

University of Memphis

University of Memphis Digital Commons

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

6-1-2015

Constellations

Erin Leigh Ponders

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

Recommended Citation

Ponders, Erin Leigh, "Constellations" (2015). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1182.
<https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/1182>

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 khhgerty@memphis.edu.

CONSTELLATIONS

by

Erin Ponders

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 2015

For Belv

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Richard Bausch and Allen Wier for encouraging me to write; I could not have asked for better first teachers. Cary Holladay and Tim Johnston pushed me to become a better writer and helped me to find a voice and story in this collection. Caitlin Horrocks and Neal Walsh showed interest in my writing and gave me the encouragement I needed to keep at it. I'd also like to thank the Sewanee Writers' Conference and Kenyon Writers' Workshop for giving me experiences that were formative to this collection, and Bette Pounders for helping me get to these conferences. I was fortunate enough to receive a Scraff Scholarship while at the University of Memphis and thank the Scraff Family for this honor. Memphis, specifically the music made here, inspired this collection and I am so lucky to call this place home. Thank you to my writing companions, Marcy and June. Most of all, I'd like to thank my family, especially Brad and Henry, who are everything.

Abstract

Constellations consists of a collection of ten “linked” short stories. The short stories share the setting of Memphis, Tennessee and have recurring characters. Using realism, the stories attempt to examine the Modern American South, specifically Memphis. In this collection, the social milieu of the Old South, which is in its final throes, is explored, exploited, parodied, and sometimes honored. Focusing upon the characters of Garnet Pigeon and her daughter, Caroline, Constellations explores generational differences along with themes such as relationships between mothers and their children, class and social status, feminism, grief and loss, revenge, love, and the art of knowing oneself in the changing landscape of the Deep South.

Keywords: Memphis, literary, women’s literature, southern literature, music, mythology

Table of Contents

Origin Story...	1
Constellations...	13
Visitation...	30
The Houseguest...	38
Rehabilitation...	56
Schadenfreude...	70
Senior Internship Paper...	94
Unpleasantries...	105
Dead Language...	121
Crisscross Applesauce...	152

ORIGIN STORY

I was still recovering from getting sick in the airport bathroom. My eyes were watering, stomach churning, and the taste of bile still lingering in my mouth when I took my seat at the gate beside my mother and began to watch the people walking past us to their gates farther down the concourse of the airport.

People dressed up back then to get on an airplane. They dressed for business, men in three-piece suits, women in blouses with shoulder pads and patent leather high heels. Mothers and daughters were dressed for a resort vacation in Laura Ashley floral sun dresses and fathers and sons in Lacoste shirts with the small alligators on the breast, braided leather belts, and khakis. It wasn't like it is now: people looking as if they are boarding a Greyhound. People looked cleaner, fancier to fly back then, or at least it seems to me now.

I was eleven and still got scared at the very thought of stepping foot on a plane, and yet I was trying not to show my fear to my mother who was distraught enough as it was. We were in the Memphis International Airport, back when it still was a busy airport, a large hub for airlines, waiting to board a plane for San Francisco. We sat together in the fake leather seats at the gate waiting to board the plane. The armrests of the seats had built in ash trays back then. Before leaving the house for the airport we had argued about what I was to wear on the trip: a denim skirt and a top that slouched off one shoulder (my pick, as we were going to California) or a plaid shirtwaist dress with a Peter

Pan collar (her pick, as I was eleven and this was a somber trip: though it was summer, it was not a vacation).

The throwing up was not because of preflight jitters. It had become a daily occurrence. Each morning I woke nervous and afraid, of what I did not know, the end result being my head over a toilet bowl purging myself of the acrid taste of the anxiety and doom. Afterwards I felt better. My mother had sent me to a child psychologist who gave the vague diagnosis of *emotional problems* and told my mother to watch for eating disorders when I became a teenager.

We sat in silence in the airport, my mother smoking and flipping nervously through a newspaper. I held my book bag in my lap, the bag full of books from my sixth grade summer reading list, and fought the urge to hold my mother's hand. Not only was I scared about flying and weak from getting sick, and the way my mother was acting made me more nervous.

My mother always got nervous when she was about to see my father, which had become a rare occurrence. They were still married but I had to look back into the recesses of my eleven year old memory to remember a time when they lived under the same roof. I was told their separation was about his job. His business required travel and he wanted us to stay in Memphis and be comfortable, yet I noticed that when he did visit Memphis, once every couple of months, he usually stayed in a guest bedroom to which I would bust in each morning, waking him. He'd retaliate by rubbing the sole of my bare foot across the stubble of his cheeks. Now he was ill and he wanted to see my mother and me. Trey, my brother, was seven and too young to make the trip. He was staying home with our

housekeeper and going about his summer as usual with sports and swimming. By the time Trey was born, my father was no longer living in our house.

I never lamented my father's absence from my daily life. Memphis had the second largest bond and futures market in the country because of the cotton trade. Many of my friends at school had fathers in the same business who also travelled almost constantly, and it never occurred to me that there might be another reason for his absences.

"If you are sick and not working...why aren't you coming home?" I asked my father during his weekly call to Trey and me.

"Because Caroline, I'm in the hospital out in...sunny California," he replied, taking the tone of a game show host, then adding a hissing sound effect of a crowd's applause.

"We have hospitals in Memphis, good hospitals, even Elvis came home to go to the hospital here."

"And look at how that turned out?"

We both laughed at this.

"I have an illness that they know how to treat out here...there's a little clinic in the hospital for it, I can come and go as needed. Plus, I live near a chocolate factory, it smells so good, and you can go there and get sundaes and chocolate bars. It's near a wharf where seals hang out."

“You sent me that chocolate last month.”

“Well, I haven’t told you the best part. I guess you’ll have to wait and see.”

I waited. There was silence on the other end of the phone. When I spoke to my father, every ounce of the woman I was trying so desperately to become melted away and I was a little girl. I waited as long as I could, and then said, “No, what is it? Tell me.”

“There is a family of wild parrots that live outside my apartment. I watch them from my window and they all have names. Since I haven’t been able to work, I feed them each day and they perch on my shoulder.”

My father always spun magic when he spoke to me, a master of distraction, guiding me away from my own thoughts and taking me into his own world, which, with me at least, shimmered with light and happiness, as a child’s should.

In San Francisco, my mother and I stayed in a one-bedroom furnished flat a block away from where my dad lived on Telegraph Hill. He secured the flat for us because he only had the one bed in his place. My father’s place was one huge room with exposed brick and ductwork. It was modern and moody, decorated in white and black with strange abstract art hanging on the walls. When we first arrived he was not staying at the hospital much, only going there for outpatient treatments and check ups several times a week.

Our place was warmer, more traditional. It had cream colored walls and Persian rugs and huge leather chesterfield couch in front of a fireplace and mantel. There was a huge bay window that looked out over the hills of this strange pastel city. My mother and

I were to share the bedroom that had a king-size bed that stood so high off the ground that it was hard for me to vault myself up and onto it.

The flat became like home in a matter of days. Mother would usually stay up late and rise early. She liked to keep one of the living room windows open to hear the noises of traffic and to watch people walk down the sidewalks on their way to and from work, some of them carrying large bags of groceries. We had a wonderful view of the skyline and I particularly liked the sleek white spike of the Transamerica Building.

