

University of Memphis

University of Memphis Digital Commons

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

7-5-2012

Forecasting: A Novel in Stories

Matthew M. Pertl

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Pertl, Matthew M., "Forecasting: A Novel in Stories" (2012). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 517.
<https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/517>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact khggerty@memphis.edu.

FORECASTING: A NOVEL IN STORIES

by

Matthew M Pertl

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

August 2012

Copyright © 2012 Matthew M Pertl

All rights reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. Echo Chambers	1
2. Wasted on the Young	22
3. Quality Progress	46
4. #firstworldproblems	69
5. Here On Earth	88
6. Futility	121

ABSTRACT

Pertl, Matthew M. MFA. The University of Memphis. August 2012.
Forecasting: A Novel in Stories. Major Professor: Richard Bausch.

Focusing on the small, unforeseeable moments that define modern American life, this is a collection of short stories that follows a couple from the birth of their first child until that child enters college.

Echo Chambers

My husband has the baby in his arms when he tells me his sister needs to move in with us. He's still in his shirt and tie from work, standing across from me in the kitchen, his sleeves rolled up a bit, the baby sitting on his forearms like a chair, facing me with his tie clenched between two pink hands. I'd been draining the noodles for parmesan when he walked in and started telling me how his sister had called him at work, crying, how she'd met some guy, moved out to Denver or Portland or somewhere, gotten pregnant, and then lost the baby. He says all this slowly, with the stammers and stops of a practiced speech one's forgotten the details to.

“She said they broke up like I should know how one leads into the other,” he says.

My husband is a weatherman on TV. And he doesn't just read the weather, he writes it. You'd think that would make him a good conversationalist or something, banter and eye contact and all that. Really he's just good at faking it. He's more of a scientist, good with numbers and machines. There's a confidence with which he wears those suits, a power he has on camera that's really unlike him as a person. Rather than compassionate or sympathetic, crying only makes him embarrassed. And when he gets embarrassed, he gets frustrated and annoyed. Even now, he's just looking at a spot on the floor behind me.

“That's,” I say, just the word for a second. “I didn't even know she was pregnant, Dan.”

“Neither did I. I haven’t talked to her since Christmas,” he says.

“What did you tell her?”

“What was I supposed to tell her?” he says.

“She doesn’t have any friends out there or anything?”

“She was crying. I didn’t really ask,” he says. Then, “You have something to say.”

“No, it just seems like a horrendously long drive,” I say. “Two days, I guess.”

“Probably three or four, but I don’t think she has money to stop a lot. We’ll see. She said she’d call along the way.”

“Okay, then,” I say.

The baby starts wriggling in his arms, trying to turn around. He lifts her up and tucks an arm under her, giving her the index finger of his other hand. She wraps an entire fist around it and begins to tug. “I really thought you’d have more to say about it.”

“Well. What do you have to say about it?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

“That’s right. She’s your sister. We’re not saying no to her. The rest doesn’t matter.”

“I just don’t want it to pop up again later.”

“Just let me finish this for now,” I say, and pick the colander up from the counter. “We can talk about it after it’s sunk in a little.”

“Okay,” he says, and takes the baby into the living room.

He's silent through dinner. I put a sitcom on the television. My husband himself has only cried in front of me once. It was back when I was pregnant, when my belly was huge and he'd whisper to it at night, about all the strange things out here, like the sky and trees and gravity. One of his fraternity brothers had died in a car crash. Dan and I had stayed up until three o'clock in the morning on the balcony of this brother's apartment across from campus, drinking beer and smoking cheap cigars. Josh Wilkinson. Dan was the first guy I'd met back then that I felt comfortable enough around to just wear T-shirt and jeans. And when Dan found out about the crash—I don't really remember what happened: the memory is just an image, of Dan in our bedroom at night, lying there in the orange light from a lamp across the room. Thinking about it makes me ashamed somehow.

"You don't think it will be weird for her, do you?" I ask during a commercial. "Your sister, I mean. With the baby? After a miscarriage?"

"I don't think so. It's not like she doesn't know."

When we go to bed, I climb on top. I roll my eyes back into my head and whisper "Oh my God" at him. Afterwards, I lie there for a while with my head on his shoulder, then I tell him that I'll move the crib and all the baby's clothes into our room, and I'll take Helen to the park and then to see what kind of places she'd like to work at, and go with her to fill out applications.

"Thank you," he says, and kisses me. "That's perfect."

He's at work, of course, when Helen arrives. I see the little red hatchback through the window as it pulls into the driveway, the backseat full of boxes. I put the baby on one hip and open the door. When Helen finally starts walking up to the door, the baby and I probably have the same expression on our faces. *What is this new person?* I've only met Helen once, for half an hour at my wedding reception, a year and a half ago. She's wearing a crocheted sweater of reds and blues and greens, and has her hair swept up in a purple bandana at the top of her head. There's a ring in her bottom lip. We smile at each other and say hi.

I put the baby in the swing chair and help Helen carry her boxes in. The house that Dan and I are renting has a large living room that we've painted an eggshell color, with chair rail and hardwood floors. Our couch is set diagonally across one corner, the ends touching two walls. I have a few grocery bags in the opposite corner, filled with old magazines I need to throw away. An article in one of them said that arranging the couch diagonally helps to add color and dimension. We stack her boxes next to them.

We drink a little water when we're through. Then Helen asks to take a shower. While she's in the bathroom, I put the baby down for a nap. When Helen comes out, she has one hand clutching the edges of a towel wrapped around her, and starts rummaging through boxes.

"Looking for anything particular?"

She looks at me and rolls her eyes. "It's stupid. I packed clothes for the trip, but everything else, I just kinda threw in there," she says, and motions at the stacks of boxes.

My husband doesn't do things like admit stupidity. He'd much sooner say something like, "I've got it," and take care of it alone. This makes me like Helen immensely. I offer to go through her boxes with her, and before too long she finds a few articles of clothing to take to the bathroom with her. When she comes out, I've arranged the open boxes into new stacks.

"I don't really think it's worth unpacking it all," she says.

I shrug. "We at least need to sort it."

A little while later I've come across her collection of wooden frogs when she asks me "Does she usually sleep this long?" She's standing over the baby.

"Yeah. Usually." The frog I have in my hand is small, about an inch or so in diameter. "I'll give her another half hour. She gets cranky if I wake her up, but if she sleeps too long now, she won't sleep tonight."

"That's the life," Helen says. She grabs a box from the stack in the corner and brings it over to the middle of the living room floor, where we've been sitting. "She's beautiful."

Dan comes home while I'm making dinner. He gives Helen a hug and she whispers thank you to him in his ear, for letting her stay. Dan nods and takes a beer from the fridge. Helen stands over my shoulder, playing with her lip ring with her tongue. I can see it moving back and forth in arcs. Dan leans against the counter and crosses his ankles and talks a little about the public transportation system here in Atlanta. A few minutes later they disappear together, back into the bedroom so they can talk. I put plates on the table and stick the baby in her high-

chair, and a few minutes later I hear Helen yelling “Jesus Christ, Dan,” muffled a little bit by the wall. It’s followed closely by “No, God-dammit. He never hit me” and Helen coming through the living room in a rush.

Dinner is awkward.

Helen sleeps on the couch that first night, and after we put the baby to sleep, Dan closes the door to the bedroom and we start changing for bed. “I think you should have told me you were worried her boyfriend hit her,” I say while I pull my pajama bottoms from the dresser.

“Why?”

“Well, it just doesn’t seem like the smartest thing to ask about.”

He throws his shirt into the hamper. “That’s obvious.”

“Seriously. How did you think that conversation was going to end well?”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Christ. I was worried about her. I did it in private.”

“It’s just a pretty shitty thing to make a person admit to. And what’s the point? She’s here, either way. Are you going to go find this guy and beat him up?”

“No, I’m not going to touch the little fucker,” he says.

I stop with one leg in my pajamas. “You still think it. You think she lied to you.”

“I know she lied to me,” he says. “Look, I’ve known her for twenty years. And the person in the living room is not her. Helen’s not thankful or quiet, and quite frankly, she’s not that nice. She’s arrogant and self-involved. She flunks out

of college because she thinks she's smarter than her teachers. She dyes her hair pink and spikes it."

"You're just pissed because she broke your whole privacy thing."

"Jesus. Why are we even talking about this?"

"It doesn't matter who's to blame. Her baby died. Inside her. I don't know if you can imagine what that has to feel like. A dead cockroach. Inside your asshole. That dirty, Dan."

"You win. You won before we even started this conversation, but if it makes you feel better, I'll say it again." He spreads his arms in surrender. "You win. Okay?"

The baby has her fingers curled in my hair. She's still at that point where she wakes up occasionally in the night. I stand with her in the middle of her room. I can hear her breathing, her lips pressing against my neck, moist. I rub my hand down her back while I turn to see if her eyes are closed. She jerks her head and faces the other way. She smacks on her lips and tugs at my hair, but soft, navigating.

One of my magazines had an article about how inside small babies, the senses merge. Whenever there's a loud noise, a pan dropped on the kitchen floor, the objects they see will start rippling, moving like a rock dropped in water. The baby's facing the other way, and I don't want to risk moving her to see if her eyes are closed. She moans. I tap her bottom for rhythm. Her legs move against my stomach.

Putting her back down after she gets up at night has always been an ordeal. The bars to the crib are too tall and if I move her away from me while I'm laying her down, she starts to panic. If I'm fast enough with my hands I can lay her down with one arm and spread the other hand out over her chest before she notices, and she'll just swallow or sniff. She'll lick her lips and maybe roll over and try to curl her fingers around the sheet on the mattress. She'll pet it while she falls back to sleep.

I walk into my room with her instead of putting her down. The floorboards creak in the hallway. I bend down over my bed and keep the baby against my chest, almost like I'm lying down on top of her. I stay there for a few seconds until she lets go of my hair by herself and then I roll over next to her. Dan moves and makes a noise. He rolls over the other way and the bed makes a hollow for the baby.

The next day I try to get the baby ready as soon as I can, so Helen and I can get out of the house, but she wakes up restless, and feeding her and getting her into clothes winds up taking all morning. Helen and I make small talk, and once we're finally in the car I say to her, "Sorry about Dan. He's dense like that sometimes."

She smiles. "Don't worry about it. I expected nothing less." And a moment later, "He kinda looks like a prick in those suits, huh?"

We drive to the grocery store to get food since she's a vegetarian, and afterwards we get an air mattress so she can start to sleep in the baby's room. I'd started the day with big plans for things we could do for her first real day here,

but we wind up just going back to the house. We move the crib into my room and Helen blows up her air mattress while I'm feeding the baby. Afterwards I put her in the playpen and Helen and I start to go through more of her boxes.

Helen is a painter. It's when I've started my third box when I find her work and start sliding them out. There are smudges and little lines of paint that cut across the white canvas that's wrapped around the top of the board and the back. Fingerprints and dribbles of paint from all the times it had been picked up and adjusted, gotten just right. "Did you do these?"

Helen has a vanilla wafer in her mouth as she looks over at me. "Oh. Yeah."

"Dan never told me you painted." There's one of a mermaid on a beach, one of an elephant, but most of them are just colors, a yellow and blue marble pattern with red streaks. Another of green and black swaths. "Helen, these are fantastic."

"God, burn them," Helen says, and swallows. "I really can't imagine more awful things to paint. I think I might have one of a screaming girl in there somewhere."

"I think they're nice. You should try to sell them."

She laughs. "There was one guy, a regular at this bar I used to work at, who bought one for a hundred bucks. He just wanted to get laid, you know. Poor guy. But they're just amateurish. Practice for skills and technique. And they're embarrassing because at one point I really was practicing ideas. The nature of the universe encapsulated in the transition from yellow to black."

When Dan gets home, I don't go out of my way to talk to him. The favor is returned.

The next day, Helen and I go out to get some applications, then empty the dressers in the baby's room so Helen can use them. We fold her laundry on the couch while we're watching television. She helps me change the baby's diapers. She's discovered that she loves the taste of rice cereal with applesauce. "You can stay pretty busy like this," she says.

"I guess," I say. "I know people like to talk about how busy moms are, but most of the time I really do feel like I'm just sitting around all day." The baby's at the arm of the couch, drooling into the tray of her highchair. She likes to gnaw on plastic blocks. "We'll go to the grocery store, or the park, when it's not cold. And I guess it's nice to be able to do things without all the rush. Be able to take my time while I'm shopping, stuff like that."

The block goes from the mouth to the floor. The baby looks down at it, reaching. Today is a good day. The sounds coming from her mouth are small. "You should work, then," Helen says.

I smile. "I had an internship when I was in college, before I dropped out," I say, motioning at the baby. "It was just data processing. I despised it. I would willingly get coffee and clean shoes and lie down in puddles for people to walk on my back, if they were people with ideas, you know. If I was surrounded by people who were really doing something. That's what an internship sounds like. But I can't sit all day and just type and blend into the background. I can't go back to

that. I wrote a poem about that internship, actually. 'They get you. And they sit you. Down in a cubicle.'

Helen laughs. "What rhymes with cubicle?"

"Dan was very supportive. He bought me about five thousand Post-It notes."

"Uh-huh."

"They'd never stick, though. I had one of those cubicles made of that thumbtack stuff, and they'd just fall to the ground with fibers coming out of the sticky part on the back. I was going to use that in the poem, too."

"Damn, lady. You need a joint. That's the saddest stuff I've heard all day, that wasn't on television." We're watching a true crime documentary about serial killers, one of the ones where they have profilers who talk about how lust and touch and admiration lead to murder. I sit there for a few minutes, watching talking heads and dramatic fade-outs. They use negative exposures for special effects. I'm thinking about stupid Post-Its, how poor me can't work an office and sits around the house all day, and about how Helen gave birth to a carcass into a toilet and I wonder if she was screaming when it happened, and it makes me want to cry, because sometimes I can be so dumb.

Dan finally becomes interested in our work with the boxes that night. There are small piles on the floor around the table, and while the two of us are working after the baby goes to sleep, he starts to investigate. He ignores the stacks of compact discs and cassette tapes, the slips of paper and old letters, and finally finds a box

with household cleaners and takes them to the kitchen to mix in with ours. He starts unpacking them and putting them on the countertop, and I turn to Helen.

“Why would you drive those things three thousand miles?” I ask.

She looks over at him. “I paid money for them and they’re fucking mine,” she says. She walks over and pulls out a bottle of liquid laundry detergent.

“Besides, I happen to be very particular about how my clothes smell. I like to put on a shirt and know that it’s clean. And if I get bored during the day, a shot of waterfall mist gives me a little boost. I quit smoking that way.” She smiles. “Yes, I quit smoking by huffing my clothes—” she puts a finger in Dan’s chest “—and I don’t want to hear a goddamned word about it from you.”

Dan doesn’t laugh at this. Helen and I exchange a glance and continue. That night, after I’ve turned the lights out, Dan is already in bed.

“You two seem to be getting along well,” he says after I’ve closed the door.

“Don’t be jealous. Some brothers and sisters just don’t get along.”

He pauses. “What makes you think I’m jealous?”

I shrug. “It’s just the way you act. I don’t know. Maybe you’re not jealous. Maybe you’re just trying to figure it out.”

“You know, it’s starting to piss me off when you just decide how I’m feeling.”

“Okay. You’re right. I’m sorry. But yes, we’re getting along splendidly.”

“I don’t want to fight about this,” he says. “But I’m just trying to get a timeline in my head. I know you wanted to re-do the baby’s room. And we were

talking about a vacation. But: has she shown any inclination towards getting a job?"

I get in the bed on my side and curl into a ball, hoping it will be enough of a signal for him not to try to have sex with me. "She's gotten a few applications, I guess. She just needs some time to—"

"I know," he says before I can finish. "That's fine. She can have as long as she needs. I guess I just wanted to figure it out." He rolls over so his back is to me and we lie there for a while. I listen to the silence in the room until sleep finally comes.

After a few more days, Helen starts getting callbacks on some of the applications she put out. She goes out and I busy myself going to the grocery store and running a few errands, looking for clothes for the baby at the kids' store in the mall. When I get back home I flip through a few magazines and find some ten minute recipes and an article on haunted houses, about how people assume that old houses plus moved furniture or a misplaced pen equals a ghost.

Helen gets back around three while I'm on the couch. I think it's while she's walking across the room towards me that I first realize how naturally beautiful she is. She's taken the ring out of her lip and has on a white shirt, a button-down that's not tucked in, that hangs from her perfectly. Even the way the hem of her slacks flow around her heels is effortless. She sits down next to me. "Why is it that the jobs that pay mostly in tips have the longest interviews? If

there's anything that's self-correcting, it's waitressing." She lays her head on my lap and takes out the chopsticks she has her hair tied around.

"No luck, then?" I ask her.

She sighs. "They were okay. The guy for the receptionist job had me out of there in fifteen minutes. But the bar took half an hour because they had some quiz on how many quarters of a tablespoon of vodka go in a hurricane. And the restaurant had this personality quiz. I had to tell them how many times I'd stolen from my previous job before, and what I'd do if I caught Jimmy putting a company calculator in his pocket." She turns on the television.

I run my fingers through her hair, straightening it out from when she took it out of the bun. "You have to be licensed to tend bar."

"I told them I have a license from Oregon, hoping that would help a little. We'll see."

"You seem like the type that would do well at a bar," I say.

She shrugs. "It can get a little creepy. At the last one I worked at, we'd give homeless guys food to clean up after we closed. Basically to do our jobs for us. And it was in the arts district in Portland; there was one guy who was a photographer with *National Geographic* who invited me to go to Brazil with him. I don't think I want to have sex with a stranger just to go to Brazil."

I laugh. "Helen, you have to take the bar job." My hand that's not in her hair catches one of hers, twists her fingers a little. "Work at the bar, live here forever, and I can just live life vicariously, through you."

She laughs and closes her hand around mine. “Don’t give me a pity party. Go get your own damn job,” she says.

And then I kiss her.

There’s no thought or intention behind it. It just happens as if I’d been doing it for years and it’s over before I realize that, in fact, it’s not something regular. And it seems like that realization seems to happen to both of us at the same time. Helen laughs, once, but before she can say anything I do it again. I know exactly how I want this to be: desperate, rushed, as if we’d been wanting and skirting around it for too long and, and now would never see each other again. Panicked and ravenous. But it’s not. She uses her hands to do things like trace lines up and down my spine, the side of my neck. When it’s over and we’re lying on the floor, it feels very strongly like a memory, of a girlfriend in high school who lost her virginity at fifteen to a senior, and then he’d broken up with her the next week. In her room, she cried and she cried and she cried, and eventually there was just the silence and I held her like that, neither of us saying anything because there was just nothing left.

Helen kisses my neck and I look at our bodies there, for the first time really. Her nipples are very pink, more than I thought they could be. And the baby left me four stretch marks. One on the outside of each breast, one under my beltline, and one across my left thigh. I evaluate them. Occasionally I look for new ones.

Eventually the baby cries.

“You should brush your teeth,” Helen says as I get up. “Now, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

I smile. “You sound like an old pro.”

She flattens herself out and bends her head up, looking towards the far wall. “You’ll start to worry at the strangest times,” she says.

Dan comes home. I’m curious if I should feel guilty about it, but I don’t, and that’s good enough for me. Helen and I have decided that we can use her dishes since we might need them now, and we spend some time rearranging the cupboards to get more room. Dan spends some time on the phone with someone from work, and Helen uses him to hold stacks of plates while she’s bringing them from the table, if she needs to re-arrange something. Just like any other night.

When Dan gets off the phone, he watches us for a while. Then he finds me in the dining area, right after I’ve picked up a stack of plates. Helen’s in the kitchen and he asks me, a little too quietly, “Do you really think we’re going to need all these?”

Something in me wants to tear out his eyeballs. “Hmm, Dan, let me think about that.”

“You know what—” he says.

“No, I think you’re right. We don’t need these at all,” I say, and I drop the entire stack of Helen’s dishes, right there on the floor. The noise is louder than I imagined, and I wince as I start to notice the differences between the sound of a whole plate sliding and small pieces of plates sliding across the floor, but I keep

my eye on him until the commotion is over. And then I yell, “Not a goddamned one,” at him, and go to the bedroom and slam the door and then lock the door.

A few seconds later he tries to turn the knob. I don’t say anything. He knocks and I don’t say anything, and finally he slams on it and I yell out, “It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door,” and I can hear him walk away. I change clothes and curl up in bed with a copy of *Time* and read an article about Iraq. Around ten, Dan tries again, and I finally open the door.

“So what the hell was that all about?” he says.

“Go to sleep,” I say, crawling back into bed.

