that he was, in the heart of him, a cold boy. “You think we're going to have some kind of affair? Is that what you've wanted?”

As his girlfriend's blood filled one tube, then another, Tamara knew she could not

do that, could not ask him to speak with her privately, not because he would look at her with amusement, but because she could not bear to find out that he was heartless and unfeeling. So when he took the seat next and asked how she was doing, she told him that her kids were doing well, that her life was going on just as it should be. *The same old shit. Same as every day.*

Later, Tamara would tell herself that she hadn't missed his vein on purpose, hadn't missed multiple times, hadn't meant to leave track marks up and down his perfect arm. But she couldn't be certain. It had never been a conscious decision, had never been a decision at all. *It's okay*, the other nurses told her. *It happens, it happens all the time.*

But it wasn't okay, and was possibly the meanest thing she'd ever done, even if she hadn't done it on purpose. *It's okay, he'll live.*

\*

That night Tamara went to bed with Dale. After cleaning the dishes, and before sitting down with him at the couch, she'd gone into the bedroom and put on lingerie—not the racy, near-trashy kind of years prior, but the kind where the underwear matched the camisole—under her robe. As Dale headed to bed, she followed him.

As he settled into the bed, she took off her robe and stood there, her body exposed, her face certain. Dale smiled, and patted the spot next to him. As she crawled in, he curled his body around her, and said into her ear, "I'm glad to have you here."

He fell asleep quickly; he must not have realized that she was dressed differently than usual. With his arms wrapped tight around her, she lay there immobile, unable to sleep. She thought she might cry, but she didn't. She felt guilty, and ugly, until she felt his penis harden against her. But he never woke up.

\*

The family gathered outside on Saturday night, though Tamara worried there would be too much cloud coverage to see any of the meteors. After they put the baby in his crib, the rest of them sat outside together on one long blanket. Cal sat at one end next to Dale, and the girls sat between their father and mother. Tamara held the baby's monitor, but all was quiet on that front. She looked at her two daughters, expecting to see them fighting to stay awake, but there they were, leaning back against their elbows, faces turned toward the sky. They were still, excited, expectant, their eyes wide open. They didn't want to miss a thing. She looked at all their beautiful faces, her daughters', her husband's, and her new son's, and for a moment all she wanted was to sit there forever and look at them. This was the life she had chosen for herself, the life she had been waiting for since she was small, the life she had wanted since the first time Dale had smiled at her. She wanted nothing more than to stay in that life, to believe in it. She tilted her own face to the dark night, in anticipation of beauty.

They didn't see one shooting star. Dale said that perhaps the night was just too overcast after all. Because none of the kids seemed that disappointed—they had never seen shooting stars before, so what could they miss?—Tamara decided she shouldn't be, either. She decided that it was still a beautiful night.

The girls began whispering with one another, pointing at the moon.

“Do you see him, Mama?” Sarah said, leaning towards Tamara, her thin arm raised. “Do you see the man in the moon?”

Tamara looked, squinting her eyes to see clearer. She couldn't quite make him out. She thought back to when she was little, and could see the man, could see his face

change night by night. She could remember thinking she could see his face change, smiling widely one night, looking stern and reticent the next. She had named him, she knew, but now she could no longer remember what she'd called him. She wanted to see him up there, to know what name her daughters would give him. She looked harder, willing the moon to have a face.

“Mama, do you?” Sarah asked again.

She couldn't. Even realizing that she could at least see the moon wasn't enough. *Maybe it will be enough when I am old and getting ready to die*, she thought.

Tamara looked down at Sarah, who had her mother's eyes and hair, and her father's nose and chin. Sarah looked back, intense, fierce, and Tamara felt awed.

She knew there would always be a loneliness in life. She could never know how Dale loved her, how her children loved her, how anyone loved anyone else. The feeling deep in her gut was the way she loved, and she would live alone with that feeling, until it finally died with her. Her clenching fear of forgetting the names of the faces she'd seen could never be known or understood, not even by the people afraid of the same things. She would always stand alone in something, as would her husband, her children, her patients. She could try and try and try to find a way to crawl into someone, and she would always fail.

“I only know what I see, honey,” Tamara said, leaning her head against her daughter and tilting her head back to the sky. “But tell me what you can see. That's what I want to know.”