In the morning she would open the casement window by the table in the kitchen, having to use her entire small frame for the momentum to turn the stubborn crank that opened the glass, and she would listen to the hums and moans of the delivery trucks and their drivers yelling at the shop keeper of the bodega at the end of the block as they dropped off their orders. Occasionally the fog was so thick that we could barely see through the milkiness and only make out the flashing lights of the delivery trucks as they parked at the curb. The foggy days were more interesting to me, the dreamlike cobweb it cast upon the city. The fog worried mother and on those mornings we ended up staying inside if we had nothing pressing.

We had cable television in the flat, and on the foggy mornings I watched channels we did not have yet in Memphis. The first time I saw MTV was during this trip, and instead of it making her cut her eyes or change the station, the music videos had the same hypnotic effect on my mother that they had on me. She had taken a leave from her work at the art museum for the summer to go on this trip, and she fidgeted and cleaned the flat because she wasn't used to not working. This was before the days of office email and

laptops or working remotely. She was stuck with her thoughts and me all day, but MTV seemed to calm my art curator mother. Soon she was singing along to David Bowie and Duran Duran as she washed our dishes or made up our bed. We waited out the morning fog watching Adam Ant and Martha Quinn, and then went about our business.

When we first saw my father, my mother tried to hide her tears. This was the afternoon we'd arrived in the city. We'd dropped our luggage in our flat and walked the half block to his apartment. When he opened the door and I saw him, I turned to look at my mother for reassurance that we had the right address, and her hand had fluttered to her mouth. She returned it to her side and then pushed me forward, nodding to me to go to him. I went to him slowly, giving myself time to recognize him.

We had not seen my father since Christmas, six months earlier, and did not expect so much change. He had always been lanky and trim, but now his frame was frail, almost skeletal. His face, once debonair like a movie star from one of the classic black and white movies my mother liked to watch, was now hollowed out like the sugar skulls we made in class out of paper mache to learn about The Day of the Dead. Most disturbing to me were the dark spots on his cheeks and neck and I was ashamed of my own disgust. I was most ashamed when he saw our reaction to his appearance, and the effort made to hide his hurt. We hugged, and afterwards he sighed, seeing my mother crying, and said, "What's with the water works? I've been dieting." Then she was laughing and crying at the same time and he held her for a long time, right there in the doorway of his apartment.

The three of us went together to his doctor appointments at San Francisco General. Usually I stayed outside the hospital, reading one of the books on my summer reading list. Not long into the trip I had read my way through most of the list and began to read the Marvel Comics that I picked up at the comics shop by our apartment when my mother sent me to the bodega on errands. The heroes were all shockingly human characters, each with flaws and their own reasons and motivations for their heroism. I read these at first out of boredom and tepid curiosity as to why the boys in my neighborhood relished them, but soon became entranced in the colorful alternate realities that the books offered: in one, perhaps a hero would perish, in another he would triumph. I longed for an alternate reality of my own, one in which I lived in this beautiful city with my father and he was healthy and would walk me to school up on the hill, the one where all the classes were taught in French, while my mother shuttled my little brother to a different school before going to her job at the de Young. Or perhaps we would all be back in dirty old Memphis going about our business in the muggy southern summer heat - that would've been okay, too. I knew that the reality that we currently inhabited would not end in triumph, and I bargained for the hero not to perish.

One afternoon, not too long after we got to San Francisco, I sat outside the hospital and read a comic book. I had developed a preference for Spiderman, specifically those issues with a strong presence of Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson's love story. That day it began to shower and I took shelter in the hospital, and found my way into the waiting room of Ward 86. I realized then what was wrong with my father; it all pieced together perfectly, cataclysmically. The posters on the walls of the waiting room read, "silence =

death,” and I saw the men waiting for their check ups, waiting to be treated for the latest failure of their bodies. My mother subscribed to *Life Magazine* and I had seen the cover declaring, “Now No One is Safe from AIDS” with photos of women, a family, and even a soldier. The realization sent me racing to the door of the hospital and out into the grass, where I clutched at my knees and threw up.

I did not confront my mother about my discovery, for I always felt, since I’d first been told about his illness, that there was a key detail missing. Whenever I asked (and I did ask) mother told me that it was “a disease like cancer.” They didn’t see me come into the waiting room. They had been taken back to see the doctor, but I think my mother knew I had discovered the identity of my father’s ailment. There was a knowingness between us as we slept that night, our crescent shaped figures facing one another on the bed, the space between us pregnant with sadness and fear.

My father was very good at business and the trading of bonds, and yet he told me regularly he wished that he would’ve become a teacher instead. He would’ve taught at the boarding school in the East Tennessee mountains, he said, where he had been shipped to school as a teenager. He said we would all live on campus, in a faculty apartment that was cramped yet cozy and had a fireplace and a view of Lookout Mountain. He would teach English Literature or Latin during the day and walk back to our house in the late afternoon where we’d uphold a daily ritual of taking tea.

He loved books. He loved stories. He mailed me a new book each month, and the latest had been translations of Greek mythology and epic poetry, which were his favorites. When he still lived in our house in Memphis, he would read stories from A Children's Collection of Greek Mythology at bedtime. It was a large hardback book and had art nouveau illustrations of the characters. Each night when he read the last line of the a myth and I paused, waiting for the story to rectify itself, for the denouement, for a happy closure. Instead I was left with sadness and fear, as, for instance, Daphne was turned into a Laurel tree: free of Apollo and yet rooted to the ground forever. I wanted to ask my father, "And what happened?" But the book would snap shut and I understood, only then, that this was the end. These stories came to my mind so often during that trip to San Francisco that summer, as I paused, straining to hear some sort of good news, waiting for my father to get better, knowing the book was simply going to snap shut.

He had many good days before the bad ones came and refused to leave.

There were six parrots that lived on the street where my father lived and where my mother and I stayed that summer in the rented flat. He had given them names: Connor, Mingus, Picasso, Sophie, Pushkin, Sonny, and Tupelo. They were famous around the area. My dad spent many mornings "communing with the parrots," as he called it. They used him as a perch and he fed them seeds from the pet store. The parrots took food from my hand, but refused to perch on me.

“Some types of parrots have longer life spans than people do,” I said one day, what would be the end of my father’s good days. It took me a moment to realize the gravity of my statement, and when I did tears clouded my eyes, the type that don’t stop gathering, that fall even when you beg them to stay inside. My father held me and we cried together as the parrots watched us from the branches of the trees.

By late July my mother had stopped her routine of nervous cleaning. She stayed at the hospital most hours of the day, sitting in a pleather armchair at my father’s bedside. I went there with her and stayed part of each day. My father was going blind and my mother read his books to him, his leather-bound favorites, and when they were done with those, she read him books she picked up at the dime store. She chose books with enrapt looking women on the covers, the bodice of their dresses popping with bosom, always with a man, dressed in period garb, nuzzling softly, or assertively pulling her to him. My parents became obsessed with these trashy books and laughed so loudly that the nurses had to stick their heads in to shush them, which made them laugh even harder. My mother held the book with one hand, and kept her other hand on father’s arm, or holding his hand. At the time, I thought the books were awful and the hospital was revolting. I couldn’t stand the chemical smell, paired with the stink of human decay that the hospital unleashed as I walked through the doors. I couldn’t bear to see my father, now ugly and foul, wasting away in a bed and no one doing anything. I hated my mother and father for reading the trashy novels and laughing, and I wanted to scream at them to shut up. Years

later, when passing the trashy books in a store, I would immediately think of my parents in that stale room laughing together in the face of Death and it would make me smile.