“Fuck,” he says. “You don’t get to go around destroying things and just shrug it off. Is this because I didn’t call you from work that day, when Helen called me?”

“What? No.”

“Then what?” He just stands there, like a child, refusing to move unless he gets a toy.

I sit up, Indian style. “Has it ever occurred to you that I was planning on doing something with my life? That I had a plan? That, by this point in my life I’d be flying to London and Hong Kong—”

“You’re twenty-two years old,” he says. “I don’t care where you got a job. And you’re missing one year of school. Go back.”

“You’re twenty-five, and you’re on television, Dan.”

“At six o’clock on Saturday morning,” he says incredulously. “When the real people take their vacations. I spend my time modeling and writing copy.”

“Okay. That’s not the point, anyway, Dan. I would have been arranging multi-billion dollar business deals. That’s what I learned to do. So will you *please* let me arrange the fucking plates? I can handle the nuance of it.” Saying this makes the hostility of it start to dissolve.

He laughs. “Okay,” he says. “You’re absolutely right.”

He moves to the bed and I fall back. “I’m sorry I flipped out. It was uncalled for, but I just got pissed.”

He moves onto his side, facing me. “You do realize, for the future, that expecting me to predict a connection between your degree and dinner plates is something that’s not going happen, right?”

“I do,” I say. “I really, really do.” I lean over and kiss him, and as soon as our lips touch is when I start to wonder if my mouth tastes like vagina, and as much as that makes me want to pull away from him, I don’t. He rises up on his hands and leans over me, and when he starts to put a hand around my thigh, to spin me so our bodies are aligned, I finally put a hand against his chest. “Not tonight,” I say. “I’m just exhausted and drained and feel like an idiot.”

He relents and falls down beside me with a few lingering kisses to my cheek and shoulder.

I bolt upright in the middle of the night. “Dan, where’s the baby?”

“She’s asleep in the playpen.” He yawns. “Leave her be.”

“I can’t hear her.”

He wraps me up in a hug. "She's sleeping," he says again. "Leave her alone."

"I don't want her to wake up your sister." I know how my daughter is impossible to get back down, and I know how it is to sleep in a bed with her, how she'll grab and hold, then push and whine. I have some image of Helen with her fingers curled around the back of the baby's head. The baby clinging at Helen's shirt. I imagine Helen waking up once to clear a spot, then again to offer warmth or contact, spending the night back and forth like that. I imagine Helen watching her in the dark. It's something I want to protect her from, something better not to have to go through.

"Open the door," Dan says, then falls back to sleep.

When I walk out of the room in the morning, Helen's on the couch in a T-shirt and boxers. "Wow," she says.

I survey the room, the floor where I dropped the plates, now swept clean. "I'm sorry," I say and sit down next to her. "I'll buy you new dishes."

"Are you kidding? Completely worth the experience. Just warn me next time. I've got a video camera around here somewhere." She sits back against the arm of the couch. "Actually, it wasn't that bad. He got over it quickly. Just started cleaning it up." She waits for me to speak. "You want to talk about it? About anything?"

"God, no."

“Good enough,” she says, and lies down with her head on my lap. I put a hand in her hair and she starts moving one finger around the inside of my elbow. After a while, she says, “Are you going to divorce him?”

I laugh. “No.”

“Me,” she says, “I’m rebounding, I guess. You? I don’t know what you are.”

“Frustrated. All I want is for you to bite me or something. I want it to hurt, somehow.”

She lifts up my shirt and places a slow kiss on my stomach. “I kinda understand that.”

“You never told me about your guy out there. Your baby. What happened. Was it like Dan thought?”

She looks up at the ceiling and smiles. “He changed,” she says. “I changed. *We* changed. It was kinda shocking, really, how fast and complete it all was. I wish we hadn’t,” she says.

Helen only winds up staying with us for about six weeks. She takes the bar job, finds a girl whose lease is about to end, and they become roommates. We hug as she’s about to take off with the last of her things. It’s all very calm. She calls every week or so for a while, and then she gradually fades away again as if she’d never been here.

It’s only after she leaves that I start to feel the way I suspected I should have felt with Dan all along. Like I’d betrayed him, that his life would be better without me, how much he deserves someone who loves him. It occurs to me that

this is self-sustaining rather than cyclic, so I start to exercise and meet a group of girls at the gym and we start going out occasionally. Dan and I go on vacation in the summer, and before the school year starts I find out I'm pregnant again. The baby starts sleeping through the night long before I notice it. She starts to wake me up in the mornings, standing in her crib, saying "mama" or "baba." I take her to get her first haircut. Ever so slowly she becomes less and less the baby, and finally just starts to be Miriam. The one on the way becomes the baby. My stomach starts growing again and Dan whispers to it again, but this time I can't help but put my hand in his hair while his lips flutter just over the surface of my skin and wonder at what a beautiful fool he is, how much there right in front of his face that he doesn't know, things that should be just as plain and dangerous as water or fire.

Wasted on the Young

The joke didn't turn out to be what I thought it was at the time. I'd played music religiously in high school, making up a band with some friends. We even won the talent show in my senior year playing some Smashing Pumpkins song that had just come out, but when college started, I decided that music was a dream that would never come true, so I pursued something profitable like my parents had always expected. Three semesters into Georgia Tech, following several drunken tirades concerning moron musicians who insisted on playing their own sad-bastard shit in a bar full of people trying to have the best night of their lives, intense "songwriters" counting pathetically into the mic rather than playing good covers like everyone wanted, I decided to call up those old friends from high school and come up with some songs people would actually want to hear. There were four of us, and we called ourselves the Bible Beaters for a while because the other guys were named David, Mark, and Aaron, and my name is Reed. We got high and started playing chords that fell like something going off a cliff and came back all at once, heavy but slow with the force of a battering ram and tortuous as someone getting a fingernail pried off with tweezers. The joke was supposed to be the one about artwork full of splashes and dots, that any idiot could do it. We sat down and wrote songs and laughed at those guys who devoted so much time and effort to composing something that sounded as appealing as waterfalls and whales humping. But the joke turned out to be that we were actually good at it. That this punk kid living off weed and ramen noodles could spend two weeks pushing out six songs that people actually enjoyed—not

sophisticated people, but college kids at parties who actually danced to the music instead of watching the performance. The joke was that there was talent there, and if this kid had actually put some effort into it, he might have been something, but instead he decided never to read about music, to operate by the sheer force of it all, the circles and swirls of hips and ponytails, the roar and the simultaneous experience of everyone there, the collective consciousness, because he was smart enough to do all of that on accident, and the experience of all five thousand years of human history was just a trap that led to mediocrity.

When you're in a band, and people like your stuff, even more people start to be your friend. Some guy knew another guy who could get us a show at a bar. Someone there knew somebody else. We started playing around Atlanta five or six times a month, and there were after-parties, always at some random person's house, and there were girls. Girls, at that stage in a music career, don't exactly show up like the people trying to make money, but once girls are pursued and exposed that environment of the sound and the altered acceptability, even the stuck-up ones from Emory were caught up in it for at least a good two months. We started writing new songs, there at parties, after the madness had died down a bit, but still in the midst of everyone, playing our instruments with pens in our mouths so we could scribble notes between the breaks, while girls were watching. Girls always loved stuff like that, too, the deconstruction of mystery, the private turned public, sharing. Our drummer even had sex with this girl once, right there on someone's couch, with about twenty people watching while the rest of us were messing around with guitars. One afternoon, a few days later when it

was just us, he got that same girl to give our bass player a blow job. The bassist was Aaron, and he'd always been shy and I guess we'd been riding him a bit that day, and we all just kinda let it happen. But when it was over, when this other guy had just come in her mouth and she went and sat back down next to the drummer—her boyfriend, I guess, in her mind—he just kissed her cheek and said “Good girl,” to her.

There's a power that comes along with this, even at that level where you're really just practicing in your parents' garage, and that power affected everyone differently. I won't say I was immune to it, but I started treating our drummer like a piece of shit after that day with that girl, mostly because I saw that he was a piece of shit everywhere, talking about Aaron's old, dying neighbors, the way he treated the lady at the sub shop, even the way he drove. There's a way in which all that crap can be funny, because it's not serious, and then there's the way it really is serious. And while our band had never been about territory and who it all belonged to, after two weeks of going on with him about pretty much everything, I finally kicked him out.

All this happened between February and August of 1994, and the timing of everything really is a big blur. Kurt Cobain blew his head off somewhere in there, and I can tell you that we kicked that first drummer out before we got a CD deal, because we got the CD deal about two days later and started to panic. And I know that we got thrown into jail while we were on our second drummer, because he's the one that started the fight. We were just at a bar and playing pool, Aaron the shy bassist over on one side, when some redneck, probably a hundred

pounds overweight, wearing denim shorts and a Ricky Rudd T-shirt, walks over and says “What the fuck are you looking at?” right in Aaron’s face.

New drummer says, “Who are you talking to?” and Ricky Rudd starts to say that Aaron had been staring at his wife, and he points over to a woman who was also probably a hundred pounds overweight, shaped like an egg with these little legs sticking out of her shorts. Blonde, and wearing this bright red lipstick and a pastel blue shirt, and standing right underneath a damn television.

New drummer says, “You’re joking, right? What the hell do you expect him to do with that fat whore?” and it was pretty much over right there.

Then we got our third drummer—an old guy named Earl, but we’d moved beyond Bible Beaters, past ten other names, and were probably on Elysium by that time—and we practiced with Earl every day, six hours a day, for two weeks. During our recording sessions—which were at a studio buried on some sidestreet in the wrong part of town—we all recorded separately, so we’d have Earl go first, and practice the next song while all the rest of us did our pieces for the first. Recording that first one took about six days, and at the end, we had our own CD. There was very little money in this—our “producer” knew a guy who would press the discs for five dollars each, add another five bucks for a case and liner, and half the cost of the CD was gone. Our producer would walk the discs into stores around town where he knew the managers, and take another five bucks off for the store and the producer, we made about five bucks per disc, which had to be split four ways. But it was a CD.

And then there was the fake touring that followed, which is when a “manager” drives around hanging up flyers on telephone poles, and the band drives to Gainesville on Friday, does a show, hopes they’re lucky enough to find a party to crash at, then drives to Tallahassee on Saturday, and either drives home that night or finds another party. Then the next weekend it’s Tuscaloosa and Birmingham. Knoxville and Raleigh. And hopefully two shows at home during the week.

I met Kate on one of those shows at home while we were driving around on the weekends. It was fall by then. She was at a show with a couple of her friends, standing around a table near the back of the bar. She was dressed in jeans and this white, low-cut shirt that would change colors with the rotating lights that were hanging from the ceiling. I went over and the four of us yelled at each other over the noise of the crowd. So much communication in a bar is visual, like scuba divers underwater, but we picked up each other’s cues quickly enough and the four of us spent almost an hour there, mostly them asking me about music and touring and the inside details people never really get to know about. Kate’s face would go up when she laughed, and shadows fell under her cheeks and a few places on her neck. We did the talking we could manage, and I remember her screaming “Exactly” into my ear with her hand on my shoulder, and I could smell her lotion and feel the tingle of her breath on my neck. As her friends were getting ready to go, I touched her hand, and she looked at me, smiling, and yelled out, “I’m married,” right there in the middle of it all. Everything was so loud

in there that even I could barely hear her, but I could read her lips and see it a bit in the power in her eyes.

“I don’t care,” I yelled back.

She shrugged a bit. “The kids do,” she yelled back, and then left.

I scribbled my phone number onto a napkin, ran up to her as she and her friends were getting to the door, and I stuffed the napkin into her purse. She shook her head, and I put my thumb and pinky finger to my face, motioning that she should call me, then I touched her back and went into the crowd.

She called two days later. “So, I called,” she said.

We actually went on something of a date before we started sleeping together. We made arrangements to get lunch one day, and it wound up being someplace with a patio and cloth napkins. The entire time I felt as if I was in her territory now, a land of salads and stemmed glassware. Kate was an interior designer, and I listened while she told me about renovating houses for retired couples with money, people who, in Atlanta, consistently wanted their living spaces to look like something out of the Civil War. Earth tones, leather, lots of metal. I told her the first few lines of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” were actually pretty amazing, the part about trampling through the vintage where the grapes of wrath were stored, that it reminded me of having something squished between my toes, how that sensation could make people aroused or squeamish, but it couldn’t be ignored. She told me about college, and from the math I put together that she was about five years older than me. I was failing a film class that semester, but decided to leave that part out. She told me she had a boy and

a girl. I told her she looked amazing for a woman with two kids. She laughed at me.

The next of our dates was to have been something similar, on her lunch break, but Kate told me she'd pick me up at my place. As soon as she walked in, she took off her rings, walked over to the coffee table, and put them down. "I was half-expecting beer bottles to be everywhere," she said, and started unhooking a bracelet.

"I cleaned," I said, watching her. "They're in a garbage bag in the kitchen."

The bracelet went down on the table. "I thought we were planning on going out to lunch," she said, and the look of power was there from the first time I met her, back in her eyes.

"Better safe than sorry," I said. "Leave the necklace on."

"Good enough." She pulled her hands back around to the front and started unbuttoning her shirt. "Where do you want me?"

"The bedroom," I said.

I'll just say that she wasn't a college girl who was looking to be taken on some grand tour of life's possibilities. She knew exactly what she was after, and exactly how to get it. When we were getting dressed again afterwards, conversation drifted into how hard it was for her to get time away, that she wasn't going to give me her number because she didn't want her husband to answer, all those things. It was almost like she was ashamed and was trying to tell me she wouldn't ever be calling me again, so I never expected her to. The band was taking calls from actual managers around that time, and we were going through

the discussion of who we liked more and who we thought could actually book gigs and wasn't trying to bullshit us. But sometime the next week, Kate called and said she'd be free in an hour. And then she called again two weeks later. Then twice the next week, after our first meeting turned into wrestling match after I took her hands away from her shirt while she was unbuttoning it, and we wound up fucking right there against the wall with most of our clothes still on. We kept up an erratic schedule like that until the band started going on real tours.

In late November, we'd finally decided on a manager, and he got a bus and put together a list of dates that would keep us out of Atlanta for six weeks straight, starting that January, of 95, right after classes started again. It was a real decision point for us—all of us except Earl, who just shrugged at everything—because the rest of us had to decide how far we were willing to take it, if the potential was worth dropping out of school. We all decided to go. We had enough money to get a big, five bedroom house together—it was cheaper than sitting on five rents while we were out of town, because we all knew there would be more tours, and talking about it and planning for it got us energized again.

I told Kate I'd be going out of town, and she just shrugged a little and told me I didn't owe her any explanations. It was not the reaction I was really looking for. I wanted her to be excited for me or interested in the places we were going, or even sad that I was leaving, but that's all she said. It was after sex and she just kept smoking her cigarette. So I started talking. I talked about cavemen, about some guy somewhere a hundred thousand years ago trying to spear a fish for seven hours, who finally gets one, and starts jumping and yelling and

screaming, how that was the origin of music and how everything that music ought to be came from that one emotion. African tribes dancing around a fire had it exactly right, and that was what I wanted to get across, the roar and the motion, every sensation, all at once.

“That all sounds good,” she said, “but at some point you have to actually take some care with it, right? Pay attention to what strings you’re plucking, something.”

“But that’s playing,” I said. “That’s just muscle memory. I’m talking about the big stuff.”

“Right, but so am I,” she said. “Everything comes easy in the beginning. But are you just going to get by on sensation? What are you going to do when you get tired? What are you going to do ten years down the road when all this tour shit starts to be what going to the grocery store is for everyone else?”

“Work at that grocery store,” I said. “Give up. You can’t make music if everything starts to be ordinary. The Rolling Stones put out a new record, and everyone laughs at them. Because it’s not good anymore, it’s just hanging on to a memory. The world doesn’t want old musicians.”

That was the greatest truth I’d discovered in my life, to that point. It was probably better to be Kurt Cobain than Mick Jagger.

“And I’m gonna guess that you’ve never put any thought into any of that. How you know when you’re burnt out. How to get some of it back for a while.”

She hopped up from the bed. “Shit,” she said, and started looking around the

floor for her panties, this aqua blue G-string that was tied up in the leg of her pants.

“Not really,” I said. “I’m not there yet.”

“Right, but maybe if you did think about it, and come to some kind of answer, it might affect how you’re doing things now,” she said. “Cause it does affect how you’re doing things now, whether you’re thinking about it or not.”

It never occurred to me to say anything about her husband. We’d talked about him once or twice. I knew that he was a weatherman on television, that she was conscious of his career and didn’t want to be seen around town. He was on a billboard around the corner from my house, one of six people pointing upwards, saying they’d told us it would be like this today. He was farthest to the left, so I knew what he looked like and all that. Instead of bringing it up, I just said, “You know I want to keep seeing you afterwards, right?”

And she adjusted her bra and said, “Yeah. I know,” looking down at herself.

The tour was drugs interspersed with occasional debauchery and regular performances, and it wasn’t long before I was spending each day more convinced than the last that I was too exhausted to make it through to the end. I’d decided when I left Atlanta that I was going to write the second CD while we were away, but there was never a good time. I was around the same people, day in and day out, and we spent very little of it laughing, unless we were out and in the middle of a mass of people. We tried to sleep while the bus was driving, and mostly failed. We just went, and did whatever until we collapsed. Even women

became routine. I was the singer in the band. I was the dangerous thing, the thing they did once in the haze and cloud of it all, the mixture between public and private, the way music expresses all the things people are unable to say but have always wanted to, and when the adventure was over and the sun came up, they had a tendency to say, "Well, I'll never do that ever again." Eventually I decided I'd rather just sleep.

When we got back home in early March, there was a message on my machine from Kate. She'd gotten a beeper, like doctors had back then, gave me the number, and said I shouldn't beep her after 5. The first time she walked into my house after that first tour, her in that skirt, walking through the mounds of dirty clothes and empty beer bottles, was like fresh air blowing through smoke. And it might sound like I was in falling in love with her, but that really wasn't it. We were always very straight-forward with each other. On one of the first good nights of the year, we grabbed a bottle of wine and drove out into the country and put down a blanket. She got on her knees, pulled her jeans and underwear down, and went down to her hands, just there on all fours with her ass in the air. There was no sexiness in our relationship. She didn't get calls from guys wanting more of her time; I didn't have to buy her flowers, or listen to her talk. I could spend two weeks out of town, and when I came back, she wasn't suspicious or sad or looking for me to prove that I'd missed her. Simply, "put it here." But she carried this aura around her, completely alien to all the other people in my life, which made me think the lady knew way more about everything than anyone else.

I spent the first few weeks back trying to stay as far away from the band as I could, going over a few hooks for the new CD. Kate started talking about divorcing her husband during that time at home, and the manager had set up a new tour, so I mostly set the CD aside. I didn't want to start it and have to drop it halfway through, because too many things would get changed. And I was sure that all Kate's talk about getting divorced was just bullshit getting at her. She was someone who cared about what people thought, who wanted to project an image even if the cost of that image was that she sometimes needed a bit of a break away from it, to get a little dose of appreciation for it, rather than always having it be considered as a given, as a normal state.

The band went back on tour in May, this time for two months, finally staying away from the college towns and going mostly to bigger cities. When I came back in July, her husband had actually moved out, into an apartment somewhere, and it was just Kate and the kids. I was a little surprised, but it didn't really change things for us. Our affair never turned out to be that high-powered, "I'm going to change everything, just to be with you" kind of a thing. We were just comfortable together, like putting on socks when it's cold outside, or taking a bath. Like smelling a candle right after it's lit, when you anticipate it and the anticipation makes it richer. The parts of her life that led to divorce had been in motion long before I ever came around, and she wasn't coming to me because she was either happy or sad. She kept me safely distant for all of that. I heard pieces of how it happened, of course. The yelling and the frustrations. But after her husband moved out, the only thing that really changed for us was that we

started going out, mostly to see sights or for special events, like tourists in the city where we lived, museums and historical sights, concerts and festivals. And eventually, she finally gave me her phone number, but told me never to call on the weekend, when she had the kids. But it was her girlfriends who went over and slept over and helped her out while she was first getting used to managing everything on her own herself. Divorce as kind of a community event.

I toured again through August and September, the new CD starting and stopping through that process, and after that tour, I started going over to her house a couple of times, and she never mentioned anything about divorce or her husband or anything like that. One night, she called me over after she'd put her kids to bed, the first time I'd ever been in the vicinity of them. We spent a while in the light of the television, playing poker on her living room floor. After sex we stayed in bed together for a while, in the middle of that clouded high, silent at first. After we'd worked our way back into words, she asked me if I knew whether olives were a fruit or a vegetable. It was just like that, too, out of nowhere. She said her daughter had asked her during the day. I told her what I really wanted to know was whether a fucking walnut was a fruit or not, if fruits are just things with seeds on the inside. She laughed, and I think we even worked ourselves into a little argument about it, and finally she just wrapped her arms and her legs around me and said I should stay. "The kids will be here in the morning," she said, "but we've had so many people over, anyway, I don't think they'll give it a second thought."