I think she could tell when I reached my limit, because she let me go back to the apartment each day before lunch. She gave me cab fare and money to spend at the bodega on the corner, enough to get lunch and dinner. I spent my days wandering the neighborhood, reading comic books, or, if I felt rebellious, taking a cab or cable car to the beach.

My mother returned to the apartment each night around nine with a bottle of wine and sat on the sofa with the TV on as she drank most of the bottle. I sat with her and saw that her gaze was never on the TV screen, but seemed to go right through or around it. She was looking into our future.

We returned to Memphis just before Labor Day. I'd missed the first week of my classes. My father's ashes were interred in his family plot in the Episcopal Cemetery.

I boxed up my comics and put them on a shelf in my closet. I felt I needed to keep them, but didn't want to see them or think about the stupid notion of alternate realities or universes. I kept all of my father's books on my shelf in my room: his leather-bound collection of the Greek Myths, the works of Ovid, Sophocles, and Virgil. I read these and no longer felt the least bit jarred when I reached the end of a story, and instead, I forced myself to simply snap the book shut.

In the end, when my mother gave me time alone with him, he told me that very soon, these bad memories would go away and the good times would be what I remembered. But that wasn't the case.

CONSTELLATIONS

It began with a challenge as they left Memphis, and now Caroline and Davis had been playing the *Kevin Bacon Game*, with their own modified rules, as the car made its way through Mississippi and into Louisiana. They were driving the five and a half hours from Memphis to New Orleans because Davis was playing an impromptu gig at a small bar. It wasn't Caroline's job to drive Davis around to gigs, but she was being paid extra for this road trip.

"I bet I can connect him with Clark Gable," Caroline said.

"In seven people or less this time," Davis replied.

"Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe in *Misfits*...Marilyn Monroe and Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot*....Jack Lemmon and Michael Douglas in *The China Syndrome*...Michael Douglas and Darryl Hannah in *Wall Street* and-" Caroline's speech slowed and she looked out the window as if the answer would be on a billboard. The one they were approaching advertised an adult bookstore off of exit 60. The last few billboards had featured busty women in lace bras, glossy lips agape, gazing at the motorists with heavily lined eyes, luring them to their gentleman's club like an interstate siren's song. She found the signs entertaining and not disturbing like the one in Byhalia that looked to be fifty years old and said, "Prepare To Meet Your Maker," in calligraphy that looked as if it came from a Gutenberg Bible.

“You’ve run out of steam already,” Davis said, “and you only have two more links.”

“Darryl Hannah and Julia Roberts in *Steel Magnolias*—”

“Shit, it’s always Julia Roberts...she’s your kingpin.”

“I love her. She’s beautiful.”

“Go ahead, go on and finish.”

“Okay, for the win. Julia Robert and Kevin Bacon in *Flatliners*. My work is done here.”

“It always comes down to *Flatliners*,” Davis said, scowling behind a pair of cheap sunglasses he had found back at the studio. The glasses had gold frames and amber tinted lenses, the type Elvis wore during his later years and that were handed out at parties and bars during Elvis Week back in Memphis. She knew he was not wearing them to be ironic, but because he needed sunglasses, and somehow he pulled it off.

“Are you upset?”

Davis shrugged.

“You’re pissed at me because I used *Flatliners*?” She reached to the passenger side and shoved his shoulder with her hand, trying to be playful. She didn’t know how to read him yet.

“You use it every time.”

“Then let’s take *Flatliners* off the table. It can be off limits.”

“Do Clark Gable without *Flatliners*. You can’t do it.”

Caroline considered this.

“Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe in *Misfits*...Marilyn Monroe and Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot*....Jack Lemmon and Darryl Hannah in *Grumpier Old Men*,” Caroline paused.

“See, it can’t be done.”

“Hush,” Caroline said and continued. “Darryl Hannah and Tom Hanks in *Splash*.....Tom Hanks and Elizabeth Perkins in *Big*.”

“One more!”

Caroline felt herself smile as she turned her head to him and said, “Elizabeth Perkins and Kevin Bacon in *He Said She Said*.”

He grinned at her and she was relieved that he wasn’t angry about her win. His hair was dark and wavy, grown out in a shaggy yet fashionable way; he tucked some of it behind his ears to reveal cheekbones so pronounced they reminded her of last summer when she finally got to go to Rome and stood gawking up at *The David*, his chiseled features highlighted by the light streaming in through the skylight of the museum rotunda. Davis looked back at her and she returned to watching the road. She leaned up to, almost over, the wheel and furrowed her brow in concentration. She recalled her friends saying that she drove more like a grandmother than a twenty-one year old, and leaned back from the wheel.

“So how do you know this stuff?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, and shrugged. “I’ve always loved *the cinema* but never really watched many old movies, until a couple of summers ago when I got really sick and it kept me in bed for a few months. Having the TV on was reassuring. I liked Turner

Classic Movies and just let it run day and night, and by the time I was better I had grown accustomed to it, so I keep it on still, running all hours.”

“What was wrong with you?”

“What? You mean back then? Nothing romantic, just mono.”

Caroline worked for the studio as a secretary where he was recording his second album. The studio was a part-time job she'd taken for the purpose of living off campus in an apartment, her mother refused to pay the rent for because she worried Caroline was becoming antisocial.

Davis was from New York and didn't have a car, even though the label he was with probably would have provided one. Instead he rode a bike around Memphis. Caroline was the only support staff in the studio. The guys who owned it, Jerry and Vic, worked the boards as engineers. She'd overheard them talking with one another about Davis before he arrived to record and had gathered that his first album was a cult favorite, popular among other musicians, but his songs were too long for radio play and the label wanted the second album to be more commercial. He'd come to Memphis so the record executives couldn't spy on his progress, the engineers said.

Caroline thought the place had a seventies feel: wood paneled walls (both in the studio and out), and carpeting that was probably once the color of the flesh of an avocado, but was now dull and brown from being endlessly exposed to a constant stream

of cigarette smoke. Gold records hung on the walls, all were recorded here, some she recognized and some she even owned.

She answered the phones, made coffee, and rarely had to type up invoices--the studio wasn't all that official and the invoices were simple--but mostly she just read.

There was a buzz among the musicians when Davis arrived in town, but then again, there were a steady stream of famous musicians who chose to record here. As Vic and Jerry had reminded her numerous times as a selling point when people called about booking time, they recorded things the old way, the way they recorded Elvis or Johnny Cash down the street at Sun to get that rough and muddy Memphis Sound: all the players playing on a two track, no overdubs, with a slight tape delay that produced that quick slapback doubling sound.

When Davis walked in for his first session, he asked her what she was reading and she looked up, confused because she was still thinking in Latin and not used to being disturbed.

He was attractive in that mystical and grubby way that most of the musicians were. They had a certain Parisian or Continental quality, perhaps a bit more so in this case as there was a light and intelligence behind his eyes indicating that he was not impaired, as most of the musicians were who came here to record.

"It's Virgil," she replied and looked back down at the text. He stood in front of her desk and she felt his gaze. His presence was warming, like one of those red lamps they kept fries under at a fast food joint. Her cheeks felt hot and flushed.

"The studio is back there," she said, not looking up, pointing vaguely to the back.

He bent and whispered before walking away, "Oh Muse, recount to me the causes."

She stopped at the record store and bought his CD on her way home from work. The liner notes gave a simple bio: he was raised on the outskirts of Los Angeles, no formal music lessons, and after high school he moved to New York and began to gig. He was thirty.

When her bosses not so much asked, but told her to drive Davis to this gig, she was upset.

"Yeah, I guess this means no reading yourself Greek on our dime," Jerry said, "you're gonna have to actually work the rest of the week."

"Unless they have Greek on tape for the car ride," Vic said and spat some dip into a plastic Coke bottle. Jerry belly laughed.

"Why can't you get one of the session players to do it?" she asked.

"Who in their right mind would want those drunks driving them around?" Jerry asked. He and Vic looked at each other and they laughed like they'd never heard a joke before. Caroline rolled her eyes.

"Besides, our college girl has a dependable car," Vic said.

"He's the one who's paying and he wanted you," Jerry added, raising and lowering his eyebrows several times.

“I mean, the best stories have already been written long ago. The Greeks. Man, the Greeks. We still only have stories that operate on a number of plots, like thirty or forty, some guy wrote a whole book about it and the Greeks and the Romans are responsible for most of those. English Lit people argue Shakespeare, but c’mon. Poetry, too, it’s all from epic ballads. Doesn’t that bother you? While you are writing lyrics? Singing your songs and knowing that the best stuff has already been written?”

She looked over at him. Davis was looking at her, a half smile on his face. He was not wearing his Elvis sunglasses and his eyes squinted from the afternoon sun. His hair fell in dark waves around his face and neck.

“Well...does it?” she asked, forcing herself to look away from him and back to the road.

“I’m sorry, what are you asking?”

“Hand me that Twix out of the bag,” she said and paused as Davis retrieved then handed the candy bar to her. She unwrapped the candy bar, took a large bite, and then said with a mouthful, “I mean, Virgil....he’s my favorite. He’s the shit. He must be a tough act to follow.”

The cadence of her car’s tires slapping the causeway over the Pontchartrain signaled to Caroline that the drive was almost complete, and she felt a pang of regret. The drive and the city were familiar because her uncle lived in New Orleans and she usually visited

once a year. She hoped her knowledge of the city would impress Davis. She glanced at him as he looked out the window at the lake and the small fishing camps, which were houses on stilts with fishing boats parked on the water nearby.

The scenery along side the interstate became the suburbs of New Orleans which was a strip-mall haven, and then came the above-ground cemeteries, that always reminded Caroline of miniature cities, the crypts in neat rows like houses lining streets stretching across the flat green ground for acres upon acres. Concrete angels and crosses taller than the cemetery walls decorated the rooftops of the crypts.

“Okay,” Caroline said, “where is it again that you booked our rooms?”

“La Pavilion, but I promised a friend I’d drop by and say hello, so I guess head towards Uptown to their place.” Davis pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and read the address, “Jefferson and Magazine.”

Caroline noted his odd use of nouns and pronouns and suspected that the friend was a woman. She tried to think of something to say but managed only to nod. The pit of her stomach hurt and she told herself this was because of the Twix.

Fourteen blocks later, she parallel-parked on Magazine and immediately pulled a book from her bag.

“Sure you don’t want to come in with me?”

“Nope, I’m good. I’m at a crucial point and haven’t read this translation yet.” She waived her copy of *The Aeneid* at him without meeting his eye.

Alone in the car, her eyes drifted over the words of one line repeatedly and without comprehension. After five minutes she saw Davis emerge from the front door of

the peach shotgun house with a long-limbed woman with a dark bob and skin the color of cream in a white china bowl. Caroline stared, taking inventory: the woman wore short shorts with a tank top and a pair of sandals and carried a large straw handbag that could be classified as a basket. She looked artistic, sophisticated, and close to Davis's age. Like Davis, she looked grubby and Parisian, as if she belonged on a beach cruiser bicycle, a baguette and bouquet of flowers in the basket on the handle bars.

The woman got into the backseat and Davis returned to the front seat.

"We're going to drop Ilene off at work, I think it's on our way."

"It's on the twenty-four hundred block of Magazine," Ilene added.

"Sure," Caroline said, and began to drive.

"Are you the girl that reads all the time?" Ilene asked, and Davis shifted a bit in his seat.

"Yes," Caroline said, watching the road.

Davis and Ilene spoke of the people they had in common, people Caroline did not know, and places Caroline had never been. They spoke about Ilene's paintings and her newest gallery show and the creative process. At red lights she watched Ilene in the rear view mirror and noted her flawless arched brows and crimson painted lips. Once, Ilene met her gaze in the rearview mirror and something about the way Ilene looked at her was both curious and apologetic. Caroline knew then that Ilene was Davis's lover or had been at one time.

Lover. It was such an adult word. Caroline had been with several guys, one in high school and three (maybe technically four) so far at college, but the thought of

referring to them as her lovers was absurd and, well, pathetic. When she thought of those sexual experiences, she thought of them as *close encounters*. Like the time her family went to Mexico and swam with the dolphins: it was okay, the dolphins were nice enough, but it wasn't like it was on *Flipper* and that was what she had expected it to be, wanted it to be.

Yet she didn't think of her sexual exploits often. At college she'd led a life of quiet and solitude in the study carrels of the campus library, the glow of the green banker's lamp illuminating Virgil, Ovid, and Homer, surrounded by the sweet scent of the decaying books in their stacks, a smell that made her salivate. Those last few years in the library with her books and her few friends, most of which were either library workers or professors of classics, had been fulfilling and happy.

Working at the studio this summer, or, more specifically, seeing Davis at the studio this summer, confused her. That day she first met him she'd torn open the excessive packaging of Davis's CD, *Found Melodies*, while still in the parking lot of the record store and sat in her running car, AC blasting, listening intently. It was as if John Keats and Virgil had somehow gotten together to write lyrics and found the male equivalent of Edith Piaf to sing them. At her desk at work the following day, her mind wandered from the dactylic hexameter of *The Aeneid* to the door of the studio and, beyond it, the artist. He was both bard and songbird. Her life no longer felt as full, and her underarms never seemed to be dry anymore.

“Okay,” said Ilene, “this is it, up here.” Ilene leaned forward, sticking her arm in between the front seats to point to where Caroline was to drop her off. Her arm was hairless and slender, like a pale vine. As the car pulled to a stop, Ilene whipped a scarf from the straw bag and, without effort or aid of a mirror, tied it around her head, making a perfect turban. Davis and Ilene kissed one another once on each cheek, not on the mouth. Caroline told her goodbye and Ilene smiled. This time she was unable to read what Ilene’s smile was telling her.

Ilene got out of the car and walked down the sidewalk and disappeared as she entered a storefront with a window that featured a sad looking mannequin wearing a yellow dress.

There was a heavy silence as the car pulled out on to Magazine and headed towards the hotel.

“Ok, do Greta Garbo,” Davis said.

She couldn’t look at him.

“She was in movies with Clark Gable,” Caroline said, and added, “I don’t want to play anymore.”

One night the previous week Caroline had been completing her daily routine for closing up the studio office. It stayed light so late in Memphis in the summer. The front door of the studio faced west and the late evening sun, beginning to set above the Mississippi, cast the office in a bright colored haze of pink and orange. The light made the dust in the

studio office appear and dance in the air. She had traveled many places in the world and yet it always seemed more beautiful here at home. The summers here were like no other on earth: hot sun and the fuzz from the cottonwood trees, white and resembling snow flurries, seemed to float completely suspended in the breeze.