I didn't refuse. Probably, I just kissed her and rearranged her so I could hold her for the night without cutting off the circulation in my arm. Sometime in the middle of the night, she woke up and rolled over to me and said, "Maybe, it would be better if you slept on the couch. They're probably going to wake up before we do."

"Seriously?" I said.

"I mean, you can go home. But I don't want them to see us in the bedroom together."

I got up and snagged a blanket. "No. I'll stay," I said.

I slept on the couch with my clothes on as best I could. I'd already been awake for a while when I noticed the daughter looking at me from the corner where the living room met the hallway. There was just half of her head poking out, an eye peering at me, along with the swell of a cheek and a lock of brown hair still tussled from sleep. I waved at her a bit and said good morning, but I wasn't able to discern any reaction, if there was one. I knew things about them, their names, and stories Kate had told me. I knew that Miriam was five and Tristan was three. But that was all. And Miriam and I watched each other for a bit, and finally when I sat up she disappeared back toward her bedroom.

It wasn't too long before the sound of voices started coming from the back of the house. Miriam had woken up her brother. I don't know if they were whispering, but all I could really make out was a "Gosh, Tristan," and a couple of "nuh-uh"s. I heard the sound of doors opening and closing. The toilet flushed. I sat there for a while in the gray light of the morning that came in through the

windows. It was when I finally started to lie back down that they both appeared at the corner again. Tristan was in front, and Miriam watched with something like horror on her face as he walked toward me without hesitation. She grabbed at his hand and said his name, but he shrugged her off.

“Mommy told us you might be here when we woke up,” Miriam said to me from the corner, as Tristan climbed onto the couch.

“I’m glad she did,” I said. “Did you guys sleep all right?”

“I could hear you snoring,” Tristan said. “It sounded like this.” He demonstrated.

“Thanks,” I said. “You’re a pretty funny guy.”

This confused him, I think. He’d simply been telling the truth. He lifted up his car. “I got this really cool car the other day, and it’s totally awesome,” he said and looked down at it. “It’s so cool. See?” He flipped the front wheels around. “And if you go like this—” he fell down to the floor in one motion, put the car on the ground, and pulled it backwards “—it goes like this.” He let go and it rolled a few feet across the floor. He looked up at me from the floor, leaning up on his knees. “And I’ve got a bunch of littler cars, and if you do it, it’ll run over them. It’s so fun.”

“All right,” I said.

“Are you going to make us breakfast?” Miriam asked. She still stood a good distance away, with her arms folded across the front of her pajamas.

“Sure. I can do that. What do you guys usually have?”

“Pancakes,” Tristan said. He started making a song out of it.

I had never made pancakes in my life. “Pancakes it is.”

“Are you going to let me help?” Miriam asked.

“Of course,” I said, and they followed me into the kitchen. I started going through shelves, hoping Kate had a mix of some kind, with directions on the box. I went through the pantry with no luck, and looked in some of the cabinets above the counter and found plastic plates and wine glasses. I looked under the sink and found her cleaners and some folded paper towels under the pipes, a roach motel in a far corner of another cabinet that held the pots and pans.

“The mix is over there,” Miriam said, and it wasn’t in a helpful tone, but more as if everyone should know where the pancake mix was.

“On top of the microwave,” Tristan said, already sitting his knees in a chair.

I got the milk and the powder and let Miriam stir it. She slopped the batter out of the bowl, and after I showed her how to do it side-to-side, whirling, she wouldn’t let me get more than five feet away. She’d ask “Like this?” and then say, “Okay.” Then a few minutes later, “Like this?”

“That’s perfect. Just like that.”

“This will really make your arm hurt so bad,” she said.

I’d never been around children before, but those two kids were exactly what I’d been trying to get across in my music for the past three years. The freedom. There was no worry, no social construct keeping Tristan from saying, “Here’s my fucking car, and it’s fantastic.” There was no self-doubt, just the desire and the action, Miriam’s “I don’t like you and I’m not going to pretend otherwise.” No pretenses, just honesty without the hypocrisy of consequence. It

was like a pack of wild animals, but tender, smelling each other out, waiting to see what this new member would do instead of expecting him to already know, or grooming, picking bugs out of his hair because the picker is hungry.

I sat Miriam on top of the counter and she watched the pancakes cook, and when we'd finally finished, I took Tristan's plate over to the table. Miriam went the other direction. "Tristan, come and wash your hands."

"I already did," he said from the floor, without bothering to look up from his car. But Miriam was already out the door. He hopped up into his chair and put his car at the corner of the table. He looked at the plate in front of him, then at me.

"Are you strong?"

"I suppose so."

"Do you know my dad?"

"No. I really only know your mom."

"Oh. He's really strong, too. Like Batman. He's really really strong. My dad can pick me all the way up." He moved the sleeve of his pajamas up a little to show a bicep. He flexed. "I'm strong, too."

"Those are huge, man."

"I know."

There was the sound of a glass being set on a counter, and when I turned around, Kate was there, shaking a bag of tea leaves. Her eyes were still tight and she was in the middle of a yawn.

“Hey, Mom, what’s his name?” Tristan asked, sticking his fork into the middle of his pancake. He lifted it up above his head before he put it in his mouth.

“Reed,” she said.

“Reed has really big muscles.” His mouth was full.

“I know. I figured you’d like him,” Kate said. She walked over to the table and took his fork out of his hand and started cutting his pancake into bite sizes.

“Yeah. And I showed him my car.”

“Mommy.” Miriam had reappeared and stood in the threshold to the living room. “Mommy, I went to wash my hands for breakfast,” she said, “and Tristan went to the bathroom this morning, and when I went in there, there was pee all over the seat. He didn’t even clean it up.”

“That’s my good girl,” Kate said. “Come eat for me.”

Miriam’s body fell. She walked over to the table and looked up at Tristan as she went. “You need to clean it when you get done with breakfast, Tristan,” she said.

“Reed and I are going to go outside for a few minutes,” Kate said, handing Tristan back his fork. She mouthed the word “cigarette” at me. “I want you guys to be good. No splashing your milk. If you get done, you can turn on the television. But we’ll be right outside if you need anything.”

“Can I come?” Miriam asked.

“No. We’re going for grown up talk.” I followed Kate out the back door. Their yard had a slab of concrete near the door to the kitchen that had probably

once been used as half of a basketball court. We sat at the edge of it, looking back towards the fence and the house behind hers. I handed her a cigarette and, as she lit it, she said, "So, those are the kids," she said.

"They're fucking amazing," I said.

"Thanks," she said, picking a bit of sleep from her eye. "I like to think so."

"I don't know why we don't take them everywhere," I said. "That kid would shit his pants if we took him to a monster truck show."

"Generally, the idea is for him to not shit in his pants," she said.

"You know what I mean," I said.

"I do."

"They have that dinosaur thing going on at the museum, too," I said.

"Look," she said. "I'm not trying to turn this into an everyday thing. I just wanted someone next to me last night."

"Okay."

"It was stupid," she said. She was looking out into the yard. It was the time of year when the birds were still migrating, and there were a couple bouncing through the grass.

"That Mommy stuff just kicks into overdrive, doesn't it?" I said.

"The Mommy stuff isn't a phase," she said. "Dirty little fuck-slut, that's the phase."

"Katie."

"Look, is it okay if you just leave?" she said. "We both know what you're after, and we both know what I'm after, but they're not going to understand that."

It'll be better for them if you don't have to make a big deal about saying bye, if you're just some guy that was here for a bit, like you were delivering a package or something."

"I made them breakfast," I said.

"I know. And thank you for that. But it's still something I can get out of at this point, and I do want that. I just wasn't thinking right when I asked you to stay."

"Okay."

"And we do have a lot of stuff to do today," she said.

"I parked in the front. You want me to walk around the house?"

"Is that okay?" she said.

"I guess. Whatever you want," I told her.

I started working on the second CD that week. I remember it because I did it mostly to stop thinking about that awkward conversation, and because I got the guys from the band together to do it, so I knew I was serious. After a week, when Kate hadn't called me at all and we had three half-finished songs floating around, I went ahead and beeped her. She never called me back. Two weeks later, I beeped her again, and when she called me back she told me we ought to meet for dinner somewhere.

We didn't meet at places, and we hadn't spent two weeks out of touch unless I'd been on tour, so I saw it coming. We decided on breakfast for dinner,

and when I got to the restaurant, she was sitting in a corner, away from most other people. I sat down across from her and she said, "We need to talk."

"Okay," I said.

"I just don't really know what I want with men right now," she said. "There's this divorce, and I don't know what I want to do afterwards."

"I know where you're going with this," I said.

"Good," she said. "I mean, this wasn't ever anything that was going to last, anyway. I just thought we should talk about it face to face."

"It doesn't sound like there's anything to talk about," I said. "You've made up your mind, and it's not a subject we have to come to an agreement on."

"Okay," she said. "This isn't how I pictured this conversation going."

"And how was that?" I asked.

"Swearing. Accusations of stupidity. Something like that," she said. "Are you mad?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters to me," she said.

"No," I said. "I'm not mad. You handled this perfectly."

"Come on," she said. "We don't have to do that. We can at least have dinner together," she said, and nudged her menu a bit.

"Why would I want to have dinner with you?" I asked. "We weren't anything that was going to last because we were just fucking each other. We didn't go out to dinner or to movies. Why would I want to start now?"

We'd finished the thirteen songs by the following March, but the universal view was that the songs were too hard. There was no enjoyment in any of them, and I started going through songs looking for common elements, small truths that I could use to tone them down. As time passed, I would come to think of this as my undoing. And then that thought would pass and then resurface. There was a feeling during the writing of that first album that could never be recaptured, and I blamed myself, I blamed a few women as time passed, that they were holding me back or pushing me too hard. The band had two more tours, and then we all drifted on to other things. Aaron went back to school. Earl, honestly, had started drinking too much even before the band started to unravel, and he eventually wound up on the streets.

I've discovered two things that have to be a part of the mindset of every song. The first is that people will say ugly, demeaning things about themselves in order to not do something hard. They'll say "I'm a manipulative bitch" or "I shot the dog" or whatever, because doing those things are easier than sitting down and letting someone go. The second is that the man is never the victim. Even if the song is about heartbreak from beginning to end, there has to be one line in there that somehow acknowledges that the guy got dumped because the lady is smarter than him. And this second one, I know, is true about the real world as well. But in the way that music hazes the mind, creates an alternate universe out of intensity and potential, I'm not so convinced that human folly in the real world, the senselessness of all the bullshit we try to get away with, is completely due to being lazy or cowardly.

But what do I know? I make money as a music tutor, failed in an attempt to become a producer, and the only touring I've done in the last five years was as a guitarist for the B-52s.

I have seen Kate around every once in a while, though. Once every year or three, at the coffee shop, or the shoe section of the department store at Christmas. We'll make eye contact and start laughing. People look. We hug. That thing. The spark is always still there, for me, anyway. We'll chat, and the part of my brain that has listed all the things I should have said to her at one point or another never really make it through the first ten minutes of our first run-in. Years have blunted the edges. Eventually we'll get to the point where we start making gestures toward the door, that we're late or expected or accompanied. The first time we saw each other after September 11th, probably a year or two afterwards, we arranged lunch for the following day and swapped stories. She was on a job, fixing someone's house—an entire conversation starts about how she runs her own firm, now—and it wasn't until the news started interrupting the FM radio stations that she learned about it. I was in bed, and saw the second plane hit. While we talked, I started to notice that she seemed much more content. Just little things: the fronts of her shirts had gone up, her earrings were less flashy. There had always been something about Kate that wanted to act ten years older than she was, and if she could just do that, it would make her stop acting ten years younger instead. She goes by Katherine, instead of Kate. She was able to salvage things with her husband, and she'd gotten those lines that accentuate

her cheeks, on each side of her nose, from laughing too much. That has always been a sign of a good life to me. She told me that she and her husband bought a new house out in the suburbs, and that despite everything, her daughter was the one that started junior high with black fingernails. I filled her in on the other guys in the band, the tours and the album that never materialized, that I was thinking about opening a studio.

We never exchanged any phone numbers or email addresses during those meetings. We'd just walk out the door of the restaurant, hug, and she would kiss my cheek and whisper "Take care of yourself," or something in my ear. All very uncomplicated.

About five years later, we saw each other at the grocery store, but she had her kids with her and I passed by with nothing more than a smile. And as time goes on, these random encounters seem more and more like lucky coincidences we've been taking for granted.

Quality Progress

I'd moved out, bought my own furniture, changed the names on bills, all those things that happen in the aftermath of filing the paperwork, which is what most people consider divorce to be. But all those things were themselves at the end of a process that doesn't really have a name, an often disgusting struggle for power and blame, of hurting and being hurt, two people separating from each other and still trying to maintain a modicum of dignity, and it's that process which is what I think divorce actually is. What happens in the build-up, and what happens in the aftermath, being alone, trying to reconnect with someone new without the influence of those severed connections, is often overlooked. Either the paperwork is filed, or it's not. But my wife and I never went through with our divorce. Our daughter got sick, needed surgery, and by the time all that came around, we'd gone through enough yelling and bickering that we could finally be honest with each other without worrying about expectation and obligation. We reconnected with each other, but that doesn't mean that we didn't have to tear each other down in the process.

The only time my wife ever came to my apartment was after I'd been there for about three months. She'd come unannounced, and standing on the other side of the door in a peacoat and scarf, holding a paper grocery bag in one arm. When Katherine had first asked me for a divorce, when school started after I'd left the house, she said it would be better if we traded the kids through school, one dropping off and the other picking up, so this was the first time we'd seen each other since I left. We didn't say anything for a few seconds. Her face was a

mixture of tiredness and some kind of anxiety over coming, probably, but it was strange to look at regardless of the expression. “Where’re the kids?” I asked, and as soon as I did, stories from the children unraveled in my mind, fall break, sleepover, so excited.

“Cindy Barnett’s mom’s,” she said. “You know they’re out until Wednesday.”

“I know.”

“You gonna let me in?” she asked.

Even though I’d been there for months, the walls of my apartment were still bare and most of my boxes were still packed, sitting in stacks of varying heights. There was a couch I bought second-hand, and my exercise machine sitting in front of a sliding-glass door that led to a two-foot by three-foot balcony. Ninja Turtles and Barbie skirts lined the island that separated the living area from the kitchen. A few boxes had indentations in the top and scuff marks on the sides, from where Miriam and Tristan would sit on them and kick while we chatted, while I was making them dinner or hot chocolate.

There are two stories about why my wife left me. The first is that I met her in college, when her flighty and mercurial tendencies were easily disguised as spontaneity and free-spiritedness. She’d been president of her sorority, maintained a 3.8, and would also devote an equal amount of enthusiasm for drinking games, weekend excursions in the Appalachians, and threesomes on spring break. She was the girl I could talk about to my mother and to my friends. We married in her junior year, right after I graduated, and Miriam was born a year

later, in what would have been her senior year. That's about the time when she started to see me as her responsibility instead of her release. We'd fight about nothing. She'd cry about nothing. When we found out she was pregnant again, I was hoping our second child would help, and he did, for about a year. And then there was more fighting, with less crying. Katherine decided to finish her degree. Another year later, she joined an interior design firm. Another year later, she said things might be better without me.

The second story is that I got married and came to believe that a certain part of my life had become settled, and began devoting my time and effort to other endeavors. I stopped looking at women altogether and got lazy when it concerned my wife. The realization that this second story existed didn't come until years later, of course. At the time, divorce was something that was being done to me, rather than something I was an active participant in. Then, I would have said that being able to focus on work and children instead of roses and chocolates was part of being adult, that there was almost a nobility in closing that chapter of life. And perhaps for some people that is true, and perhaps even for Katherine that might be true, but not at that time in her life. But really, that idea sounds more like an old relic from a hundred or two hundred years ago, when work was more about daily survival, the last dying remnants of which had been handed down to my parents and there preserved for the last time, either out of an honest mutual interest, or just because it's the way things had always been done. My mother and father courted in the past. It was never a continual habit. My father had never been particularly nice to me. He'd been practical. Here is how

you tie a tie. This is what against going against the grain means. Here is how you change a tire. This is the easiest way to fix the pipes. Here is how you shave.

When your wife tells you she'd rather have you leave, you quickly come up with your own new list. Here Is How You Get A Divorce. This is how you get a hotel room for a week while you scrounge up an apartment. Here is how you change the addresses on all your bills, over the telephone, one at a time. Here is how you lose yourself in your work. Here is how you change your route when you start to drive back home out of habit. Here is how to stay away.

Katherine made a spot on the island for her bag. "I took Miriam to the optometrist and he prescribed these drops," she said, pulling out the box. "He said it wasn't a big deal, she just has to take them once a day, for about a month. But you have to keep on her about it."

"What do they do?"

"I don't know," she said. "They moisturize or something."

"She's never going to take them if she doesn't know what they do," I said.

"She's five, Dan. Look, just don't call them eyedrops." She picked up the box and held it up to the light. "Tell her she has to take her cyclosporine emulsion. She'll love that. Take her to the library to find out what it means."

It was my daughter who first told me Katherine was seeing someone new. Two weeks before, I'd picked my son up from pre-school—he was three at the time--and we went together to pick Miriam up from kindergarten. She had still in the process of closing the car door when she told me. "Daddy," she said, "there

was some man over at Mommy's house this weekend. And he spent the night. And he was really, really weird."

There are about a thousand pieces of information I'd wanted to know, a thousand different ways to pose the questions that were forming in my head, and I'd like to think the one I really would have asked was if Mommy had kissed the weird man, but thankfully, I never got the chance. As soon as Miriam was done, my son perked up in the back seat. "Nuh-uh," he said. "He was awesome. He had muscles like Batman, Dad."

"No he didn't, Tristan," Miriam said. "He had muscles like Mommy. You just watched Batman five hundred times. I hope that movie breaks."

And that was it. The conversation had moved on, and there was no way to bring it back. Which I suppose I was glad for. They shouldn't be the ones to be questioned about it. But the questions had still remained.

"And this is Tristan's very special rock garden," Katherine said, setting a small aquarium on the counter. "Show and tell is on Thursday. It's very important than none of the rocks move. He'll rampage," she said and looked at me for a second before going back into the bag. "And I'm going to guess you haven't gotten anything for your mother's birthday."

It was her fiftieth, and less than a week away. "Nope. Forgot all about it."

"It's not a big deal," she said, and handed me a small, six-inch cylinder wrapped in varying tones of gold. "It's a spoon holder for her stove, with her name on it and a little house, white fence, all that. If you stop at the post office

tomorrow, it should get there in time. Just don't mention me. You got it, you picked it out. Nothing about me."

Just a few weeks before, that would have made me smile, would have made me think there was still some kind of potential. Or, at least, it would have made me thank her. But with the timing, it just made me suspicious. "You didn't have to do that," I said.

"I know I didn't. But you need to start paying attention to stuff like that. People like it." She set it down on the counter. "Now, when she gets it, she'll give you a call. You need to talk to her, find out if she wants to see the kids on Thanksgiving or Christmas. She can pick whichever one."

"Just cold like that? 'Hey, ma, when do you want to see your grandkids?'"

"Exactly," she said. "It's the way we're gonna have to do it until everyone gets used to it. And I'm going to need a weekend free sometime soon, too. I thought we could trade a few whole weeks. And probably another in December."

I just decided to say it. "Yeah, I heard you're seeing someone now."

"Heard from who?"

"Who do you think?" I asked.

"That's why I'm asking," she said. "We don't talk to any of the same people. Have you been following me?"

For the previous three months, I'd been sitting in my apartment filling an old ledger with record temperature data and earliest snowfall dates for the metro counties. At the time, I was a weekend weatherman for the ABC affiliate in Atlanta, and while all that information was on computer, it was something I felt

like I could do, something I could know. Aside from that, I would engage in stilted, awkward bar-chat with my friends, old fraternity brothers, guys who'd majored in things like business and exercise, until they would finally break the awkwardness by saying I needed to get laid, that it was impossible to get over a woman until you were with someone new. But whenever I'd think about sex, it was always Katherine's body, her sounds that wound up in my mind. When I counted my accomplishments from those three months, I could only actually say I'd done one thing right: I'd been able to leave Katherine alone, just like she'd asked. "Our daughter told me, Kate," I said. "Jesus Christ. Who the hell do you think I am?"

Her face fell. "Of course she did," she said, shaking her head. "The first thing she did was run and tell you."

"She wasn't even in the fucking car when she started," I said.

"Don't get pissed at me about this," she said. "Or surprised. If you haven't been dating, that's your own fault."

I had, in fact, been out with another woman, though I wouldn't really call it a date. My weekend broadcasts were at six o'clock in the morning, right before the cartoons and the church shows. We used a taped sports segment from the night before, but the anchor was a woman named Beth—Elizabeth Rayburn when she was on air. At some point, I figured there were millions of people who didn't pretend to care about each other before they slept together. And one morning, one of our sound engineers, a man who'd been with the station since it opened in 1948, mentioned that Beth looked more like a high school cheerleader than a news anchor, and that's when the connection was made. Our broadcast

time was traditionally reserved for people the station didn't know what to do with, or who were just starting, and Beth fit into both. She was two years out of Syracuse, and was taken off of beat reporting because of a scuffle with an aide at the mayor's office who, as the story went, "just didn't know how to talk to beautiful women." I was twenty-eight years old, had decided that the best thing for my life was callous, heartless sex, and saw nothing wrong with pursuing it with a coworker. Or, at least, using her as a means to learning what callous women cared about. It wasn't until much later that I began to suspect that I might have been interested in that because I was convinced it was what my wife had turned into.

Beth agreed to go to brunch with me one Sunday after our broadcast. She'd slid into the seat across from me and ordered a mimosa without looking at the waiter. While he stood there, she put her purse on the seat next to her and started rummaging through, and I watched her as she checked her make-up, trying to think of some way to describe those small indications of entitlement she put out, trying to think of some reason why I was interested in her at all. Eventually, she closed her compact and looked at me, raising her eyebrows a bit. I followed them and saw the waiter, still standing there, waiting for me to order a drink.

"Make it two," I said.

Beth finished in her purse and looked up at me, crossing her hands across the table. "I'm not going to have sex with you," she said.

"Okay," I said. It came out as a question.

“Divorce only ends three ways for guys: promiscuity, beer bellies, and remarriage. And even if you want to be promiscuous—let’s face it, all guys want it—I don’t think you’re really the type that can pull it off. And I don’t think you’re cut out for a beer gut, either. So, if we were to start something up, I have no doubt that you’d propose to me, next Christmas at the latest. And that’s not happening.” Within three years of all this, Elizabeth Rayburn would be in New York, anchoring the weekday lunch hour on a cable news station. “With anyone. Nothing personal.”

That exchange, and the hour of trying to salvage some kind of conversation that followed it, sometimes counted as a successful accomplishment, when I needed to think about it in the right way. But Katherine was still standing in front of me, beginning to fold up her brown paper bag, and I still wanted to yell at her. “You decided to fuck some guy with our kids in the next room,” I said.

“Let’s not do this, Dan. We’ve been civil up to this point. And if it matters to you, I’m not seeing him anymore.”

“You mean you haven’t seen him since.”

“Very nice,” she said. “You should really unpack this place. Make it your home, and stop thinking you can question me about what I do in my personal life.”

“And it’s not like I can question you about who you’re introducing to my kids,” I said.

“Frankly, no,” she said. “But you’re not nearly as mad about the kids as you are that I’m seeing someone else. Just consider that possibility for a while.”

“Did you like it? Was it worth it?”

She sighed. “It wasn’t any better than you, Dan. Or any worse. Just different.”

“Even I’m not stupid enough to believe that,” I said. “Did you suck his cock?”

“Okay,” she said. “I’m not doing this. Have a good night.”

“No, seriously, I want to know. Did you just decide to invite him over because you couldn’t wait to get your knocks off until Monday? How long have you been seeing this guy?”

She’d been walking towards the door, but she stopped at that, and laughed a little bit. “Oh, buddy, you do not want to know the answer to that question.”

The laugh made my mind race, and the thought that occurred to me was that she had met him earlier that day, or the previous day, something like that. But while those stories were still unraveling into something that made sense, I had to speak. “Why wouldn’t I want to know, buddy?”

“Because I’m about tired of being nice to you,” she said.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“A year, Dan,” she said. “I’ve been seeing him for more than a year.” She watched my face, and as soon as she saw that all the pieces had fit in together, when my mouth opened, or whatever happened, she said it again. “A year. Feel

better now? Want it all out on the table? The night before the station's New Year's party, when I said I was going out with the girls? He'd just gotten a new house, and we fucked each other from one side of it to the other. I must have come seven times. Felt completely ravished. Anything else you want to know?"

There's a moment of silence. "You've been having this guy in our house for a year?"

"No," she said, and took a deep breath, trying to calm down. "No, that was a stupid, one-time thing." I could physically see the signs that she was trying to rein her anger back in, but mine was just getting going. And she just wouldn't shut up. "And, at some point," she said, "you're going to have your own debate with yourself about whether or not to introduce a woman to the kids. And it might even be that you do introduce them, then realize you never want to see her again." And then came the kicker. "But we're just at two different points in this process, Dan. I've done my sitting around, wondering if it's a phase, thinking it will all work out. But it's not going to. And you need to man up and accept it, because I can't be the one to hold your hand until you get there."

I was going to say one of two things in response: either "You don't get to tell me how to react," or else something that amounted to, "You haven't been holding my hand; I haven't even seen you in three months," but instead, I just bypassed words altogether and I punched her. Right in the side of the face.

I'd never hit my wife before. I hope that's an obvious statement. I'd never even hit my children before, either, and I really don't have a clear memory of that moment. I just remember that she fell down on her side, either from surprise or

because of the force of it. I remember her mouth made into an O, the weird tilt of her scarf, and I remember that being the first moment when I really knew that my marriage was over. "Just get out," I said.

She stood up and walked over to me so that she was standing just inches away, so close I could feel her heat and smell her, the smell of our house. And then she slapped me, and left.

We haven't talked about that night. And we've had many chances in the years since. Honestly, I don't really know how it's something that we got past, except for perhaps a mutual acceptance that we came to independently, that we'd both done things and said things that we didn't mean, or would take back if we could. But I also think that my realization that my marriage was over was instrumental in ultimately saving it, and that somehow, in her mind, that slap she gave me was equal to the punch that preceded it.

And so I became, by any literal definition, an abuser of women. I spent a few days going over that, because while it was true, I didn't feel any rush of excitement or horror at the time, and I didn't feel any latent yearning to do it again in the days that followed. These were the criteria I'd established to gauge whether it would happen again, but eventually I simply decided that it wouldn't ever happen again, that she could say whatever she wanted to, and I'd sit on my hands if I had to, and that would be that. And I haven't hit another human being since.

That's not to say that I didn't feel much better in the days that followed, though. I was liberated. My feelings for, and my responsibility toward Katherine had been a decision I'd made a long time before, a decision that had become a given in my deliberations, but it was then I realized that it was something that I really could just simply stop doing. Make a new decision that it didn't matter anymore, just like that.

I went to work that week with a new vigor.

Earlier that fall, a journalism professor over at Georgia Tech contacted me to ask if I'd present a lecture to the class he was teaching that semester. I had the worst broadcasts at a small affiliate in the city that headquartered CNN, but the professor said I was exactly what he was looking for. He told me to call him Brad, and said he was an adjunct, recently hired and recently graduated himself. He explained that his own courses had been full of lectures from older, notable journalists, and that he was looking to do something "fresher," as he put it. "No one ever tells these kids what happens between graduation and the anchor chair. I want someone who's actually in the process of working up the ladder, not looking backwards from a pedestal."

Later, I would find out the reason why Brad didn't know what happened between graduation and the anchor's chair: he'd gotten a doctorate instead of a masters—he'd learned to *teach* journalism rather than do journalism. But Brad was energetic and convincing, and I figured he knew more about the news business than I did since my involvement was only peripheral. A few days after that first call, we met at a chain restaurant to go over the particulars. Brad wore

shorts and kept his hair fashionably unwashed. We set a date in late October, which wound up being the same week I became a wife abuser, and he suggested I start my discussion with a description of a normal day off-camera, “the cultivation of persona,” and things of that nature. Up to that time, my only outreach efforts had been in elementary classrooms, but he made it very clear he wanted to stay away from an outreach discussion. “No ambassadors for networks or corporations, and especially not for platitudes like determination. Equals, sitting in a room, having a chat.”

So I went and gave my lecture. I spent time on how long it took for the computers to make forecast models, creating narratives for teases, dealing with management, filling the seven to twelve minutes I was given for each broadcast. I left half an hour at the end for questions, but most of the questions went back to concerns about editorializing. One girl with a triangular face and far more split ends than Katherine would ever allow Miriam to leave the house with asked how we made the decision to lead if there was a murder in an affluent part of town and a murder in the inner city. Another girl said that racism wasn’t simply bias, but bias with power.

When it was over, Brad was standing at the front of the room with me and said, “Don’t worry about it. Someday, a few years from now when they’re pulling their hair out, they’ll think back on it and wish they’d asked you something different. Sometimes that’s all you’ve got to go on.” He said that a few of the students generally went to a bar after class, and that I should come along because things will be “more casual.”

There were six or seven students in Brad's class that were over twenty-one, and a few other that went along for conversation, regardless. As naturally happens when that many people get together, three or four separate conversations developed, so I remember very few names. The triangular faced girl was there, whose name was Megan. She drank a margarita from a straw and asked if I was glad meteorology didn't come loaded with the same issues of influence that hard news came with.

"I don't think most of my co-workers are as interested in that as they are with practicing their smile. We all go over copy, but at the end of the day, whether we're influencing our town or the town is influencing us, it doesn't really matter if you can't transition between nuclear bombs and puppy dogs."

Over the next hour, students left one at a time until Brad and I were left with Megan and one of her friends, whose name I can't remember, a table full of empty bottles and glasses, in the midst of some conversation about the friend's romantic situation.

"If he doesn't want to sleep with me, that's fine," the friend said. "I just want to know why."

"He just doesn't like black girls," Megan said.

I'd only had two beers over that hour, but this was a subject I felt much more comfortable discussing with them. "You don't get to know that stuff, anyway," I said. "Even if you ask, they're going to lie. And even if they're honest, you're not going to understand what the big deal is," I said. Megan's elbow touched mine, under the table, at that, and as her friend continued on, the elbow

moved on to the hands, the hands moved to the thigh. She wrapped an ankle around one of mine, then wrapped my ankle between both of hers.

Eventually Brad had heard enough about the boyfriend-that-wasn't, and stood up. "I think it's about time we got out of here."

"I'm way too drunk to drive," Megan said, and there it was.

Brad and her friend asked a few times if she'd be okay, the friend said she ought to move back to campus, and as we all left together, Brad and her friend just a few steps ahead, she asked me if I was okay with giving her a ride home. When we got to her apartment, she fumbled up a few steps, but she unlocked the door quickly enough, and once we were inside with our coats off, she turned and faced me and bounced on her tippy-toes a few times.

We kissed slowly, and I took her clothes off slowly. She was pudgy and wore an old bra that was a few shades away from its original color, but her mouth was soft and I told her so, and we moved awkwardly towards her bedroom. She went down on her knees and after a minute or so of a blowjob I couldn't really feel apart from the warmth and moisture, I took her head in my hands and pulled her away towards the bed. We hadn't even changed positions when she pushed me off of her, ran to the bathroom, and puked.

So there I was, in this strange apartment, filled with stacks of books, movie posters, half-moon shapes on the bedding, the room of someone stuck in the weird vacuum between being a girl and being a woman. And that person also happened to be in the next room vomiting, and running the faucet, and gargling mouthwash while I was naked on her bed. I was ashamed in part because I was

in the middle of the least sexy act I'd ever envisioned, and partly because I knew that tomorrow there would be phone numbers, and there would be seeing each other again, and I already knew I wasn't interested in that.

"Much better," she said as she came out from the bathroom. "You got all wilty," she said, and went down on me again.

And of course I continued.

When I woke the next morning, she'd already left. There was a note written on a torn-off piece of notebook paper that was left by my clothes that read, "Had to run. Class at 8. Lock the door." I wrote my name and phone number on it, and left it near the television before I left. I felt, at the very least, I had the obligation to talk to her face to face.

She never called me back.

My wife was the one who chose the names for both of our children.

I took them to the park later that week, and they went around telling those names to the other kids scattered around the sand boxes and jungle gyms. Tristan also had the habit of introducing the toys he'd brought along, and he'd squat along the railroad ties that separated sections, fumbling with the Velcro on his shoes as he watched the other kids play with his cars. Miriam would try to organize games like hide and seek, and she'd be in the center of a group of kids, pointing and giving directions. Years later, when she was a teenager and having so many problems, I mentioned to Katherine how I'd never seen those problems

coming, that she'd always been responsible and mature for her age. And Katherine just said that Miriam had rarely smiled, even as a child. Thinking back on it now, after all those children had dispersed for some activity with less talking and less structure, leaving Miriam alone in the wind on that fall afternoon, it all seems like an open book which I can see falling together with causes and effects, but which I can change no more than the vial of poison or the serpent. Miriam would get married herself one day, and get divorced, and the problem that weighed most heavily on her was that her husband had tried too hard and had no life outside of her. It made me feel less bad about the causes of my separation with Kate. There's only a certain amount that trying can help, and usually it winds up being counter-productive. Events will unfold as they unfold.

Eventually that day, Tristan came up and put his head in my lap, still half standing up. "Dad, I'm really tired," he said.

"Do you want to go home?" I asked.

"No."

"Okay. Go tell your sister we're ready to go."

"Okay," he said. He trudged off with his shoulders slumped, like some kind of exaggerated zombie. When Miriam and Tristan came back they were kicking pea gravel at each other. "Daddy," Miriam said, sitting on the bench next to me. "That girl over there has a kite." She didn't look at me, but stared at a dot in the sky above the tree line. I followed her gaze. Tristan put his head back in my lap, and we all sat there together, Miriam squeezing my knee as she watched the dot crumple and rise again.

“You’ve got a birthday coming up soon,” I said.

“Could I get one?” That’s when she really looked at me. “Could it be Barbie?”

“We’ll see. But you’d have to wait until spring before you can use it.”

“That would be okay.”

I got up from my bench, and we began the walk back to the car. “Maybe we could talk to Mommy, see if we can hang it from the ceiling in your room, or on your wall, until it gets warm outside.”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Having two rooms isn’t fun anymore,” Tristan said. When Katherine first asked me to leave, she was very adamant that it not have an adverse effect on the kids. So she made a game out of it. They got to have two rooms now, and two beds, and they spent the time I was finding a place in preparation for it, coloring and making decorations and picking new beds. We walked the aisles of department stores looking for plastic dishes with the appropriate cartoon characters.

“I really don’t like it, either,” Miriam said.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it,” I said, and after a few seconds without a response, I began to think that this had been my most definitive statement on the subject. Previously, I’d say something like “We’ll see,” or try to make them buy in a little while longer. “Sorry if that sounded mean. I don’t really know how all this works, either, so we’re all going to have to kinda figure it out together. I love you. And Mommy loves you, too. No matter what.”

“Mommy makes us go to our room so she can talk on the phone,” Miriam said.

“Yeah,” Tristan said. “Miriam knocks all my pieces off the board when she loses.”

The conversation went astray from there, but little by little, one day at a time, we talked it over. I told them I’d be seeing other women. Again the phone thing came up.

“All Mommy does is talk to boys on the phone,” Miriam said.

“Do you hear her?”

“Well, no.”

“Has the Batman guy been over again?”

“No.”

“You know that Mom does a lot of business with a lot of people that want their houses pretty. She has to talk to water guys and power guys and floor guys and all that jazz,” I said.

And that was how the next few weeks went. It was easier for me to be fair to her when I had to do it for them. And it was easier for me to figure out what to do with myself when I had to do it for them. I don’t really know if Katherine talked to them about any of this, and I don’t know if the course of her conversations with them centered around all the things I did that irritated them, but when I finally went over to her house one Saturday afternoon, and they both came running with shouts of “Daddy’s here,” I got a bit of pleasure from the roll of her eyes, if for no other reason than she had never come to my house to see if they did that to her.

“You need something?” she asked.

“Dad, look at my truck,” Tristan said. “The wheels go from side to side.”

“I just wanted to chat,” I said. Miriam went running off to her room.

“I really don’t feel like talking to you,” Katherine said.

“We’re going to have to do it someday,” I said.

“And then if you back it up—Dad, look.”

“Really, we don’t,” Katherine said. “Show up at one of their weddings with a new wife. We’ll do it then.”

“You can stand there for three minutes to listen to me,” I said.

Katherine swung the door open as Miriam came running out of her room with a picture. “Dad, look what I did at school,” she said.

“I need talk to Mom for just a little bit,” I said. “But as soon as I’m done, I’ll come look. Why don’t you go and get everything ready for me?”

Miriam finally left and Katherine and I were alone. “You’re going to be here for an hour,” she said. “And they’re going to be talking about you all night. You should have called so we could set something up.”

“We’ve waited long enough.”

“I really don’t want to listen to you apologize,” she said. “I really don’t. You’re just going to be doing it to make yourself feel better, and it’s going to piss me off.”

“What’s so wrong with feeling bad about it and wanting to get it off my chest?”

“Because you just feel bad because you let yourself down. It hasn’t even gotten into your head that you actually did something to someone else. Look, you hit me. I hit you. We’re even. Let’s just drop it.”

“I’m not quite sure those two things are the same,” I said.

“You had your fist closed,” she said. “Mine was open.” She shrugged.

“I just mean that I think power is a determining factor in that. I don’t think men hitting women is the same as the other way around.”

She laughed a little bit at that. “Dan, believe me, aside from physical strength, I don’t think you have a whole lot of power here.”

It’s hard to say exactly when healing begins. “Okay. You can apologize to me, then.”

“I just wanted to make peace,” she said. “I shouldn’t have gone over there that night.”

The sounds of yelling began to come from the back of the house. Most likely, the kids had begun to argue over what they were going to use for the little show and tell they were getting ready for. “How do you want this to be, then? Do you want to not see me ever again, do you want to be friends?”

“I don’t know, Dan,” she said. “I don’t know what I’m doing any more than you do.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “We’ll see how it works out. Maybe it’s better if the kids are around when we meet up. We seem to be more civil.”

“I don’t want to confuse them,” she said.

“We’ve already done that.”

“Not about getting back together,” she said.

“I guess that’s true.” I looked off toward the hallway. “I should probably get back there.”

“What did you come over here for today?” she asked. “What did you want?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Nothing. This. Us, disagreeing, and shrugging it off,” I said, and walked into the bedroom and explained that I’d go to each of their rooms one at a time, that there wasn’t going to be any back and forth.

#firstworldproblems

The car breaks down somewhere between Birmingham and Hattiesburg, and I'm glad. The four of us have been going for six hours already in Ethan's 1970 Jeep Wagoneer, some vehicle that has more in common with a tank than a jeep, and the sun set hours ago, and I'm just ready to stop. We're in the south in December, cotton country, with naked, jagged stalks left to decay in the fields that stretch out from both sides of the highway all the way to the horizon, and all I want to do is pull some of those stalks out of the ground, light them on fire, sit on a sleeping bag and listen to them pop. "I'll get the tent out," I say.

"We're not sleeping out here," Tyler says. Tyler and I are both eighteen, but he's a freshman in college and I'm a senior in high school, just because of how the birthdays worked out. He has bright, curly red hair that goes in every direction, kinda like Albert Einstein, and he acts the way I'd imagine Albert Einstein to act in person, too: four parts awkward, two parts hilarious, one part asshole. He's also probably going to try to have sex with me sometime on this trip, and I haven't quite figured out what I'm going to do about that. "We'll die out here, Miriam," Tyler says. "Exposure."

"It's fifty degrees out," I say. I have my arms up to the sky.

I met Tyler in high school and we spent most of his junior and senior years hanging out. He's one of the most cynical people I've ever met, but mostly because he's naturally gentle and unassuming. In his senior year, he made an application for smartphones that would let people find out the academic calendar for our school district, spring break, holidays, all of that. But he used the school

district's logo in his app, and the district threatened to sue him if he didn't shut it down. He went on a rant for weeks about school systems and education, boring whole generations of students and smacking down independent thought wherever it was encountered. They were good rants, passionate, ones that would make teachers stand up and applaud, or at least the good teachers, those mythical ones that politicians keep insisting are out there somewhere. But it also seems like the universe is a little less substantial when he goes on those rants, because he's usually very meek, concerned with being rude and wondering what people think about him. And also worrying about catastrophe.

I'm actually a bit impressed by the length of the conversation Tyler and I can have about death from environmentally-induced reductions in core temperature, but eventually Ethan and Jon come around from the front the truck, and Ethan says, "We're gonna be on the road again by the time you get the tent unpacked, anyway."