She watered the sad potted plants that she'd resurrected during her tenure at the studio. In the control room it was dark and she scrunched up her nose as she emptied all the ash trays, which were filled by the end of each day with both Vic and Jerry's cigarettes and, occasionally, the burnt out ends of their joints. The window over the board looked out upon the recording studio, and the lights were on. Davis was still inside strumming his guitar, singing, and jotting things down on a piece of paper balanced on a music stand. He wasn't using a mic and she couldn't hear him playing or singing. It was like watching television on mute. She remained unseen until, leaning on the control board, she hit a button causing an amp or mic to squeal inside the studio.

Davis stopped playing and shielded his eyes from the house lights, trying to see into the control room. Caroline darted out of the room and to the kitchenette sink and began to rinse out the coffee pot. As usual, Vic had left it on when it was almost empty, cooking the dregs of the coffee into a black soot. Hearing footsteps, she cleaned this pot as if the task fascinated her, she became a scientist of the coffee pot, scrubbing it and holding it up to see that her work was progressing.

"Was that you at the boards?" he asked.

"Yes, I had to dump out the ashtrays...apparently Jerry has been hitting the ganja again."

She felt him move closer to her, and it was as if her hands were on one of those static balls, the type at museums for children that made your hair stand straight on end like a dandelion, rather than on Vic's nasty coffee pot. Electricity danced along the nerves of her neck and arms.

“Are you still reading *The Aeneid*?”

“Yes.” She put the coffee pot on the rack to dry then turned from the sink. “When Jerry and Vic aren't busting my balls about...”

She looked up and his face was inches from hers. He put his hand on her cheek, cupping it, and she nuzzled her face against his palm. Without thinking, she put her hand on top of his and moved it from her cheek to her mouth and kissed his wrist. Then, as if snapping out of a hypnotic state, her heart thudding and embarrassed by her own bravado, she bolted from the kitchenette, grabbed her book bag, and walked out the door into the humid dark.

They had not spoken of it.

Caroline refused to watch the show and waited for Davis to finish his set at a coffee shop a few blocks away. Over cups of diner coffee at the lunch counter she forced herself to focus on the words in her book, highlight passages, and take notes in the margins, but every few minutes her mind worked its way back to Davis. She thought there had been an unspoken understanding between them, an energy between them, an

intimacy, and she felt foolish to have thought so. How would she know it if there had been?

She had not known hardship in her life and yet she had not known intimacy either. Many privileges had been afforded her. Her father had died when she was eleven, leaving a good bit of money, and yet she was raised by television and books while her mother worked to raise funds and curate at an art museum. Her only company at home had been the housekeeper who smoked Kool Cigarettes in the backyard when she wasn't scouring and scrubbing the house with a vindictive fervor, and a brother who was into golf, jam bands, and the Republican Party. Neither of them spoke to Caroline very often.

When her mother did speak to her, it was to criticize. She hoped each time her mother sat her down for a talk that it was to tell her she had been adopted and that her real parents were the hirsute bohemian couple from the illustrated sex book that she'd found in her mother's scarf box in the seventh grade, but that conversation hadn't occurred yet. The response to Caroline's attempts to connect to her mother was always a reductive soliloquy, the sole purpose of which was to let Caroline know she was a mistaken fool. For instance, a couple of years ago, Caroline had read a book for college orientation, the one that had been chosen for all entering Freshman so they would have something to discuss together while doing ice breaker games and trust building exercises in the quad. It was a memoir about growing up in the shadows of the nuclear generators of Three Mile Island and being a closeted lesbian. Caroline was unable to put the book down. She found it "honest" and "relevant," just as the blurbs on the cover described. After reading it, she gave the book to her mother to read. Her mother read the book

jacket and the introduction where the author talked about her current life, living in a yurt in Colorado with another woman, then handed the book back to Caroline. Her mother shook her head and sighed and said, “This is emotional exhibitionism.”

“It’s about the environment,” Caroline replied.

“Everyone nowadays has to compete with each other over what all they’ve *overcome*,” her mother said, making apostrophes in the air with her manicured fingertips. “It’s the goddamned pain Olympics.”

Just last semester Caroline had saved up enough to pay for the multi-flight trip that would take her to Atlanta, then to Cancun, and then on to Havana for spring break, where she would study colonial architecture and research the practice of Santeria. But her mother had withheld her passport, refusing to get it out of the safety deposit box at the bank, and dismissed her pleas with the statement, “Communism is bad.”

After conversations like these, Caroline usually went to her room or, more recently, her apartment, popped her old VHS copy of *Clash of the Titans* in her VCR, and watched it without interruption. She had been watching this movie since she was five when her father, a lover of Greek Mythology, had taken her to see it at the theatre. She found it reassuring: the dark and handsome Harry Hamlin bravely slaying Medusa to save Andromeda, the clicking and tweeting of the mechanical owl, and, most of all, Lawrence Olivier and the other Gods and Goddesses on Mount Olympus moving the action figure-like replicas of the mortals around on their table and thus dictating their fates. The movie gave her hope, of what, she hadn’t then known, but now she knew. It wasn’t to be saved from a kraken by a hero, it was to be understood by someone, to have a connection with

someone who was, at least to her, worth naming a constellation after. She wanted a thick black straight line connecting her dot, her star, to another's.

It was nearly three in the morning when he loaded his gear into the trunk of her car and they made their way back to the hotel.

Caroline changed into a tee shirt and sat on the edge of her bed, the hotel linens stiff beneath her thighs. He was in the adjoining room and she wondered if he would go back out or if Ilene would come over here with her straw bag and wrap her milky limbs around him. She immediately began digging in her bag for her discman and headphones. After dumping the contents of her bag and realizing she did not have her headphones, she belly flopped onto the bed and covered her head with a pillow. The pillow, heavily starched, crunched as she pressed it around her head. She decided that this arrangement would work almost as well as the headphones as long as she kept the pressure on the pillow throughout the night. When she set the pillow aside to peel back the bedclothes, she heard a rumple as a piece of paper slid beneath the door to the adjoining room.

Caroline walked over to the door and picked up the paper. It was a note scrawled on hotel stationery.

“Virgil opened up for me tonight. He was a tough act to follow. Did he ever work with Kevin Bacon?”

She wrote on the bottom of the page, “I’m sorry I missed that (Virgil’s performance I mean, not yours). He was responsible for the screenplay of *Footloose*, so yes, he worked with Bacon.”

She slid the paper back under the door and after a moment she heard the lock on Davis’s side unlock.

Caroline took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly as she unlocked the latch of her door, and waited.

VISITATION

I watch my younger brother, Trey, and his new fiancée, Esther, stand across the room at Mother's house after Aunt Ida's wake, and I try to hear what they are talking about.

There are only a couple of guests still here and I'm standing in the doorway of the living room, but Trey and Esther are out in the hall, standing close, always on the verge of a kiss, smiling like this isn't supposed to be a somber occasion, even though everyone hated Aunt Ida.

Esther is a much better choice than the last fiancée, the girl he brought home from Ole Miss. The last one was a Born Again Christian and wore elaborate curly monograms on every object of clothing she owned. She said the Bible wasn't like trail mix: you couldn't just pick out what you like and ignore the rest.

Esther isn't ugly but she isn't a knock-out either. My brother is so polished and manicured and knows the importance of a starched shirt and how seersucker makes a man more likable. I am curious about Esther, mainly because I've never seen Trey so taken with anyone, and I'm wondering what sort of magic she has worked, because he is not an asshole anymore. We have a few years between us, so we never were that close, never really got along, but now he stops by my house on his way home from work. I'll fix him a sandwich and we'll talk.