Tyler met Ethan and Jon in college, so we all started hanging out together. We're all socially-conscious, but we all hate people who are proud of being socially conscious, like most Whole Foods shoppers. We had this local coffee shop we liked to go to until it started being the trendy place to go, so then we switched to a local chain, a place designed for truckers, with a jukebox in the corner that ranged from Perry Como to Garth Brooks. The four of us actually planned this trip out at that place, getting looks out of the half-turned faces of old, fat men with the name of God emblazed across their hats. College exams were finished, mine were two weeks away, and in my mind, taking exams early was

equal to skipping two weeks of class to take them on time. My teachers apparently prefer I be bored off my ass for two weeks than actually outside of their little box, seeing things I haven't seen before. We decided on Ethan's truck, money from everyone, then New Orleans and Phoenix, cross the Rockies in the South, then Portland and back.

"You're not still going to try to go all the way tonight?" I ask Ethan.

"That's the plan," he says, "and we always stick to the plan." He throws a bottle of oil or something into the back of the truck. "Hit Bourbon Street at four in the morning, get a little drink on, throw our legs up, watch the sun rise over the river." Ethan has the whole survivor-man thing going on, muscular, in the way skinny guys can be muscular, long hair hanging out from a baseball cap with sunglasses perched on the bill, slightly unshaven. He has on a red T-shirt with blue cargo shorts, even now, in winter, and tennis shoes with short little socks. He's the only one of us that's over twenty-one.

"They're not going to let me into any bars when we get there," I say.

"It's New Orleans, baby," Jon says.

Jon is wearing a T-shirt with a blazer thrown over it, but he generally has a very good taste in turtlenecks and hats. He's one of the few guy I know who can pull off a fedora, and he loves to show it off. I let him get away with the "baby" stuff for two reasons. First, because I once saw him start a completely normal conversation with a woman he didn't know, and as soon as sexual tension began to develop, began calling her a "stupid cunt" because of her preference in carbonated beverages. Jon is aggressive, and if he has something to say, he's

gonna say it. At the time, I thought that whole outburst was just his own way of slinking away, too embarrassed to come up with a witty response, and too proud to admit it. Now I'm pretty sure he's as gay as a rainbow on a spring day. That's reason number two. I don't think there's any ownership involved with it, and probably, the "baby" was in reference to the city, anyway.

"See?" Ethan says, and flashes a smile that, quite simply, could make God melt. "That's what I'm talking about." He slaps Jon on the back. I tried to have sex with Ethan once. We were drunk at his parents' house one night when they were away—we all still live with our parents—and we were on his bed watching television and I kissed him. He pushed me away, gently. He had one hand on my face and just said, "We can't." And I obsessed about it a lot before I did it, so I had a list of reasons why we couldn't be together while I was going into it, but I still thought about it afterwards. And I don't want to sound like I'm hot shit or anything, but I'd never been turned down before. There are plenty of reasons why a college guy wouldn't want a high school girl, but I'm pretty sure the main reason was that he was already in love with someone else, and that the two of them were both completely in the closet.

Fixing that is my mission on this trip.

So, the bars on Bourbon Street won't let me in. Instead, Ethan hits the store and we wind up drinking in our hotel room, and then go out to the Moonwalk and lie down, which doesn't really point in the direction of sunrise, but that's okay.

And that's another reason why I'm out on a road trip with three dudes. Two of them are gay, the straight one is so scared to death of me he has someone between us at all times, and when we get to those points where a bunch of catty girls would start yelling at each other and crying, we somehow make it all work out.

My mother would be thrilled.

The next afternoon, there's a man walking a dog down Toulouse, except the dog has a cat standing on its back, and the cat has a mouse on its back. The cat and mouse have to constantly step forward and backward to keep their balance. A woman in her fifties crosses Royal with nothing above her waist except fluorescent green fishnets. Vendors around Jackson Square have hung artwork on the fence around the park, American flags with eagles, various mermaids on a beach, their elbows straining under gravity for the first time, their faces turned over their shoulders toward the viewer with expressions of fear, lost and alone. They're amateur pieces, things that won't be remembered in thirty years except by the people who buy them and the person who made them, but this whole city is like that. We follow tour guides who tell stories about voodoo and Confederate generals and slain Turkish harems, but the buildings around me are all old enough that someone has died inside, children and grandmothers in candlelight.

There's a living statue on one corner, dressed and painted completely silver. She stands there, unmoving with a drum strapped over a shoulder, and every few minutes or so she will bow with slow, jerky, mechanical movements,

then tap her drum twice and return to attention. There are three other groups of people around her, one with a kid that fakes punching her in the stomach, another one with two fourteen year old girls in a conversation about how stupid it was that someone would stand out on the street and do that. But the statue ignores them all, her eyes focused on something far behind me in the distance, then starts her motion again. As we're walking away towards someplace with food, I say, "I wonder what the inside of her apartment looks like."

Jon and Ethan create a drinking game at dinner that involves shots and oysters, while Tyler and I watch and talk about the statue girl and the statue behind the cathedral and taking some time the next day to see the cemeteries on the far side of Rampart. By the time we get back to our hotel, they're singing Journey songs together, and one of them says "Dude, dude, dude. Elton John. 'Tiny Dancer.'" And then they start off together, off pitch, half sounding like wolves, laying in the bed together, pausing to sing in unison.

And Tyler is sitting on the bed with them. "You guys are like the fucking internet. Play artist: Queen," he says.

"'Bohemian Rhapsody?'" Jon says.

"Another one bites the dust," Ethan sings.

"Yeah, I think I'm going to go back out," I say, and I look over at Tyler. "You want to come?" I say to him.

"Uh, sure," he says, and stands up with this dorky smile, and goes over to get his shoes.

"Whoa, we're not invited?" Jon asks.

“No,” I say. I walk over and put a hand on his cheek and Ethan’s. “You two fantastic gentlemen are entirely too drunk.”

“I like a woman who can make so many valid points in so few words,” Ethan says.

Tyler has put his shoes on and stands next to me, and I move towards the door. “If you’re not puking in an hour, I’d suggest finding a karaoke bar,” I say.

“Uh-huh,” Jon says. “You two know you’re skipping out on the real party.”

“Have a nice night,” I say as I’m closing the door, and then Ethan and Jon are alone in the room together, and Tyler and I are alone in the hallway together, moving towards the elevator and whatever else comes up. I’ve long ago come to terms that the one would require the other, and, to be honest, it’s not really a problem for me. I’m not necessarily opposed to the idea of getting together with Tyler—we get along well enough in every other way—it’s just that I’m more worried that he’ll wind up being one of those “you know I’m awesome because of my hot girlfriend” guys or a “what do you think we should do tonight” guy than someone who actually wants to go out and enjoy life. So I guess you could say that I’m actually kind of interested in hearing the sales pitch, even if my life would be simpler without it. I want see what he comes up with.

But he never says anything. We spend a while walking the streets, dodging small groups of people and an occasional tour, thirty people bunched up and blocking the sidewalk, often standing in the street. Eventually we find a bar that has a courtyard and we sit across from each other around a metal table with an umbrella in it, and we talk, just like always. And that’s fine, but I keep trying to

read him for some sign of what he's thinking, for nervousness or whatever, and there's just nothing. Probably, he's simply had so much practice at keeping things from becoming awkward, that he doesn't know how to do anything else, and that makes me feel even worse. Our courtyard has a magnolia tree and a small fountain with cherubs that's not turned on. Our conversation turns to those, and to the painted walls that are cracked and stained green and yellow from the slow, unceasing victory of nature over time. We stay out until the alcohol spilled on the sidewalks over the course of the night starts to smell like piss and sweat and dead flowers, and Tyler still never makes a move on me.

When we wake up the next morning, Tyler has his arm around me. We'd found Jon and Ethan crashed in the same bed, completely innocuously: fully clothed, arms folded so that their hands were behind their heads. Tyler and I had slept in the same bed the night before, so that was no big deal, either. I took my bra off under my shirt. He took his jeans off under the covers. As soon as we're alone that day, Tyler apologizes for the arm thing. "That's kinda weird," he says, and I want to punch him.

We use our room key to get into the pool before we check out, so we spend another hour or two there. I put on a little bikini, and Ethan gives me the once over as we're walking out there and says something like, "Looking good." It's a little thing that started after he shot me down, I guess his way of apologizing without making things awkward that I just went with. There are rules to it, though. When I do it to him, I can touch. He can't. But it doesn't matter, anyway, because

Tyler sees, and winds up spending the majority of the time in the corner of the pool. Ethan and Jon quickly get into some teenage pool battle using some five year-old's Styrofoam pool noodles, and standing on body boards, as evaluation criteria. Tyler just keeps his eyes averted from me, people watching and trying to peer through the fogged glass into the day outside, and all-around too consciously trying not to look at my tits. And that irritates me much more than last night, because now it's like I can't even talk to him, and eventually, I just take out a book and find a corner of my own.

We're at a rest stop somewhere in Texas when Jon sits down next to me on one of those picnic tables and lights up a cigarette. "So," he says, "what's the deal with you two last night?"

Talking to Jon is always somewhat of an exercise. He likes to explode and call people "cunt" in the middle of a conversation because he thinks it's funny, but it just makes everyone unable to continue. In a way, I'm proud of him that he phrased his question the way he did, instead of, "How many times did you two get to banging?" or something like that.

"Nothing," I say. "Why?"

"I dunno," he says. "What did you do?"

"Like I said. Nothing. We found a bar." A dog zips by us in pursuit of a Frisbee.

"Oh," Jon says. "Shit. I figured." But he stops there.

"I figured, too," I say. "What about you two? Who puked first?"

Jon shakes his head. "It wasn't that bad. There wouldn't have been all that swimming, otherwise." He pauses for a second. "You mean Tyler really didn't say anything?"

"Not a word," I say. "And don't say whatever's gonna come out of your mouth next, about him being a sissy or a pussy or whatever else."

Jon laughs. "But he kinda is though, right?"

"Yeah. He kinda is."

"So you want him to make a move, then?" The dog returns triumphant, tail wagging, and its owner meets him halfway, petting him vigorously, but when the owner goes after the Frisbee, the dog won't give it up.

"Want is somewhat of a strong word. "'Open to the possibility' might be better."

"Do you want me to say anything to him?" Jon asks.

"God, no," I say. "Why are you interested all a sudden? Did he say anything to you?"

"No. Me and Ethan were talking about it, and we figured you two were probably going at it, or looking for a place to go at it, so we thought we'd look for a suite the next time we get a room. Something sectioned off a little bit. See if we could find something around the same price as a regular room."

I wait a second before saying anything. "I think we should definitely do that. I mean, at the very least, we'll be able to establish if he's gay or not, right?"

I know the reaction I want when I say this—for him to have to catch himself or just admit to something, for fuck's sake—but Jon is good enough to

meet me halfway. “You’d think it would be a fuck of a lot easier to figure out if a guy is after meat or poontang,” he says.

When I was a kid, my dad used to say stupid shit like “I don’t lie, because it’s so hard to remember what you were lying about.” But everyone around me has been lying for so long that they’ve come across the real danger, that it’s too difficult for the truth to come back out when it finally proves to be a barrier.

The plan was to be in New Mexico or Arizona that night, but it’s almost ten by the time we get to San Antonio, so we just stop. We get our suite, and while the guys are more than satisfied to stay there, I’m irritated, in that cabin-fever kind of way of having spent all day watching the land move past by us, and coming to the slow realization of just how futile our effort was. I never expected Texas to be so obstinate, and I want to get out and do something just so I can feel that the day wasn’t a complete waste.

I finally talk Tyler into coming out with me, and we walk through the businesses collected around our hotel. There’s a 24-hour chain breakfast place and Texas-themed steakhouse. There are two gas stations and a strip mall that has a store that sells cards, along with a hair salon and a video store. The parking lot is full on the far side of the seven-lane street that connects to the interstate, so we cross and eventually find a dance club.

“This will be fun, right?” I say, but what I really mean is “funny.” We get to the door and the bouncer takes three ones from each of us and we get an X on our hand in return. The inside is this strange, giant, black-lit room, a grocery store

re-purposed, with glowing fluorescent graffiti on the walls and strobe lights, something out of 1996. The people inside act much the same as at a high-school dance: the sexes ignore each other as much as possible, congregating in groups. But, beyond that, there's not much that's funny. The crowd is racially non-identifiable, though still self-segregated. And the only people who are dancing either actually know how to dance, or are making out while standing up, occasionally moving their hips from side to side.

Tyler and I get drinks and a table and talk for a little bit, and eventually just fall into people-watching. After we've been there about thirty or forty-five minutes, I'm watching a Hispanic girl dance something that looks vaguely Celtic—lots of arm motion up and down, flowing. The strobe lights only give me snapshots as she moves: hip to one side, arms down next to her. Flash. Arms out, curled back at the elbows, head tilted to one side. Flash. Arms up, reaching down to hold up her hair, hip out to the other side. Flash. I'll gladly admit that I'm usually one of those people who makes fun of others who can't do the things I can do. And I also make fun of people who are able to do things that I'd never consider doing. And I'd like to think that, somewhere on the scale of jackassery, the mocking of others can be somewhat subdued by later acknowledging those who are actually skillful. And I know that's not the way it works, that I'm not less of an asshole by later giving compliments, but either way, this girl can dance.

“Come with me,” Tyler says. He stands up.

I don't really think I want to have kids. Ever. I would, however, like to meet a boy and have him smile at me. I do kinda want him to want to hold my hand out

under the neon lights of some movie theater at night. We could curl up on the couch in sweats and a T-shirt and eat pasta with our hands, slithery, thick penne noodles, slipping out of our fingers, and we'll have to wipe the water on our shirts and try again. And strawberries, too. I want to watch TV in bed from time to time. I want to fuck in the rain in the backyard, and turn the grass into mud. "You don't dance," I say. "And I don't dance."

"So you just want to sit here?" he asks.

"No," I say. "Let's just go."

"Where is everyone?" This is what Jon asks when we get back to the hotel room. By the time we get there, I'm already planning out the rest of the night, which is going to consist of finding a book and trying to ignore everyone around me.

"Sleeping," I say. "Or out somewhere."

"The keys are right there," Tyler says, and points the small coffee table. Our suite has two bedrooms, and a small living room area with a sofa and television, and a small kitchen with a stove and a fridge, to go along with its two bedrooms. I'm on the sofa, and in my mind, I already have my pajamas on.

"They don't have to take the car to leave," I say. "Pretty sure we just demonstrated that." In my mind, it is tomorrow and Texas is gone. In my mind, I never came along on this trip.

Tyler disappears, and I get up to grab a book from the bedroom. I'm aware of Tyler peeking his head into the bathroom, and I'm aware of him knocking on the door to the other bedroom, but I don't put these things together until he has

stuck his head into the other bedroom, and a voice from the other side yells for him to “get the fuck out.”

I turn around Tyler’s there, standing with a small gap between the door and the threshold, and he’s not moving. I hurry over and pull him backwards a few steps and the door falls open, and as I’m moving to close it, I see inside. The light is on, so there’s nothing to hide it. Two naked males in a bed, at least one erect penis, and a twisted sheet hurriedly pulled over in an attempt to cover it all, but failing.

I slam the door shut and turn around to Tyler. “Don’t say anything,” I tell him.

“The light was on,” he says. “I checked.”

“Let’s just go sit down,” I say, and we go into the living room. There’s a part of me that wants to yell and jump up and down, not only because they’re finally together and there’s more love in the universe and all of that, but also because something finally happened on this trip. But I restrain myself. Tyler and I sit next to each other on the sofa, silent for a while. There are no sounds. “That whole thing was bad.”

“Turn on the TV,” I say.

Tyler does, and we wait for about ten minutes with a newscaster spouting facts at us. “What are they doing?”

“I think they’re hiding,” I say.

“Maybe they’re going at it again,” he says.

We both laugh for a little bit.

“How long have you known?” he asks.

“I didn’t. I just suspected. I think that might have been their first time.”

“They’re not coming out here,” he says.

“We should wait for a little bit longer,” I say. “I really don’t want to have some awkward ‘so happy for you guys’ conversation tomorrow. And I don’t want them to just pretend like it never happened, either.”

“I don’t think waiting is going to help that.”

“Yeah. We’re gonna have to do something.”

“I could just apologize in the morning,” he says.

“No. It has to be funny.”

“I think that might make things way worse,” he says.

“It’s just a matter of getting it right.”

“You tend to take things to extremes, Miriam,” he says.

I turn over to him. “No, I don’t. What do I do that’s extreme?”

“I dunno,” he says. “Road trips with three guys. Skipping two weeks of classes.”

“I refuse to see the relevance of any of that,” I say, and I pick up the keys to the Wagoneer. “Come on.”

“Miriam,” he says.

“Live a little,” I say, and I go back down the little hall towards the bedrooms. “We’re gonna go now, guys,” I say through the door. The light is out on the other side. “We’re gonna take the car. We’ll be back later. Much later.”

“Where we going?” Tyler says as I’m heading for the door.

“I don’t know yet,” I tell him.

I type the words “vibrator san antonio” into my phone and it takes us to a little store that sells vibrators and corsets and feathered boas, and all that stuff. They also have an arrangement of sex related postcards and whole shelves to explore. “This is not going to help anything,” Tyler says as I put my hand into two puppets shaped like penises.

I make the puppets talk to each other.

“Gross,” Tyler says. “They’re anatomically correct.”

“I’m a bit disappointed in the girth to length ratio around here,” my left hand says to the right. “It’s okay. Momma just wants ‘em hard.”

Tyler laughs a little bit, and I wink at him. I can see the kiss coming, in slow motion, and I just let it happen. He’s not pushy about it or anything, he’s just taller than me. I don’t say anything to him. He looks at me for a second. “That’s not an ultimatum,” he says. “You can be with whoever you want to, do whatever you want to. But sometime, someday, it might be necessary for us to tell someone about our first kiss. And I want this to be the story.”

I lick my lips. “Did you just kiss me and propose to me all at once?”

“I might have kissed you and acknowledge the possibility of men and women having the capability to marry,” he says.

“Uh-huh. And our kids, or whoever we’d be telling this story to, you really want to tell them about the penis store?”

“Cock shop,” he says. “And the penis puppets may have something to do with that.”

And that’s the end of the conversation. He pulls me away, tells me to look at a set of penis-shaped cookie cutters.

“That’s it,” I say. “Penis-shaped pancakes in the morning.”

“They’re not going to eat them,” he says.

“We can put butter at the end.”

We pay for them and then go to the grocery store and put all the stuff in the fridge. The room only has two plates and two sets of silverware, but there’s nothing to be done about it at this point. And then Tyler tries to do that thing where he takes his pants off under the bed, so I pull my shirt off while I’m standing there in the middle of the bedroom. I let him watch as the jeans come off, and finally the bra, and I walk over to the bed in my panties.

There’s also a part of me that’s expecting this to be the worst experience of my life, but thankfully it’s not. He tries a little too hard to be good—putting me into different positions and stuff—but overall, not half-bad.

Ethan and Jon wake up the next morning, and we have the pancakes ready to go with them. Ethan looks at one, flops it around, and tosses it into his mouth whole. Jon looks at them and says, “I’m not eating that.”

And that’s about as far as the conversation goes. We get to Las Cruces the next night, and to Phoenix around sunset the night after that, and I’m left to just observe them and analyze them, almost like an anthropologist. They don’t

say anything, don't give any indication that anything has changed at all. Finally, we get to a camping supply store in Phoenix, and Tyler asks why we're stopping.

"Two tents," Ethan says, and hops out.

"And don't fucking come in it, either," Jon says.

And that's it. We spend the days as a foursome and spend the nights separating into couples all the way to Seattle: one couple in the backseat of the Wagonner while the other is in the hotel, in the shower, in separate tents.

We're camping one night on the side of a mountain somewhere, and we climb over a corral for horses or cows or something, dodging manure while we're walking, when suddenly Ethan stops over a pile of poop.

"Really," I say. "We're doing this?"

Ethan shines his flashlight around on the ground. "There are the tracks. Looks like it went that way. So we're gonna go the other way."

"What went that way?" Tyler asks.

"Probably a panther," Ethan says.

"Panther?" Tyler says.

Ethan is standing over a pile of crap that looks much more like a dog's than a cow's.

"Not a big deal," Ethan says. "If it just shit, it just ate." And he moves on.

"Yeah, I think that's what those people you hear about on the news always say," Tyler says. A while later, a rabbit bolts by us right at the edge of the light provided by the fire, and Tyler jumps. He keeps me up all that night, fidgeting.

And then we get to Seattle. We spend the day at Pike's Place, browsing through the shops and finally Tyler and I find a small room that looks out over the Puget Sound. For some reason, it reminds me of that line from Kerouac, that now we've gotten to the end of America, and there's nowhere left to go but back. And that possibility seems all too real to me. Ethan and Jon seem no different out here than they did at home, and it's more than likely that when we get back everything will just go back to normal. And even with Tyler, I don't feel any overriding pull to keep things the way they are. I just feel like I'm waiting for something to happen with him, waiting until I like him better, and in the meantime I'm just watching him and his reactions, like I'm studying him. Like all this stuff about adventure and excitement and getting away from home are just manufactured, stumbling attempts to do the things people are too lazy and too busy to actively pursue from their classrooms and offices. But I've done my manufacturing with another person, because I have the power to do so. I can go home and tell Tyler that I want everything to go back to the way it was and he will comply without question, because he loves me. Probably he will even offer me an excuse to get out of a relationship even better than I could come up with on my own, saving me the trouble of even having to work at that.

There are no boats out on the sound, only the hills on the far side that lead out toward the Pacific. Tyler puts his arm around me and says, "I'm not ready to go home yet."

Here on Earth

On Wednesday, after my sister hasn't been home since the weekend, Mom finally says she's going to call the police. The only reason it's taken this long is because the last time my sister pulled this, Mom freaked out immediately, and when the cops finally showed up, Miriam walked in the door while they were actually here and started cussing them out, calling them pigs and all that, while they were standing in our kitchen. Mom's spent five days weighing the likelihoods of false alarms, dead daughters, and public humiliation, which makes me think this whole cop thing is something Dad talked her into.

When she was fifteen, my sister got arrested for riding around with some guys who were throwing vinegar and baking soda, wrapped in tin foil, from their car window. The idea was that the little packets would explode in miniature versions of that volcano science fair project, except it would happen on someone's car, and that would be funny. One of the guys in the car actually got areested on bomb-making charges, since the tin foil technically exploded.

After that, there was the night she sneaked a guy into the house. She got away with the guy, too—all Miriam had to do was get him out the door and she would have been Scott-free. But Miriam doesn't do things to get away with them. She likes the fight, she likes proving her points and letting everyone know that she's smarter than them, and that she's the victim of social constructs and things like that. So she gets caught in the kitchen, while she was making this guy breakfast. Since then, she's come home drunk in the middle of the night,

throwing up so loud she woke everyone, and then, finally, just started spending the night away from home whenever she wanted to do something.

So, on Wednesday, Mom is waiting for me when I get home at night. She's sitting Indian-style on the couch in sweats and a tank top, playing solitaire on her computer. Either she's losing or she's just clicking through the cards. Mom always likes to talk these things over with me, probably so she can feel like not every kid is like Miriam, or so she can feel like she's not crazy, or something like that. And every day this week I've been able to get out of that conversation, because after school I've had dress rehearsals for the play we're putting on at the end of the semester. After that, I've been going out with the girl who's doing makeup. Three straight dates.

I put my backpack down and sit on the couch when she starts talking about cops. "It's Miriam, Mom," I say. "She's just out with her friends or something. Besides, it's not even like she's a runaway. She's eighteen now."

"She's still a missing person," Mom says.

"But what happens at the end?" I ask her. "How do you get the police to *stop* looking for a person? She's going to walk in, either blow everyone off or else start yelling, and then what? Does she have to go downtown and prove who she is? Are they going to interrogate her about where she's been? What's the point?"

"The point is to find her, Tristan," Mom says. "She could be lying face-down in a ditch. For four days now."

"Really? That's what you're worried about?"

“Yes,” Mom says. It’s the first time she’s looked up from her computer. She looks like she just told me she has cancer or AIDS or something. She’s about to die and only wants to tell me she loves me. I haven’t felt worse for her in my life. It only lasts for a second, and then she looks back at her computer again. “How was school today?”

“Fine,” I say, and there’s silence for a little while. “I had a date tonight.”

“How’d it go?”

“Pretty good. Her name is Aubrey. Aubrey Bynum. She does the makeup.” She has light brown hair that goes just below her shoulders, and this great smile. She’s two years ahead of me in school, in Miriam’s grade, and she’s an honor student and on the volleyball team. I have two classes with her: art and study hall. I know she finishes her written tests first, likes impression-ism, and prefers Greek sculpture to Renaissance portraiture.

“I thought you weren’t going out with any more theater girls.”

“She’s not a theater girl. She does the makeup. One of the teachers asked her to. She’s just doing it because it’ll look good on her transcripts.” I kissed her for the first time tonight. It was in the parking garage of the mall that’s right around the corner from our school. She was leaning back against one of those concrete supports, in between her car and another. The boom of a car door broke us out of it. “I think you should go ahead and call the police,” I say.

“Now you’re just placating me.”

“No,” I say. “Well, I do think that if anything bad had happened, you’d already know about it. She would have called. Someone would have called. But you seem like you’ve thought about it.”

Mom doesn’t say anything.

“We can compromise,” I say. “Remember when I wanted that video game system, and you made me wait two months to make sure I *really* wanted it?” This is worth a shot.

Mom actually laughs. “I’ll call on Valentine’s Day.”

“Seriously,” I say. “She’ll be back by Monday. Exams are coming up.”

“Yeah,” she says. “You’re released. Have a good night.”

I walk back to my room and turn the light on, and I’m surprised by how suddenly and completely my day feels bad now. Earlier, after I finished eating with Aubrey Bynum, I did one of those obnoxious things that boys do, and started taking pictures of her. When she told me to stop I took some more, and she started putting her hands up in her face, yelling at me to stop, generally making a scene in this deli while the employees were trying to close. All the while I was clicking away. Before I start my homework, I take my phone out and flip through the pictures. Aubrey Bynum is smiling in every one of them.

My dad is a weatherman on television here in Atlanta. He does the morning show and smiles a lot, and talks back and forth with the news anchors. Every once in a while he’ll throw in a bit of astronomy. After that, the guy tells you what it’s like in your neck of the woods.

Dad got robbed at gunpoint once, right in front of our house. I was about seven or so. We were all inside. Years later, when he was telling me about it—there are a lot of places in Atlanta that parents don't want kids going—he said that every one kept saying they were sorry and how horrible it was, but the whole time he'd actually been wishing for a re-do. "I wanted to stab the guy's eye out with my key or something," he said. "I didn't want to kill him or anything. I just wanted to make him suffer. Like a small animal. I wanted to shoot him in a shoulder and watch him squirm." He said it was stupid, that it was a normal reaction for guys. He snapped at everyone for a few weeks, and eventually got over it. But it's one thing about him that I've never forgotten. He's never talked to me about girls or math or anything, but this is the stuff he decides to tell me about.

I think he told my mom some stories about missing girls, the ones on the news that get found in the woods, mostly because he really does want to find out what happens when you want the police to stop looking for a person. I think he wants Miriam to go down there and start crying. Not just because she hurt him or anything, but I think he wants her to give him an answer, just once. And since he can't make her, someone's going to.

With Miriam gone in the afternoons, Dad's started watching sports highlights in the living room for an hour or so before he goes to bed. This part, at least, I don't blame him for. My sister likes to lie on the couch after school, reading Melville or Hugo or one of those Russian writers, and then get up and walk away in a huff as soon as someone turns on the television. It's hard to be in

the same room with her most of the time. She uses words like myopic and zeitgeist, then makes fun of people who don't follow her. She claims eclectic tastes in music—that's her word, too. When we were kids, she used to make me dance on her bed with her, to boy bands. I like to sing her the lyrics now, when I can. I've spent the majority of my time in high school trying to live her down.

Later in the week, after dress rehearsals are over, I sit down with my dad for a while and watch. He likes to make noises at the best clips. Sometimes the noises turn to words. My favorite is, "Holy Christ, they got that on film." I like to know there are things that still impress him.

One day he says, "I know it's awful to say, but the only thing that's not death or dismemberment that I can think of for where your sister's been is that she's out somewhere getting an abortion."

"Yeah. I'd keep in that 'awful to say' part if you ever say that to Mom."

He smiles. "Oh, it's much too late for that."

Most of my relationship with my sister goes something like this:

One afternoon when I was six, during the summer when my family first moved into the house we live in now, Miriam and I pulled all the pillows and blankets off her bed and put them down on the floor. We were lying down on them, head to toe, and she was trying to tell me that birds can see in more colors than people can. "They can see in ultraviolet," she said.

"What's that?" I asked.

“Well, people can only see the colors of the rainbow. Red through violet. Ultraviolet is the one after that.”

“How many colors are even in a rainbow?”

“Seven.”

“People can see more than seven colors, Miriam. There’s sixty-*four* in the crayon box.”

“Those are all combinations of the real colors,” she said.

“Brown isn’t in the rainbow. And *it’s* in the package of *seven* markers.”

“That’s a combination, too,” she said. “You’ll learn that in second grade.” We could go at things like this for hours. This was generally the way she ended them.

“Well what do we see instead of ultraviolet?”

“*Nothing*,” she said. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. We see right through it. It’s *invisible*. Birds have this color, in their feathers, at the tips and stuff, that only they can see. Doesn’t that sound cool?”

I thought about it for a minute. “Ultrared would be cooler,” I told her.

“It’s not ultrared, it’s *infrared*. And you don’t see it, you feel it. It’s heat. Don’t you know anything?”

I had my own way of ending these things. “I want to go play outside now,” I said.

I like those kinds of conversations more now than I did at the time. We had other ones—we played in our rooms and outside a lot, even before Mom started working. But for some reason, I think that one is my favorite.

Right after I kiss Aubrey Bynum for the second time ever, she tells me she's just using me.

It's Saturday, after Miriam's been gone a full week, and Aubrey Bynum calls and invites me over to her house. She says her parents have a Christmas party to go to during the day, and then they're going to see *The Nutcracker* downtown. When I get to her house, I'm pulling into one of those old, huge mansions. Three stories, big yard, circular driveway. Columns, servants' entrance, everything. I've seen *Gone With the Wind*, and I know Sherman burned Atlanta during the Civil War, but I'm thinking that this part of town was slightly out in the country at the time. There's even a door you have to go through before you get to the real front door. Aubrey Bynum is there pretty fast after I ring the bell. She asks me if I found the place okay, and there's a split second where I'm about to make some joke, but before I can get anything out she tells me to come inside.

She actually gives me a tour of the house. She says it's been in her family for five or six generations, and the first floor looks like it hasn't been redecorated in all that time. There are chandeliers and painted ceilings, hardwood floors that are coming up, a harp and a piano that share an entire wing, separated by a carved fireplace and a sitting area with little loveseats that look like the ones in movies about Marie Antoinette. There's a giant staircase. The kitchen is the only thing that looks new—the countertops are black and there's a flat-screen hanging from a cupboard.

The second floor, apart from the number of rooms, looks like a normal house. There's the same beige carpet everyone else in the world house, only it runs through a big room with a home theater, a room with a pool table, and all kinds of other rooms we don't really go into. The thresholds and doorknobs look old, and there are bookcases built into a few walls, but that's about it. The hallway is lined diplomas on one side and photos on the other. There is nothing about any of this that makes it a good time to kiss her, and I don't really even know why I'm looking for a moment. I've kissed her before. But it's still a little intimidating.

"My brother wanted to go to Iraq when he graduated, and my mom almost had a heart attack," Aubrey Bynum says. She points to a photo that she's in, on a beach at sunset, in a bikini, standing in between two guys. "He went to West Point instead. Rick enlisted, though." She points to the other guy. "They were always best friends. He shipped out not too long ago. Afghanistan." In the picture, it's Rick's side that Aubrey Bynum is leaning her head into.

She walks the rest of the way down the hallway towards a set of French doors, and when she gets there she throws them open. There's a sunroom with a glass ceiling, lawn chairs, and plants. As soon as I look through, Aubrey Bynum closes the door again. "And there you go," she says. "I hate this house."

You don't kiss a girl after she says that. "It must be tough," I said.

"Everyone that walks in has to get the entire history of my family," she says. "You should hear my mom tell it. Back in they were building the Georgia Dome, in the eighties or nineties or whatever, my grandmother wanted to be a

booster for it—give money, raise money, all that. My grandfather didn't want to. She nagged him about our family being a part of everything worth anything in the state of Georgia—except for the biggest whatever the Georgia Dome is the biggest of.”

“I don't think the Georgia Dome is the biggest anything anymore,” I say.

“Exactly. These are the stories they tell people. Finally, grandpa got tired of it and moved to Florida with some college girl. ‘Skips a generation in every family.’ That's what my Mom says. That divorce got her into this house.” By this point, Aubrey Bynum is plopping onto a couch in the room with the home theater system.

“But, still,” I say. “It's a nice house.”

“We tore the radiators out a few years ago,” she says. “That's good, I guess. It's just creepy, though. It creaks in the middle of the night, the power goes out all the time.” She shrugs.

There are a lot of reasons why I like Aubrey Bynum. Every now and then she'll wear a plain shirt and gym shorts to school: I like the tan of her thighs. I like the way her ponytail bounces when she walks with one. I like her earrings. Usually, girls have to say they like someone's earrings before I even notice there are any in the room. I notice them on Aubrey Bynum. I also like that I can sit in a movie theater with her, and we can agree on when it's time to leave without talking. And I like that I can say things that might sound mean without having to explain myself to her. But this time I mean it.

“Especially the harp,” I say. “That's really creepy.”

She stops and looks at me. “You think I’m a brat,” she says.

And that’s when I finally kiss her. And we get into it for a minute, too, before she finally pushes me off and says that she can’t because she’s just using me.

I have absolutely no idea what this means. I’m a sixteen year old boy, and in every story I’ve ever heard anyone tell about boys and girls, it’s always the boys who use the girls. And they use them for dirty things, because they have great boobs or something like that. So the thing that comes out of my mouth is, “Using me for *what?*”

She doesn’t say anything. A little bit of her hair has fallen into her face, and she brushes it aside. She says, “It’s just complicated,” and then she looks like she’s about to cry, and she just says, “Come with me.”

So I do. She grabs a flashlight from the home theater room, then grabs me by the first two fingers of one hand. “We’re going to the attic,” she says.

“Why?”

“Because I want to show you something.”

We go up a small staircase to the third floor, then around a corner where she opens a door that goes up to the attic. “Go on,” she says.

“I guess you’re not going to lock up there, right?”

She smiles and turns on her flashlight under her face for a few seconds, and I’m glad for that, because I really wasn’t prepared at all for the crying thing.

When I get to the top of the stairs there are a few seconds where it’s just me with the light coming up from the staircase as she’s walking behind me.

When she gets to the top, she shines the flashlight around the room. It's emptier than I expected, with just a few boxes around the doorway. The ceiling is pointed in the middle like most attics, but this one is too tall for me to reach. I can only see where the sides meet the floor when she happens to be pointing the flashlight at just the right spot. There are crossbeams that go across the ceiling every so often, turning the upside down-down Vs into As. The wood is old and dark, and the floor creaks as we walk.

After we've gone for a little while, she points the flashlight up at an angle, and says, "There it is."

I follow the light upwards and see something draped over the side of one of the crossbeams, but I can't really tell what it is. At first I think it's a dead snake: there are stretches of light and dark running down like a ribcage, so I stand on my toes to get a better look and that's when I see the knot on the bottom—it's a rope—and at about the same time, Aubrey Bynum says, "No, don't touch it. My great-grandmother killed herself on that."

I've dated girls and none of this has never happened before. My first reaction is to pull back from it, like it's a bug, but I think I'm able to stay on my toes well enough. I look over at her and say, "Why would you show me that?"

"I haven't told anyone about it," she says. "I didn't even find out until a month ago. My aunt told me at Thanksgiving. The little part of the story they don't tell."

I roll back on my feet. "Who keeps something like that up there for a hundred years?"

“It was my great-grandmother, Tristan. It was back in the fifties or something.”

“Okay, who keeps something like that up there for *sixty* years?”

“I wouldn’t want to be the one who had to come up here to cut it down,” she says. “Would you?”

When Miriam was a freshman, there was a girl at school that died. She was on her way home from work one night and her car slid into a telephone pole. She was wearing her seatbelt and everything. That’s all I really know about it. Earlier this year, there was a kid in my grade that killed himself. His name was Dixon Calhoun. I saw him around sometimes, but I didn’t really know him. He would sit by himself at lunch—he always wore neon pants and these shirts with cartoon characters ironed onto the front—and he would sit, looking at the opening of his soda bottle intently. There were always rumors about him, though.

There are about three thousand kids that go to my school, so I have a lot of experience with rumors. Most generally come in one of two varieties: old or dirty. One of the theater kids I know used to get dressed in the dark in the mornings, so back in second grade, he would always come to school with his shirts on backwards or inside out. One football player told the entire team. This other kid I know threw up on a girl in fourth grade. And then there’s the boy who had sex with some other, unidentified guy, on the playground of the elementary school we went to, during the summer between middle school and freshman

year. There's also a girl a year ahead of me, a debutante—a Daughter of the Confederacy, actually—who gave her first blowjob to her older brother.

Trying to figure out which ones are true is a lot like algebra. I tend to believe the ones that have stories to them, but mostly because stories only get attached to rumors when someone says, "Nuh-uh," and I like to believe there are a few people out there who are trying to stick up for people. When I first heard about the guy who threw up on the girl in fourth grade, it was the actual girl who was telling me. I told her that the kids' family was poor, that the only time he ate was at school, and that was why he threw up all the time. When I heard it again six months later, the rumor had changed into how his parents were crack heads and he threw up all the time because his house was so dirty.

When Dixon Calhoun killed himself, the popular story was that when he was a kid, he lived in Alabama, in a trailer park. One night when he was six, the police came. Both of his parents had been shot. The police took him down to the station and questioned him for ten hours, trying to figure out what happened. Eventually, Dixon Calhoun told the cops that he'd been the one that killed his parents. Then, child services came in and said the police had basically tortured him, that the confession was a fake, and they sent him to live out here. Ten years later, he decided to kill himself.

I tend to believe this mostly because I still don't really know what child services is. And I tend not to believe it because no one knows even simple things, like if he was living with foster parents or with an aunt or something.

My sister's take was completely different. When Mom came home the day my school told us he died, I was on the couch doing homework and Miriam was sitting in a chair, eating an apple. I guess they called the parents because the first thing Mom said was, "You guys okay?"

I just shrugged a little. "I didn't really know him or anything."

Miriam's response was, "No one cares if some kid at our school killed himself, Mom. It's a passive response to external stimuli. It's complicated." She took a bite of her apple because she was chewing when she said, "And distant. Now, if he had taken a couple dozen of Tristan's ex-girlfriends with him, it would be completely different."

"Thank you, Miriam," Mom said. "I'm sure that's very astute."

"What does *anybody* I know have to do with this?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying that most people tend to dismiss suicide, while they maintain an interest in murder. They attribute it to all kinds of internal forces that they don't care to understand."

"You two should just stop before you get something started," Mom said.

"It's already started," I said

"Then knock it off," Mom said.

"I'm tired of being the one that walks away. She's psychotic."

"I'm not psychotic," Miriam said. "Everything I said is well documented. It sucks, but it's true. You just have to look for it."

"This kid killed himself, and you're sitting around here talking about books. At least have enough humanity to shut up for a day or two."

That's when she called me a frat boy. "And actually, not even that," she said. "At least frat boys have to compete with other frat boys. You just hang out with the theater kids so you can be the cool one by default."

Nothing good happened after that. It was back at Halloween, and that was the last conversation I had with my sister before she left.

We live inside the city, in a two-story house that's pushed up too close against the others around it. I've always thought this was a good thing. We moved here when I was six, and I was always on my bike with an action figure, trying to talk to the old man next door. We have a long, narrow backyard with a big tree that casts the entire yard in shadow, and brick wall on one side that has ivy growing down from the top, halfway down to the ground. My mom has a corner where she tries to grow vegetables in the summer. After school on Monday, when Miriam's still not home, Mom is out back on the porch, sitting in one side by a table she has out there.

"Are you calling the police now?" I ask her.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Yeah, Dad said he told you the abortion thing. I have a question for you. It's weird."

"Okay." She motions to the chair next to her.

"If your grandfather's mom had killed herself, when would you tell me about it?"

"I don't think I want to talk about that, either," she says. "Why do you ask?"

“This girl I’m dating or whatever.” The whole thing about her using me is not something I really want to go into. “Her great-grandmother killed herself in the attic. I think she’s mad about it. She showed me the rope and everything.”

Mom looks over at me. “Wow, kiddo. Wow.”

“Yeah. So?”