I believe he is in love.

Esther is Jewish and has an unruly mop of brown hair she jokingly calls her “Jewfro,” a term that frightens my Presbyterian mother a bit.

“Wake just sounds like, like an Irish occasion with a dead body in the corner,” Esther says and Trey laughs a bit too loud. “You know? The body has pennies on the eye lids and people are drinking whiskey and singing ‘Danny Boy.’ We never called it that in Brooklyn.”

“What did you call it?”

“Sitting *Shiva* if they were Jewish and a visitation if they weren’t,” Esther says. “I guess the Irish people called it a wake, I dunno, but I think that happened at pubs-without a body.” Esther looks nervously around the room. She wears a black dress I recognize from a recent trip to Target. Her shoes are cheap. I realize I like her and try to think about how my family would appear to me if I were a stranger. It’s too much to consider and though I want a shot of vodka, I order another ginger ale from the table the caterers have made into a bar just as the bartender is packing up to leave.

I carry my drink down the corridor and see them in the red room, Mother’s study. It’s called that because it is floor-to-ceiling red toile wallpaper and matching upholstery. I memorized the little scene of toile years ago, as a child: little French children dressed like Dresden Dolls, playing in a meadow with sticks and hoops. I lurk in the hallway, and their backs are to me as they look at the framed portraits on the wall of a baby Trey, who was an asshole even back then.

“Holy shit,” Esther says in a hushed tone and pushes her hair back from her face with her hand as she steps closer to look at a picture of me. “Is that your sister?”

“Yes, it’s Caroline. Mama found it when she was going through the small treasury of crap Caroline left in her old room. Caroline’s college years,” Trey says. He stood behind Esther and kissed her shoulder, which was fish belly white despite it being July.

I know the picture and I wish Mother would take it down. It’s a close up of my face and it was taken by a rather famous photographer in New Orleans who had been taking pictures of Davis. I had been sitting on the stoop outside of The Howling Wolf before Davis’s set. In the picture my eyes were heavily lined with kohl and in them was a sense of life that isn’t there anymore.

“She was gorgeous! How old was she here?”

“God, I dunno. Nineteen maybe?”

I’d been twenty-one.

“Was this when she dropped out of college for that guy?” Esther is excited to ask this question. The story was the elephant in the living room of my family’s life.

“Yes, I think so,” Trey says.

It was.

“Was she with him when he died?”

Trey turns and sees me in the hallway. He looks apologetic. I don’t say anything, just slink into the kitchen where the caterers have already packed up their stuff. The room is quiet, clean, and empty.

My husband, Andrew, didn't come with me tonight to the wake. He said he got called into the hospital. I know Andrew isn't happy being married to me. I'm not a standard-issue doctor's wife and can be a lot of trouble. He is into Botox, running marathons, and caveman diets; I, as per his suggestions, do not work, but instead of being useful I spend the days smoking Camels and staying in bed, reading or listening to vinyl, until noon.

When I met Andrew, he was right out of med school. He liked fried food and music festivals. He was so damn funny. He is an ER doctor now, just out of residency and, in all fairness, I think seeing so much death, almost everyday, has just changed him, the wiring in his head.

Sometimes I long for an affair, but know that any man who would be with a married woman is not the type of man I need.

The caterers have left trays of wrapped food and left them on the countertops of the kitchen and in the refrigerator. Mother is going through a phase. She took up yoga and is learning to cook Indian food, even bought a tandoor oven, and I guess that's why she had the caterers bring *naan bread* and various curries and *saags*. I tear a piece of the naan in half and chew it.

I subsisted on *naan bread* when I lived with Davis. He rented a run down place that he chose because of it's proximity to the *Taj Mahal* Indian Restaurant and the Zoo. He didn't own a car and either biked or walked everywhere. We'd wake up late, go to the

Taj and he'd get us the *naan* bread, the sweet kind with the raisins baked in, and we'd walk to the zoo. He loved the tigers and the butterfly exhibit best.

We napped a bunch in the afternoons. I regret all the time we wasted together sleeping. No one could bother us, this was before, right before, cell phones became a thing. This was when there were still records and albums. Before downloads, when labels still discovered and signed acts. He'd go to the studio at night. I'd stay in his bed and read.

Davis was well-read even though he never went to college, but he called me his "Guru." He'd walk down to Burke's, back when it was on Poplar, and buy me an armful of books to read for when he had to go into the studio.

My time with Davis wasn't what my family thought it was. I'm sure they pictured a spree of sex, drugs, and rock'n roll -- just a sleazy guy taking advantage of a younger girl. Perhaps there were elements of all that as well.

But I don't think so. He was only thirty then, younger than I am now.

I find my purse in Mother's bedroom where I placed it for safe keeping and sneak out the back door to my car. I know I will hear it from Mother about leaving without saying goodbye, but my mood has dropped, everything turning a shade darker. For an instant, I hope Andrew will be home when I get there, and then I adjust my expectations.

I've been trying. I've been eating right, smoking only when he isn't around, and I joined the Junior League and though I already want to quit, I'll go to the meetings and listen to the women talk about philanthropy, vacations, children, and Tory Burch shoes.

Andrew's car is not in the garage when I get home. I search the kitchen for a note or some sign of when he will get home from the hospital but find nothing. I peel the pantyhose from under my dress and itch the spot where the elastic band clung to my waist. I put the hosiery on the kitchen countertop, a childish act, since Andrew loves the kitchen to be a sterile environment and even keeps the stainless steel appliances polished.

Davis and I used to go on long walks. He lived on the other side of Union but we often ventured into the neighborhood where I now live. We loved looking at the historic homes though he scoffed at the new renovations, saying people had turned them into "cat food houses." I laughed and asked what a cat food house was, and he explained it was a house with a nuclear family inside, with granite countertops, lots of carpeting, and a ton of cat food stockpiled in the garage for the family pet.

I step out of my heels and leave them in the middle of the kitchen and walk about the ground floor of the house, turning on each light, making the house glow like a beacon for Andrew when he turns onto our street. This will both irritate him and let him know that I have been expecting him, that I have noticed his absence.

Davis and I went to the zoo when we heard that an elephant had been born. We were disappointed to learn that it was with its mother in seclusion and wasn't out yet

where we could see him. The zoo had a contest to name the baby elephant. They had a ballot box and index cards for the visitors to enter their name. Davis chose “Moo Shu.” He was quite sure his name would win. We had to go each morning to see if the baby was out yet.

A week later it was on the news that the mother elephant had nuzzled the baby and her tusk had stabbed him, which, they said, is a fairly common occurrence. He was dead and she was still in seclusion. The news shocked us into silence, and made the sun go behind a cloud.

Not too long afterwards Davis walked into the Mississippi, into a little outlet, a marina, and never came out. I’ve read that a person cannot drown himself, that the body will fight the water, struggle to reach the surface for air. But I will always want to know if he wanted to leave. People who knew him a lot longer than I did say he loved his life too much to do that, to even consider it. Others say he struggled with a darkness and always had.

I go to my closet, which is the size of a small room, undress, and hang up my dress. We don’t need all this space in this house, a house that I bought because Andrew liked it, a house that matched his inflated sense of self, his newly found God-Complex. I put on a tank top and debate taking a bath while the realization that Andrew is not really at the hospital fights to be heard in my head.