“I don’t really know,” she says. She turns back to the yard and sits up a little in chair. “Whenever it came up, I guess. At a funeral, probably. That’s usually where stuff like that comes up. I know there was a little girl on your father’s side who died young—her coat got caught in the spokes of a car, back when cars had spokes. And I had always thought *my* grandfather’s middle name was Elmer, until I started going through his paperwork after he died. It was actually Elmore. He just said it too fast.”

“Then your final answer is funeral?”

“I’m not going to tell you about it at dinner one night, no. And she’s mad about it?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Maybe not mad, exactly, but she bothered to tell me about it in the first place, so it’s got to be something. It’s not exactly something you just throw around.”

“I see. I’m guessing you haven’t told her about Miriam, yet?”

“God, no.”

“You should.”

“What’s she going to say about it?” I ask. “The whole thing is stupid.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“She likes bands, you know,” I say. “Miriam, I mean. She likes to go see them. She knows all about the ones that play around here. I was just thinking about the night she came home drunk. She even wrote a pop song.”

“Really.”

“It was a joke,” I say. “It never said what anything actually was. It was something like ‘You said it, and I wish it could say it only hurt, but it’s all right, it’s okay.’ She *knows* about bands.”

“How did you ever find out about that?” Mom asks.

“She was telling her boyfriend about it in the car one day. She came up with a new line.”

“And when were you ever in a car with her?”

“Oh. Right. Well, we skipped one day. The day that kid killed himself. Miriam said the last time a kid at school died, people came up asking her about their MySpace pages, if they should take pictures down. ‘Cause Dad works at the station and all. They wanted to know if there would be reporters.”

“So you just decided to leave.”

“Yeah, but my point is that people do things like that. People go to bars, and they see shows, and they even have a beer. That doesn’t make them bad or anything.”

Mom sits back in her chair again, and is silent for a while. Then, “Believe it or not, I’ve been to a show at a bar before.”

“Exactly,” I say.

“I’ve been picked up at a bar, too. Your sister can be twenty-one when she’s twenty-one. And this isn’t happening because she got yelled at once, or even a hundred times.”

“I’m not saying that. I’m just saying it’s what she likes. It’s what she does.”

“I know,” Mom says. “I’m glad you do, too. And I’m even a little glad you skipped that day with her. You should go tell Aubrey Bynum about the whole thing. Probably she’ll say nothing. But maybe she’ll have something good to say.”

My mom is kinda crazy, and not completely in the same way that all moms are crazy. She likes to talk to me, and she thinks that talking about everything will make it better. My Dad thinks that talking about nothing is better. And I’m just trying to look for some kind of a middle ground here. Talking to Aubrey Bynum about Miriam is the last thing I want to do, and really, talking to Aubrey Bynum about how she’s using me is right up there on that list, because I don’t really get that and there’s nothing I can say about it. But I still want her to like me, to think that I’m an all right guy, and all of that, so when I see her after school on Monday, I just talk for a little bit about the rope in her attic. I ask her if she ever noticed the dates on her great-grandmother’s tombstone, when she died, and Aubrey Bynum tells me she has no idea where her great-grandmother is buried. I guess I just assumed that her family had some big area where everyone was buried, or a tomb or something. I don’t really know why.

It's my idea to go find the grave. I guess I've started to think about the whole thing like being afraid of an airplane, something you're supposed to confront. Or maybe like putting a story to a rumor.

"Look, Tristan," Aubrey Bynum says. "I don't think we need to see each other anymore." She looks over her shoulder at the empty hallway.

"You're just thinking about it the wrong way," I say. "You're thinking about it like it's a whole romantic thing. You should just think about it like it'll be like an adventure."

"Tromping around a graveyard," she says. "With you."

"We'll start at the library," I tell her.

She agrees to go to the library with me, but when we actually get there, the smarter-than-God librarians just shrug and tell us to look on the internet. We get a computer and start checking through different websites. She's sitting in the chair and I'm squatting next to her, trying not to get in the way of the people next to us. It actually takes us about half an hour to actually find something, but the website has an image available for us to look at. It's a draft card for World War I, filled out in 1918 by hand, in neat, cursive writing, English teacher's handwriting, by someone named Terrance Bynum. It's probably the most awesome thing I've ever found on the internet.

"All the boys in my family have the middle name Terrance," Aubrey Bynum says. "The first-born boys, anyway. It goes with the house."

"His address isn't yours, either," I say. "He must have been the one that bought it."

“His wife’s name is Eleanor. And he already has two kids.”

“So your great-grandmother would have been this guy’s daughter.”

“In law,” Aubrey Bynum says. “She would have married in.”

There’s nothing very surprising about the baby’s tombstone, except maybe that it’s even there in the first place. It’s just a rectangle, about a foot by a foot and a half, that comes maybe two or three inches off the ground. It seems more like marble, black and smooth, than the tombstones we passed on the way down here, but I’m not sure what tombstones are really made out of, so it could be tin for all I know. The lettering is orange like that, at least, like copper or rust. It has the baby’s name, Albert Terrance Bynum, that he was born on December 18, in 1942, and died three days later. Nothing else. Aubrey bends down and wipes away a few broken clips of dead grass that have collected in the inscription. She lingers there for a minute.

“So this would have been my grandfather’s brother, right?” she says.

“His older brother, I guess.”

She nods, still touching it. “Yeah. I definitely didn’t know anything about this.”

We’d come here looking for Aubrey’s great-grandmother, but the lady in the office up front told us this was the only Bynum buried here. We’ve checked three different cemeteries so far, and this is the only one that’s even had someone with Aubrey’s last name, so we decided we would walk down anyway. Aubrey told me when we were pulling into the parking lot that a lot of rich people

used to get buried here, back before there were suburbs. But as this part of town got worse and worse, finally the city had to buy the cemetery, for John Does and the homeless. A lot of the markers we passed along the way were crumbling, with little piles of stone still lying on the ground where they fell. On top of the hill we walked down from there are some family tombs from the nineteenth century or something, complete with statues of angels and saints. They have these dark lines running along with the curves, the robes and cheeks and the outstretched hands, almost like they were drawn there. I almost said something about them because I thought they looked good with the details, but of course, once I got up close, the lines were just splotchy and uneven and probably alive. The noses are chipped away, toes missing. I couldn't read whatever scripture that had once been there, but I could make out enough of the dates to place them around events I know, Appomattox and Pearl Harbor.

They keep the babies in a little bowl of land. Rows and rows of little tin boxes, or marble boxes, or whatever. There are just a few trees on the hills at the edge of the horizon, old, huge, bare with winter.

I have no idea what this kid means to Aubrey, if it means anything more than if this had happened just last week to some nameless family out in Colorado or somewhere. And I also don't know if that makes me a creep. "It's even his birthday next week," I say.

She stands up again, holding a few strands of hair behind one ear, and sort of leans her cheek into that hand. I put my arm out for her and she falls into me a little bit. She has on this coat with fur around the collar and it catches her

hair a little bit as it's blowing. She's frowning a bit so I just stand with her in silence, and in the wind. Finally she says she doesn't think she would have been able to do it. "Go through the whole pregnancy, labor," she says, "just to have it die after three days—especially at this time of year. Can you imagine? And then to have to come out here, in front of people, talking to them, and bury it? Him. I just couldn't have done it."

After a while I walk her back towards the car. We don't say anything. This was my big thing for Aubrey Bynum, my big chance, and it just feels over. Not like I failed or did anything wrong, exactly, but more like we've grown up or we've know each other for years somehow, or shared in something that is the least sexy thing ever, important and meaningful and altogether unsexy. And I don't really understand that. And it's Wednesday night, the first night of the play, and we have to be back at school by six.

Usually at my school, the theater department doesn't give parts to underclassmen. Instead, we're supposed to be in charge of advertisements, set construction, those kinds of things, while we take classes. My first ad was for the fall play my freshman year. It was a rip-off of the opening credits of *Saturday Night Fever*, and aired during the morning announcements on every television in the school. But instead of just walking, I'd jump and land with one foot over the other, or land backwards, whatever. You could tell I was a ladies' man by my ability to get people to follow me by nodding and pointing suggestively. It was enough to get me a part as a sophomore.

I have two scenes, one at the very beginning in the first act, and another at the end of the second. I help give out drinks during intermission, and once they play starts up again I spend some time in the rotunda afterwards, helping clean everything up. It's me and three freshmen in a corner when Aubrey walks in. I put my bag behind one of the tables and meet her by one of the doors that looks into the auditorium and onstage. I'm pretty used to the way she dresses, but tonight she's in heels and a black, sleeveless dress that comes down to about her knees. I feel like I caught my sister in her underwear.

"Are you going to the party tonight?" she asks.

"I'm not really in the mood."

"Yeah," she said, and we watched the performance for a few minutes. "It got weird, didn't it?"

"Definitely."

"And now you don't want to talk to me anymore?"

"It's not that," I said, and it's the first time I've really thought that the silent walk back to the car, the silence while I was in her make-up chair before the play, all of that, could be construed as "I don't have a shot, so I'm done with you now." I shrug. "I just don't really know what's going on. I don't know what to say."

"You're a good kid," she says. "A good guy."

"Yeah, maybe I'll make some little sophomore girl happy," I say, and it pisses me off immediately, because it's exactly what my dad would say.

"I should touch you up sometime in the fifth scene," she says, and walks away.

I pick up my bag of trash from behind the table, and spend a few minutes chatting with the theater kids until the conversation turns into a singing competition. Then I head for the make-up room, which is basically a janitor's closet full of wigs and wardrobes, for more silence with Aubrey Bynum.

We're in there for a few minutes, both of us trying to dodge the other's eyes while she's looking me in the face, brushing here, smudging with her finger. My phone rings. It's on vibrate, but she can hear it, and she says I can answer it if I want to.

"It's just my mom," I say.

"They're not here?"

"They're coming on Friday," I say. "My sister's been acting like a turd, so they probably forgot it started tonight."

"That's right," she said, and laughed. "You're Miriam Preston's little brother."

After my *Saturday Night Fever* ad aired in school, I'd have football players point me out in the hallways between classes and say, "Hey, it's that little guy from the announcements." And I would much rather be referred to as "that little guy" than as my sister's brother.

"I have honors calculus with her," Aubrey Bynum says. That's something else that Miriam likes to say a lot. She doesn't just have calculus, she has *honors* calculus. "But she hasn't been there for a while. Is she okay? I figured she'd be back this week, because of exams and all."

And the story just forms in my head. My mom is calling me because Miriam came back, safe and sound, the victim of no crime, but just having fun out on the town, or in need of a little vacation or something, no big deal, but she had to come back because she has to take her exams tomorrow and she probably left her fucking books at the house. “Shit,” I say.

“Are you okay?” Aubrey Bynum asks.

My phone starts buzzing again. I know that if my phone only buzzes twice, it’s telling me that the caller left a voicemail. If it buzzes three times, it’s a new call. Once the third buzz comes, I say, “Fine. Absolutely fucking fine.”

And then Aubrey Bynum stands up, walks over to the mirror, kinda slams down the compact she’s been using, then turns around to face me. “Look, my boyfriend died over there,” she says. “The guy from the picture, you know? He got shot in Afghanistan. And I know it can be hard to see what that has to do with you, but it has to do with me, okay?”

“Okay,” I say. “I get it. I mean, no, I don’t really get that at all, but I understand that it’s not your fault, and it’s not my fault. It just kinda is what it is.”

“Then why are you being such an ass now?”

“I’m not,” I say. “Really, I’m not trying to be. I’ve just got this other stuff going on.”

“Right,” she says. “But if you were still trying to date me, you’d be telling me what that stuff is, not just blowing me off.”

“Trust me,” I say. “I don’t think there’s any way I could ever really tell you about this in a way you’d understand.”

She doesn't say anything, but she goes back to get her compact and starts on my face again. Someone pokes their head in the door. "Ten minutes, Tristan," they say, and then disappear again.

"I'm sorry about Rick," I say.

"Thanks," she says. "I guess it's just different. When it first happened, all my friends knew. I kind of buried myself in taking care of his family. We made them dinners and did bake sales, and made banners and stuff, for his family, you know."

"Are your friends cheerleaders?" I ask.

"Well, yeah," she says. "There were always people around. Always stuff to do. And then time went on, and they all started acting like it never happened. Or, that it was the only thing that had ever happened," she said. "It was nice being around someone who didn't know."

And then my phone starts vibrating again. "You really need to get that," Aubrey says.

"I'm sorry," I say, and get out the chair. "I don't know why these things have to be happening at the same time." I pull my phone out of my pocket, but it's not my mom who's calling me. It's Miriam herself.

"Do you want me to leave?" Aubrey Bynum asks.

"Nope. This is gonna be quick." And then I hit the button and put the phone to my ear. "Where are you?"

"I need you to come pick me up."

"Call a fucking cab," I say.

“I’m in a hotel downtown, on Courtland,” Miriam says. “I’ll text you the address.”

“Jeez, Tristan,” I say. “Sorry I’ve been such a crazy psycho-bitch lately and I couldn’t call you two fucking weeks ago, but now that we have that cleared up, could you do me a favor?”

“Tristan,” she says.

“Get Mom to do it.”

“Mom’s just going to tell you to do it,” she says, and then pauses for a second. “I got married.”

I look over at Aubrey Bynum. She’s sitting on the little counter in front of the mirror where all the make-up is. She has her legs crossed and she’s looking down. “Bullshit,” I say into the phone.

“I’m going to text you the address. I need you to hurry.”

“I’m in the middle of a play, Miriam.”

“Just get here when you can,” she says.

“Where’s your—” The word husband seems unpronounceable all of a sudden. “Where’s the guy?”

“He’s not coming. Just me.”

“Christ.”

“I have to pack. Hurry.” And she hangs up on me.

I put my phone down and Aubrey Bynum turns toward me again. “That sounded pretty intense,” she says.

“Are you almost done here?”

“Yeah,” she says. “I mean, I have to touch up the leads while you’re on, but as soon as you come off, they go on and I’m finished.”

“Okay,” I say. “I wanted to do this whole big thing for you, so you’d believe me when I said you should date me. And that kinda blew up in my face. So now I’m gonna do this big thing so you’ll believe me when I say I want to be your friend. But I’m pretty sure that’s gonna blow up in my face, too, because it involves Miriam. But if you’re in, we need to leave as soon as I come off.”

“Okay, then,” she says. “I’m in. Let me finish you.”

So she finishes, and I go backstage and wait for my cue and try to ignore the past ten minutes or so. I’ve never really been hesitant about going out on stage. My hesitation is that I want a lead role, and that I can’t go out there and simply read my lines, but I have to be enthusiastic and original and memorable. So I just think back to rehearsals, because I’ve been enthusiastic and original and memorable four different times now, and I just have to do that again. And I go out, and the lights are so bright I can’t see anything, I just hear laughter from some black void, directed towards one of my friends who’s been making people laugh for as long as I’ve known him. It’s like we’re in someone’s living room, just trying to keep the whole laughing thing going, and as soon as I go offstage, Aubrey Bynum is there, shaking her car keys at me.

I tell her the story on the way. It helps me not think about how I want nothing more than to yell at Miriam when I see her, but I still want Aubrey to drive faster because I do want to see her. When we pull into the parking lot, I text

“What room?” to Miriam, and as we’re standing in front of the elevator, she texts the number back to me.

“What am I gonna say to this guy?” I say in the elevator.

“Nothing,” Aubrey Bynum says. “She’s already talked to him, right?” The doors open on the third floor. “This is so fucking strange.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you swear before,” I say as we get out. I check the numbers on the sign in the hallway, and point to my right.

“But this is beyond weird.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I’m not sure it’s more weird than showing people your great-grandmother’s noose.”

“First, I’d never done that before,” she says.

“You should have just told me about Rick, then.” We get to the door and I knock on it.

“You wouldn’t have cared. Or at least, I didn’t know that you would have. Most guys would just think, ‘Cool, she’s single.’”

“You need to start hanging around some different guys,” I say, and that’s when Miriam opens the door. It’s in this quick motion, where she’s almost turned back around into the room by the time the door actually opens, and I don’t think she sees Aubrey.

“Come on in,” Miriam says. “I just need to finish up.”

We walk into the room and there are clothes strewn everywhere, the bed is unmade, and a few water bottles are on top of the dresser along with some open wine. My sister generally dresses in all-black, with spiked bracelets and

combat boots and all that, but she's actually dressed normal for once. She has on blue jeans and a wool sweater with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. She's grabbing piles of clothes and stuffing them into a suitcase in mounds, and when she turns around to sit on top of the suitcase, she sees Aubrey Bynum next to me and says, "What is she doing here?"

"She's here to make sure I don't kill you," I say. "Where's dude?"

"I sent him out for Chinese. To the suburbs," she says. "This place in Marietta."

"Jesus Christ," I say. "You didn't even tell him you were ditching him, did you?"

"I'll tell him later," she says while she's zipping her bag up.

"What did he do?" Aubrey asks. "Did he hit you or something?"

"No, he just won't leave me the fuck alone," Miriam says. "I'm reading a book and he asks me if I want water. We're watching TV, and he asks me if I'm too cold. We're going to bed and he asks if I need more covers. He will not shut the fuck up."

"Tell him to back the fuck off," I say.

"He's just trying to be nice. Look, I'll talk to him later." Miriam picks her bag up. "Right now I just need to get out of here before I stab his eyes out with chopsticks. He's going to be back any minute," she says, and starts walking toward the door.

I don't move, I just look up to the ceiling and I say, "What is up with girls and this stupid bullshit?" and Aubrey Bynum, to her everlasting credit, laughs at this.

"Come on," she says, and we follow Miriam out the door.

"Mom's gonna freak if she's there while all this goes down," Miriam says to me in the hallway.

"She's not going to be there. We're dropping you off, and we're going to a party." As soon as I finish talking, Miriam stops in the middle of the hallway, and I turn to look at her, and she has an expression that's one part shocked and two parts ashamed. And then I turn to look up the hall, and there's this skinny guy standing there, with wild red hair and a brown paper bag tucked under an arm. "Well, perfect," I say, and I keep walking down the hall.

I think Aubrey looks back at Miriam, and Miriam starts walking again, and when I get up to the guy, I say, "Miriam wants to go home."

"What?" The guy says it to me, but he's looking behind me at Miriam.

"Home," I say. "Like, to her parents' house. She'll be there tomorrow. And seriously, chill out about trying to do nice things for her. If she wants water, she'll get it herself. She's a fully capable human being. And if she wants you to drive to Marietta to get Chinese, tell her she's out of her mind," I say. And then I walk off, and the girls kinda follow me. Miriam keeps looking back at him like he's a puppy on the side of the road, and I turn around and say, "But I think she likes you, though, because you're the only person I've ever seen her afraid of hurting. Just keep her from wanting to punch you."

And then we walk around a corner, and Aubrey Bynum is laughing a little, and as we get into the elevator, I say, "Seriously. How hard is that?"

Futility

My father has this habit of giving tours of his living room to my children when he needs attention. Today it's just my son, Tristan. He's eighteen in two weeks. I watch from the couch, back and forth with the game on television, as Dad puts his hand on Tristan's shoulder, as he says the words "Have you ever seen." Dad had these bookshelves built into the wall, ceiling high and flanking each side of the television, to house all the baubles he's collected over the years. It's his icebreaker for when he has guests. There's the wooden turtle from Singapore, the dried tree frog from South America, the portrait of the four-armed woman from India. The woman's name is Shakti. Dried tree frogs are illegal in the United States, but Dad got his when he was in the military. He says this with a wink. There's a story behind the turtle, something about the white paint and fertility, but I don't remember it anymore and by the time he gets around to it I've reached the point where I have to stop listening.

As soon as we got here, my daughter scurried back into some corner of the house, and there's a part of me that wouldn't mind joining her. She's twenty, and not the type of person that can stand there with my father and listen without letting any hint of boredom show on her face. But Tristan, even though he's seen all this stuff every year since he was five, has a slight confusion in his eyes, turning into clarity. There's curiosity, changing into understanding. Even a little bit where his mouth is open.

He was the lead in *The Foreigner* this year.

In most ways, my son is the complete opposite of me. Skinny as a rail. His first car is small and gets good gas mileage. But it was when he went into drama that I started to worry that he might be gay. I'd do little things to steer him toward sports, to remind him of all the baseball games we used to go to when he was younger. Then he started bringing girls home for dinner and such, and the thought just came to me, as sudden and simple as finding the keys in my hand after looking for them for ten minutes: he's completely his mother's son. She keeps track of when he breaks up with these girls. She'll know the name of the new one before he's brought her over. I watch Tristan and how he works my father and I can almost hear Katherine's voice in his actions, as if she'd been preparing him before we arrived. "Just let him talk. He won't say anything about what's on his mind, but just let him go on." And Dad does talk. Tristan nods. But there's some part of me that still wonders if he goes off afterward like any kid his age, laughing about it. The old kook and his crap. Dad's hand hesitates on a small photo album. A time-out ends on the television. Dad says they're pictures that Mom took of the backyard. The two of them make eye contact and Tristan takes the book, opening it, flipping through the small three-by-five pages.