I light a candle and a cigarette and put Nina Simone on the turntable. Before I slide into bed, I turn off the bedroom light but leave all other lights in the house on. I lay,

smoking in bed by candle light, ashing in an empty vase on my beside table. I do not open a window to let the smoky air dissipate. It's my damned house.

I can go for long stretches without thinking of Davis. I'll keep my mind away from the subject, but then something will happen, like tonight with what Esther said, and I will revert and years of mourning will fly by the wayside and I will have to start all over. I will see him everywhere. I will connect every object and action to a memory of him. I will force my mind to steer back away, yet my very core is trained on him.

Just down the street from my house they opened this store. It's a chain store that's schtick is to be retrospective and expensive. They sell vinyl. I watched a girl flip through the records and though I heard her say she didn't know who Davis was, she chose his second album and an overpriced album frame to hang on her wall, not noticing that the woman on the cover, slightly out of focus and obscured by orbs of sunlight caught by the camera lens, is the thirty-something woman standing beside her.

Of course I too bought a copy of the album that day, brought it home, took it out of its sleeve, and listened to it for the first time in years. The chord progressions remind me of the fading sunlight at the start of fall; they bend just enough to where you feel the change, feel yourself slowly bending and falling, only to bring you right back. Back to where you can see yourself again.

THE HOUSEGUEST

It was four years into my recovery that I began getting messages from Davis. I had been married to Andrew for two years, and was settled and by settled I mean that I was a grown up for the most part. I mention this to stress that I wasn't high or in DT's when the messages came. It wasn't some drug induced delusion. Mainly Davis, who at the time had been dead almost ten years, came to me in dreams. He would often laugh and shake his head with pity and ask me what I was doing with my life, and this made me angry. I asked him why he walked into the Mississippi on a May night to swim with his jeans on. I asked him if he had meant to drown. When I'd returned to college after Davis's accident I'd continued to study the Classics as I had before, and I learned that the Greeks believed that the dead visited the living during their dreams, sending them messages. And though I don't believe that, I have to.

Sometimes I felt him beside me and got a cold handprint sized spot on my arm, as if someone had snuck up and placed an ice pack on me. He was taunting me. I would say something back, like, "Is that all you got, Davis? You aren't much of a ghost." For a while it happened often, once a week at least, and then he'd get fed up and disappear, probably because I wasn't taking his advice and, for the record, I wasn't clear on what he was trying to tell me. I wanted him there, even if he was just laughing at me, at what my life was like, what it had become: Pinterest, paint chips, and crock pot recipes. It was as

if Davis was staging some sort of astral intervention. That was fine, I enjoyed the attention.

The icepack incidents started happening the summer I was redecorating the house that I'd used a chunk of my family money to buy when Andrew and I got married. It was a large old house that had been painstakingly renovated by the prior owners and was in the same historic neighborhood as the first house I had lived in with my parents. The neighborhood had gigantic oak trees, a Fourth of July Parade, and the residents were always out walking, running, or pushing the expensive jogging strollers that looked like small spaceships from *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Interior decorating and color theory were things I knew nothing about, but I was determined to learn. I stared at paint chips and bought small sample cans of the paint and painted small patches on the walls to see what the paint looked like at different times of the day, how the colors would shift tonally with the light depending upon the time and the weather, as this was the advice the books and the Internet had given me. I went online and looked at pictures of redecorated rooms until my eyes developed a dull pain in their sockets and then I shifted my focus to making dinner. I tried a new recipe each week. Cooking has never been a pleasure for me as it is with other women. It's more of a chore. To me, dining out is a pleasure; it doesn't have to be anywhere fancy. My favorite places to eat usually serve food in the red plastic baskets lined with wax paper. But I made an effort to cook. I tried to enjoy it. At the time, Andrew was still coming home for dinner then and we would make small talk and carefully avoid eye contact. Seeing him, handsome in his scrubs, his head perpetually bent to study the screen of his phone that

constantly bleeping for his attention, made me lonelier than I had been earlier in the day by myself with my paint chips. I wanted his approval and attention, but had no idea how to get it.

Jacque, the neighbor's six year old son, was a kind child with big coke bottle glasses that made his eyes appear as large and dark as those of a baby harp seal. He came to stay with us for a few weeks that summer. I had become close friends with Jacque's mother, Soulet, and agreed to keep Jacque while she went on a Mediterranean cruise with her husband. Cecil and Soulet were always doing stuff together: date nights, taking trips together, dressing up and going dancing, picnicking with a wicker basket and wool plaid blanket. Andrew rolled his eyes at this. I think many of the people on our street (we all knew each other and talked about one another) did as well. It probably scared us all to see a married couple behaving appropriately and wanting to be around one another. It held up a mirror to ourselves and our own marriages.

When Jacque appeared with a suitcase, I knew him well enough already, and we were simpatico, and so we quickly established a daily routine which consisted of television, snacks, and toting him to a lesson or day camp of one type or another. He had the calm and quiet confidence and maturity of a child who received more than adequate attention from his parents.

Jacque watched classic television shows: *Andy Griffith*, *Petticoat Junction*, *The Addams Family*, and I even let him watch *The Twilight Zone* when a marathon came on.

His favorite episode was the one with the doll, Talking Tina. None of them scared him. Children of his generation had evolved beyond being frightened. After a few days, I abandoned my paint chips and lounged on the couch beside him. His body smelled like the sunscreen I'd coated him with this morning before we went to the park.

“All these people are probably dead by now, huh?” he asked, looking at the television where Andy was talking to Floyd the barber.

I considered this and what my answer should be, remembering how I had the same thoughts as a child watching *The Three Stooges*: Curly laid out in a coffin for viewing, Moe's angry eyebrows finally relaxed by eternal slumber, or Larry's body being placed in a mausoleum wall somewhere in Hollywood.

“Opie is still alive. He's grown up and famous now. He directs movies and has kids of his own.”

Jacque looked at me as if this information was of little consequence to a larger point that he was trying to make.

I retrieved the sunscreen from the bag on the coffee table. I needed to apply more for his swimming lesson. The monumental importance of sunscreen for this new generation was something I had learned from watching the mothers while out with Jacque. I coated him with it before leaving the house, terrified his fair skin would burn.

“Take your glasses off and pull back your bangs.”

He pulled back the hair from his face, his eyes lingering on the television set as I smeared the lotion on his face, carefully avoiding his eyes and rubbing until his face had the shiny gloss of a glazed doughnut.

“George Washington had his hair like this,” he said, pointing to the pompadour of his bangs he was creating with his hand.

“Get up, you’ve gotta get your suit on and go if we are going to make it to your lesson.”

He sighed and crossed his legs at the knee, “But *Hazel* is about to be on, Caroline.”

I put the bag back down on the coffee table and sunk back into the couch, tucking my legs beneath me and studying his little shiny face as he laughed at Barney Fife.

Andrew and I had been trying to conceive for six months. He worked long hours at the hospital down the street and was on-call incessantly. Too often, the stars aligned so that we wouldn’t see one another except in passing for days on end. I would go to sleep on the couch with the TV on, having planned to wait up for him, only to feel his shadow pass in front of the TV screen, then not being able to muster the energy to get up and follow him up stairs to our bed. When I did manage to make it into bed he showed all the interest of someone getting their shoe tied by a stranger while I sat astride him, closing my eyes and moving my hips against his.