Really, though, this is the usual way we deal with the things we'd rather not talk about. My mother has had a series of diseases, starting with bronchitis and pneumonia and getting progressively worse, on and off for about five years now. She's been hospitalized for the last two months straight. Before we left Atlanta for the trip out here, Dad called to let me know that she's started starving to death. Her esophagus has constricted to the point where it's become too

painful for her to swallow, and she never wanted any business with tubes. He said that with everything else they didn't think this would be the way it would happen, that the doctors were saying it would probably be Tuesday or Wednesday. "Just so you all know," he'd said. Nothing more.

Dad says something about "the colors." Los Angeles turns the ball over to a guy from an inside zone. "All these photographs were taken from this window right over here." Dad's hand goes up to Tristan's arm and they walk across the room.

Dad points. My daughter Miriam hides. Today is Good Friday, and my wife is in the kitchen, doing a ham. I'd gone in there earlier and had come up behind her, about to try to say something to her, but she just did this thing where she melted back into me, moved her head on my chest, a little too conspicuously. I wound up just getting a beer. I keep waiting for Tristan to say something, but he's silent. Dad finally tells him how the position of the setting sun changes over the course of the year in relation to a tree in the backyard, and I decide I have to get up.

We'll all be spending most of the day at the hospital, and taking shifts spending the night. My sister, Helen, has tonight. Rather than just taking dinner up there to her, Katherine insisted that Helen come home to eat, so she's covering at the hospital for a few hours and Dad has only his progeny at the table. "I've been thinking about selling the house," he says. This is the closest I've heard him actually talk about something since we got here. Tristan spoons some mashed

potatoes onto his plate. "Let someone else have the lakefront," Dad says.

"Someone younger, who could enjoy it. After all, it's not like I need all this space. I don't think I could even take care of all this space." But he gets shut down almost immediately.

"You'll have plenty of time to think about things like that later, Dad." I haven't seen my sister Helen in almost three years, a holiday somewhere, with pajamas and her kids. "You never know how you're going to feel in two months," she says. At fourteen, Helen started a war with Dad that lasted her entire high school career. It was the war most fathers and daughters have, Brad Carter down the street with the Trans Am. But she won. She spent the late eighties in college in Boston, her black leather jacket ripped along the back and her hair teased, and pink. "You might find that you'd rather be here with all these memories than just leave them behind." She spent the early nineties going from place to place as some kind of new thing, a blend of hippie with punk rocker: baggy clothes, organic shampoo, piercings. She moved around a lot from city to city. Then, suddenly, she started getting in touch with us again, regularly. After a year or so, of that, rumors started flying around the family, whispered and cautionary, that she'd been saved. Listening to her now, the way she's begun to sound like a prescription drug commercial, I can't help but think that I had known this person, once.

"Give it a year. A month," she says.

After dinner, I go out on the deck to where Dad's standing with the porch lights off. The moon is setting across the lake. I can see one of the Dippers, I

think, and the cloud of the Milky Way. I pull out a cigarette and sit down at the outdoor table next to where he's standing.

"When'd you start that again?" he asks.

"Here recently. I'll quit soon. It's just work."

"How are you and Katie doing?"

I let the smoke move itself out of my mouth. "Fine," I say. "It's all fine." This is the truth, but I've never talked to my father about women before in my life, except for one-liners. "Helen's probably right, you know, about waiting to sell the house."

"Yep."

"You could probably find someone to come out once a week or so and do the cleaning." He doesn't say anything. Dad's view of the lake is perpendicular to the dam. Car lights appear in the distance. "Have you picked out a plot?"

"Yep. Years ago. At the church." Now he turns around to face me. "I guess you've never been there, have you? We should stop by tomorrow, after we go to the hospital." He walks the three steps to the table and sits down next to me. "They've had to expand the grounds here recently. Everything growing so fast. But we have a place relatively near the building. Your mother picked it, actually. It's on a small side street. In the shade of a tree in the afternoons." He looks at the night.

This little trip to my parents' had been orchestrated back at Christmas time. That this is Mom's last week is just a coincidence, though apparently it's not big enough of one to get me into church. It had been a few days before New

Year's, around the kitchen table and playing bridge, except then it had been both my parents with Katherine and me. Mom sat across from me at the table and said, barely above a whisper, something like "Maybe we should get everyone together for Easter." They'd just told us a few days before that the doctors weren't expecting her to live for more than a year. There were percentages and dates. Helen had been at her in-laws. They said they'd called her.

Mom had been looking at her cards when she made the suggestion, and the three of us sat there, silent for a minute, probably looking at each other, until Katherine said, "That sounds like a great idea." We played out the rest of the hand, and while Dad was shuffling, Katherine said, again, "That *is* a great idea." She got up and called Helen right there in the middle of our game.

I sat while she talked, looking at Mom's eyes as she sat back in the darkness around the edge of the overhead light. I put thoughts into her head, but even as time passed I never figured out if she thought Easter would probably be the last time she'd get to see the whole family together, or rather if she doubted that she'd survive the winter, and wanted something already in place for us to come and make sure her husband was all right when she wasn't around to make sure of it anymore. Mom met my eye and smiled a half-smile from the corner of her mouth, something like the smile Katherine gives Tristan when he goes out on dates or when I've made too big a deal out of making sure the dishes don't have spots. Except that with Katherine and Tristan, the message seems to be *You're still a great kid* or *You're what I always imagined* and with my mother and me it seems to be something more like *As long as you've got her around, you'll be all*

right. “Helen said it sounded fabulous,” Katherine said after she hung up the phone. “She said she’d make all the arrangements.”

That Christmas had probably been the last good one Katherine and I will have with our kids, at least until there are grandchildren. The six o’clock mornings and footed pajamas, where everything comes with “This is what I’ve *a/ways* wanted” had finally given way to everything being the wrong brand, the old version. So Katherine and I decided, rather early in the year, that we were going to stuff all of their presents into boxes for various common household appliances. We gathered around noon last Christmas and watched them unwrap their toasters, a paper shredder, ink cartridges and things like that. Tristan didn’t even finish unwrapping his grill cover. He just mouthed “What the hell?” very slowly, over to his sister across the room. They spent the rest of the day silent, whispering to each other, wondering what to do. They were on the same side, one last time. Too shocked to complain. At some point, I caught Tristan actually reading the side of the coffee machine box, to see how it worked. Around seven, Miriam started yelling across the house. She’d finally opened her cookware, and found the little zip drive or flash drive or whatever was inside.

I try to imagine the conversation between my parents, the one that starts “Well, we have to tell the children” and ends “We’ll wait until Christmas. Yes, that’s best.”

I’ve never been very close to either of my parents. I spent my adolescence trying to follow in my father’s footsteps, and I think there’s something about that

process that requires the two people to have a certain distance from each other. And I was always too busy, of course, to really notice anything that Mom actually did, or didn't do, for us. After dinner, Helen goes back to the hospital and Katherine returns, playing a few games of cards in the kitchen with Dad before we leave. I'm in the living room, watching a documentary on the Revolutionary War. I can hear the vague sounds of Tristan and Miriam fighting, slowly getting louder. They have to sleep in the same room at the hotel for the next few nights and it makes them skittish. "You are so disgusting," Miriam says. This is the fight Miriam usually picks when she's desperate for something to say, the one about how boys are demeaning girls when they flirt with them.

"Calm down, Miriam," Tristan says. "She is my girlfriend."

Miriam is older than Tristan by about eighteen months. I'd like to call her a dreamer, and she is, but rather than trying to accomplish something good, she's bent on stopping everything bad. She's a cake mix of all the contradictory things she's heard, complete with the black combat boots, the black T-shirts and fingernail polish, and this sterling silver necklace that looks like it's made out of barb-wire. I try not to worry too much. Everyone tells me that black is the new pink. "That is every little asinine thing that's wrong with the world," Miriam says. "This post-colonial, patriarchal matrix of domination."

"Are those words or something?" Tristan asks.

"Yes, asshole. It means that it's going to take about five gallons of ammonia to bleach the smell of pussy out of the backseat of your car. That's what it means."

“Hey,” I say, in that loud voice that used to make them jump when they were three. “Knock it off.”

Now they just ignore me. “Miriam, you practically laid the entire sophomore class last month.”

I get up from the couch at the same time as I hear one of the chairs at the kitchen table being scooted back. “Both of you get upstairs. Now.” They look behind me at Katherine who’s walking into the living room from the kitchen, her jet black hair showing just the faintest gray, falling down over her shoulders, a few locks in front of her glasses. If Satan himself wanted to come back and do some real damage, it would be in that body, with that face she gets when the kids make her click. She says nothing, just points upwards at an angle.

“Great,” Tristan says. The three of us trudge up the stairs behind him.

Mom and Dad bought this house right after Helen moved out, the huge, five-bedroom lake house, with a vow that neither of us could ever move back in again. All the memories here are theirs alone. I never slept in any of the beds in their guestrooms as a child. Nothing on the walls pulls me back to a more familiar time. “I hope you both know that your grandfather heard that little stunt you just pulled,” Katherine says.

They’re silent.

“Look, we get it,” I say. “You’re twenty.” I point. “You’re eighteen. You’re enjoying yourselves. There’s nothing we can do about it, even if we wanted to. But this little fight wasn’t even cute in the third grade, when it was about who got more of those gold stars. Do you two really want me to going around the house

first thing in the morning, yelling about how beautiful your mother looks when she comes?”

Both their faces fall. “This isn’t helping anything, Dan,” she says.

“No, but it ought to. You two don’t want to hear about us. We don’t want to hear about you.” I stop. “Are you both using condoms?”

They flinch when I say the word. “Jeez, Dad,” Tristan says.

“No, Dad,” Miriam starts. “Do you think I’m a complete moron?”

“Okay. Then this is all this is about. Have a little dignity and show some respect. Especially now. Christ.” I turn around and leave the room.

Katherine follows me after a second, and as we reach the top of the stairs, we can hear the two of them starting back up again. “And don’t waste any time bickering about who’s dumber,” she calls back. “Right now, you’re both the same amount of dumb.” We walk down a few stairs together. “My god,” she says, and laughs. “You get to this point, you know, where you think you’ve seen it all. And then they just blow something all new out of the water.”

“I need a beer,” I say.

When I walk into our hotel room, Katherine is in bed with the lamp on, sitting Indian style with a phone book in her lap. She’s wearing a white cotton shirt with small holes in the seams. She’ll sleep in the same one for a decade or so.

They’re the best smelling shirts on the planet. She has her hair in a ponytail and flipped up over her shoulder. She looks up at me as I throw the key card down on the dresser. “Helen came by after you left,” she says. “Did she find you?”

“Yeah.” When we got back to the hotel, I went down to the bar to have a drink and catch the scores. It was a pretty swanky place for a hotel bar, dark, lit only by the blue light from the aquarium in the center of the room and a few oil lamps spaced along the walls. Lacquered tables with candles in the middle. Light jazz. There were a group of tanned, petite fortysomethings in short pastel dresses gathered around the bar. They had fluorescent drinks. I was about halfway through my beer before Helen got there, and I spent most of our conversation thinking about what it would be like to have a sister that that lived on margaritas and Mitsubishis instead of the librarian across the table from me, who wears her aquamarine brooch a little too high on her shoulder, who wears that deeply floral, old ladies’ perfume now. Who got to the point that she had to hide her entire past from herself, and got stuck there.

“How is she?” Katherine says.

“I don’t know. I made her cry.”

“She’s just touchy.”

“No. I’m pretty sure I made her cry. I’ve been doing it for forty years.” I walk into the bathroom and fish my toothbrush out of the bag. “Did you bring that little yellow dress with you?” I ask.

“No, I left it,” she says.

“It’s Easter.”

“It’s six inches above my knees, Dan.”

I walk into the bathroom and turn on the water in the sink. “Yeah. Shame.”

She generally ignores things like this. “So,” she says, “when Helen came by she also asked me if I’d look around for hotels for next weekend.” She nudges the phone book a little. “But I still can’t figure out why we’re in a hotel *this* weekend.”

“You know how she is. She probably thought we’d just be in Dad’s hair.”

“I know. We already paid for it.” She pauses. “When you die, I want my kids at home. I want them with me, in my house.”

“Okay. Tell him we’re staying next weekend. Or this weekend,” I say.

“Don’t you think you should be the one to talk to him about it?”

“I will. That’s fine. But he likes you more. It doesn’t really matter.”

“But it does, I think.”

“I know.” I spit and wash my mouth out and walk into the room. “It’s just – has it occurred to you that all these little things you’re doing, for him, for me, are just making it a lot easier to lose her?”

She just looks at me for a second. Then: “Well, yeah, Dan. It has.” And there it is again, that simplicity. I am utterly, completely defeated. I sit down next to her, and that’s when her eyes scrunch up. “And the word manipulate had better not come out of your mouth,” she says.

“No.” I sit down next to her. I lie down. “No. Thank you.”

“Well. You’re welcome.” She puts the phone book over on the nightstand and lies down. She turns off the light and scrunches against me and I move my arm for her. “You’ve been pretty antsy since we got here,” she says.

“Yep.”

“Like you’re mad at everyone. And they’re doing everything right, you know. Or, at least, the best that they can. Maybe it’s all wrong, too, all at the same time.”

“I know.” We lie there like that for a while more, letting the dark draw in around us. “I think I’ll stay here with him, for the week,” I say.

“I think that’s the best idea I’ve heard all night,” she says.

My mother is still in the ICU, so we can only go back to see her two at a time. I take Miriam with me while everyone else sits in the waiting room. The nurses are keeping her sedated, and I asked why—it made me angry, because that seemed like a decision they ought not be making—but they just answered me with a sentence that sounded like it should be on *Jeopardy!* and I let it go. Inside her room, there’s a machine that has a heart monitor and three other lines that fluctuate in rhythm. It provides the only sound. I sit down in the chair next to the bed. Her mouth is hanging open and her eyes have begun to sink back into her head. Her cheeks are gone. I know there’s not a real comparison to Auschwitz or anything like that, but that’s what comes into my mind. There are rings of dark skin under her eyes, days and weeks of effort, of no sleep, followed by only sleep. The skin of her hand feels like plastic.

Miriam has only seen this woman twice a year, and I don’t know how much of a connection there is for her. I don’t know what’s going through her mind. She looks at her grandmother, her face and her hands, and she’s silent and finally sits down next to me.

“She’s a good woman,” I say, but I quickly stop and wonder whether that’s true, or at least if it’s true in a way that Miriam would respect. My mother never drove us to broaden our horizons, the way Katherine has for her. She was content to simply be seen and not heard, to support without judgment or pressure. “Now, you two,” she would always say, so easily ignored.

“There are some secrets there,” Miriam says. My daughter has been married and divorced, and whatever the reason for that mistake was—youth or arrogance—no matter how much she talks about philosophy that is completely wrong, every once in a while she’ll say something that makes me think she’s been through more than I have.

“You don’t have to sit here,” I say. “You can send the next group in. I’ll just be a minute.”

“Okay,” she says, and gives me a look like she wants to ask if I’m sure, but finally goes.

I don’t think I’ve been in a room alone with my mother for twenty-five years or more. And I’m not a superstitious person—I don’t feel a great need to say anything now to try to rectify that vacancy, or to express acknowledgement that a vacancy existed at all. I don’t believe in angels watching down, and I don’t believe in people who are asleep hearing and understanding things. But I allow myself a few minutes to imagine scenarios, things that could have happened in the past, things I could have said to make this moment less like losing someone who had been gone for years and something that felt closer to what she deserved. And then Katherine and Tristan walk in.

“You okay?” Katherine says.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’ll be out front.”

My father, Helen, and Miriam are sitting in two rows of chairs that face each other. Miriam has opened a book. My father is watching the television. It’s one of those years when the Masters is on Easter weekend. A little while later, a hospice nurse comes to see Dad, Helen, and me in a small room and says that Mom will be moved upstairs during the night, asks if we’ve chosen a funeral home, things of that nature, and there are tears at that point, and the three of us sit there together in silence for a while.

We have lunch and the discussion is mostly practical. I tell Dad that I’ll be staying during the week, tell him I’ll go find a funeral home with him. We’ll have to choose a casket and flowers. Helen asks if he has money freed up for all of that.

“I have plenty of money,” he says. “We saved up enough for her to travel on after I passed. We never thought it would be her.”

I’d always imagined my reaction, if Katherine were to die, as being angry and snapping at people, but he just seems more lost than anything else.

After lunch, my aunts and uncles start arriving—Mom’s sister and Dad’s brother, their spouses. Helen and I meet them at the emergency entrance and we shake hands or hug, share a few words about the suddenness of it, and then talk a bit about business as we walk to the waiting room. Dad’s brother was in the navy and wears the hat from the ship he served on. Mom’s sister’s husband is a retired machinist who has on his local 506 cap. But when we finally get back to the waiting room, Dad perks up.

The six of them grew up in the same small town, and conversation quickly moves from Miriam and Tristan to the prom of 1963 and the night my mother was crowned the queen of the annual parade. They remind each other of some detail that one or another has forgotten, laughing because of the lapse or because of the time, and I slowly come to the realization that my father still treats me as his child. He's with his brothers and sisters now, and they talk about me and Helen the way Katherine and I talked about Miriam, right there in front of her, when she was still crawling. When my sister was six, she went to my aunt's house one morning instead of school, claiming she had run away, something I had never known. Dad says that Mom had wanted to leave her there. They move on to the kids they'd gone to school with, the couple who'd owned the store on the corner, how Dad had spilled a strawberry milkshake on Mom the night he'd wanted to propose, and how Dad's brother had gone back just a few years ago. And I'm glad that Miriam and Tristan have each other, because there are stories in life that I'm never going to tell them, even if they were willing to listen.

We leave around six that night, and when we get back to the house, Miriam heads outside, Tristan begins playing with his phone on the couch, and conversations break out in different rooms. The phone rings five times, ice starts clinking in glasses, and before long elderly ladies start coming through the door, one at a time, with aluminum trays with food. I find Katherine while my uncle is telling a joke, put my hand on her back, then go outside.

The sun is still up, and Miriam's lying on one of the lounge chairs that Dad has on the deck. It's Savannah in April, and people are still out in their boats on

the lake. The bugs have begun to bring back the birds. Miriam's wearing sunglasses and reading, fully clothed—jeans, a T-shirt, her combat boots—but laid out as if she were sunbathing. "Don't you have a swimming suit?"

She doesn't look up from the book. "Nope."

"Hmm." I hold my pack of cigarettes out to her. "Are you smoking yet?"

"Just crack, Dad."

It actually makes me laugh. "Can't blame me for checking."

She says nothing.

"Whatcha readin'?"

She finally looks over at me. " Sylvia Plath," she says, then goes back to the book.

"Oh," I say, and sit down next to her. "What does she write about?"

"I don't know," she says.

"She writes poems, though, right? They've got to be about something."

She eyes me suspiciously from the corner of her glasses. "Nazis," she says. "And bees. Lots and lots of bees."

"Bees."

She nods a little bit.

"Is there something poetic about bees? I don't know any of the rules. Venom, or the way they can only sting once—"

She sits up. "Have you been reading books on parenting or something? It's a little late, you know," she says.

This is one of the hard parts about repairing relationships. The other person has to be willing to go along with it. “Nah,” I say. “I tried, once, when you were a kid, but there were never enough pictures to keep my attention.”

There’s something that happens to her mouth when she rolls her eyes. I can tell even through the sunglasses. “I suppose I ought to be in there shoving my head up someone’s ass like my dear brother has been all weekend, huh?”

I take a drag from my cigarette. “I don’t know what to say to that, Miriam. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, Miriam.”

I can’t help but think that a little bit of my attitude is what left her so angry in the first place, but there’s only so far a person can feel responsible for their children before it becomes counter-productive. Two days ago, I would have said that the opportunity for any changes that in department had passed by years ago, but now I feel as if they’re still years off. Miriam sits back in her lounge chair, and I let myself sit in the backyard with my daughter in the evening. I think about a cup of coffee. “There’s food inside,” I say, when I finally go back in.

The next weekend, we all gather again for the funeral, except this time Helen’s husband and her boys are with us. After the funeral, we eat, and then Tristan and I bring strawberry milkshakes back for everyone. My mother’s sister offers a toast, saying that everyone in the room had known Mom as a wife or a sister or a mother, that no one yet remained who remembered her as a daughter. It was a part of her life had been over long ago, but all the rest would endure as long as those who remembered it.