Until Jacque’s residency at our house began I didn’t really want a baby. Or rather I wasn’t sure if I did or not. Though after several days of having Jacque at our house, I became more conscientious about waiting in bed, ready for Andrew to arrive home clad in his scrubs. I bathed, shaved, spread lotion on myself, and wore a silk chemise rather

than the faded black tee shirt with the face of Dolly Parton screen printed on the front, then waited in the dark of our bedroom ready to pounce. Instead, after an hour or two, I drifted to sleep and Davis visited. The dreams were very simple but had become more emotional: just Davis and me in the Butterfly Exhibit at the zoo. Butterflies were everywhere and we stood facing each other, just out of each other's reach. I told him how I'd been and he smiled and nodded. I spoke quickly so I could tell him everything before our time together was up. I knew he had to leave whenever he started looking sad, and then I got upset, and that woke me up.

“Jacque has dance class tomorrow. The first of the summer session, right J-man?” All three of us were at the dinner table. Andrew had made it home that night a bit early. I had made *Crocque Monsieur* and the recipe I used had promised that they would taste the same as they did in Paris, and yet they tasted like ham and cheese with a thick and odd tasting white gravy swimming atop.

Andrew coughed and wiped his mouth with his napkin.

“A dance class?” He was addressing the question to Jacque and yet looking at me, like the lesson was my idea.

“It's Hip Hop. It's not like ballet or something,” Jacque said, not at all bothered by Andrew's reaction, adding the part about ballet just to placate him. Jacque's generation seemed to have evolved past not just fear, but also gender roles and labels. I found it wonderful if a bit idealistic, but it seemed to scare Andrew.

“What’s your teacher’s name?” I asked.

“Perseus. He’s really cool.”

“Ahhh, Perseus. The name of a Greek Hero,” I replied and Jacque looked slightly confused. “We will have to watch this old movie I have about Perseus. It’s was my favorite when I was your age.”

“Caroline, I hardly think that *Clash of the Titans* is age-appropriate,” Andrew said.

“I don’t see how it’s any different from superheroes, but okay.”

“Maybe I could take you to a baseball game downtown? I’ll look and see when they play,” Andrew told him as he scraped off the white gravy from the lid of his sandwich with a knife.

“Okay,” Jacque said, while pulling the ham out of his sandwich and eating it. He met my eyes and gave me a wink.

The parents in the waiting room of the dance school didn’t look up from their phones. There was one dad and seven mothers but the dad had stepped outside. The mothers sat on the sleek leather sofas and chairs of the dance studio waiting room, pecking with manicured fingers at the screens of their phones. They all wore the same brand of yoga pants, and three of them had the same hairstyle: a highlighted bob that was longer in the front than in the back. It was what my hair stylist referred to as the “can I speak to a manager” hair cut and I agreed with that description; the women with that hair cut were

usually in front of me in line at the bank, store, or restaurant and usually wanted to speak to a manager over some issue. Occasionally the women in the waiting room paused their pecking and giggled or huffed at their screen. It looked schizoid in nature, like we had been placed in a padded cell together and the women were responding to the voices in their heads. Meanwhile the children, including Jacque, were as far away from the parents as they could get while still being in the room. They were spotting one another in headstands.

When Perseus entered the front door of the dance studio, he was mobbed by children. I sat in the corner of the waiting area watching the children, eight of them, speak to him at the same time, each demanding to be heard. It was a lot like a press conference. Perseus was probably pushing thirty. His dark hair was brushed into a ponytail at the nape of his neck and he was wearing a black warm up suit and Jordans.

He responded to their stories with “wow” and “no way” and nods and high fives. He led them like a herd of small livestock to the door of their studio. He took a last glance at the waiting area and scanned the room. I waved. His head recoiled a tiny bit and he smiled. His eyes widened slightly. It was a look I recognized from high school: the physical reaction when a nice guy thinks you are pretty but the guy is well mannered enough to instantly conceal the look. He waved back.

“Hi there, everyone,” Perseus said to the waiting room of women looking at their phones, “today is parent observation. Y’all are welcome to come in the studio to watch.”

I accompanied one of the moms into the studio and the rest stayed seated in the waiting area.

The music was club music, the type with very few words, the focus was on the beat. *Boom-chee. Boom-chee. Boom-chee.* Every sixteen measures the word “dance” was yelled, and these were the only lyrics.

The class was adorable and hilarious, the lack of rhythm astounding, the lack of the children’s self-awareness was exhilarating. Perseus lead them in a series of pop and lock moves which they did not come close to duplicating. He moved with an effortless grace, making each gesture and bit of footwork seem as easy as breathing. His dancer’s body, all collar bones and toned limbs, moved in fluid motion and stopped in perfect time, only to bend and begin again right along with the rhythm. All the while he gave encouragement to the children who smiled at him in the mirrored wall with fierce concentration furrowed in their brows.

After the class, Perseus was mobbed again by his class as he walked them into the waiting area. The mothers put their phones in their purses, collected their children, and left.

“Perseus, this is Caroline. I’m staying with her while my mom and dad go on a boat,” Jacque said and led me by the hand until we stood right in front of Perseus. “She says you are a hero.”

“Your name. He told me your name last night and...I studied Classics in college. Perseus. Andromeda,” I said. I noticed he had the longest eye lashes I had ever seen.

“Yes. *Clash of the Titans* and all that,” he said smiling.

“Well, thanks for letting me watch. The children really love you,” I said taking Jacque’s hand and moving toward the door.

“Thanks for watching. See you next week, Jacque.”

“Why are you in such a hurry?” Jacque asked me and I noticed that I was speed walking out the door and to the car, pulling Jacque along by his clasped hand.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to,” I said and opened the car doors and we got inside. I looked in the rearview mirror and sighed, noticing my cheeks were a bright pink.

Back at the house, I put a drop cloth down and let Jacque use the rest of the paint samples and paint on the wall where I had tested patches of different paints. We turned his shows on in the background and he painted faces. He was good at it, too. He painted the characters from his shows: Talking Tina with a maniacal grin, the round face of Aunt Bea, the angular face of Lurch.

He was still painting when Andrew came home and stood in the doorway.

“Jesus, Caroline. He’s painting on the wall.”

“The painters are painting over it next week anyway. Who cares?”

“For God’s sake, I care,” he said as he turned and walked back towards the front door. I heard the door slam and his car start and motor away.

Jacque looked at me, unsure of what just happened.

“Hey, oh J. you aren’t in trouble. I love the paintings. I’m in trouble with Mister Andrew. When people live together they argue about stuff, it’s normal...he’s probably extra hungry from being a doctor all day.”

“They aren’t finished yet. He will like them when they are finished,” he said, unbothered and still focusing on his artwork. “I get grumpy, too when I get hungry. He probably needs a snack.”

I had known for some time that my marriage was in trouble, but it was during Jacque’s visit that I knew it wouldn’t last. I just couldn’t put my finger on what was causing the trouble. It wasn’t an easy answer, like with my friend Liz whose husband left her for one of his students at the Junior College where he taught a World Civilization Class, or my friend, Sookie, who left her husband and came out as a lesbian (which surprised no one but the husband). While Liz rebounded from the divorce fairly easily, Sookie’s husband still dressed up in costumes involving masks and trick or treated at her house on Halloween just to see her. She always knew it was him because of his gait and his trembling hands as he held his empty bag open for her to fill with candy.

I think maybe Andrew wanted the Memphis equivalent of a Geisha, which is a doctor’s wife, and that job requires a skill set I just never had. Or maybe we just grew apart because he worked so much and I was so bored. I often wonder if I had gone against his wishes and taken a job if it would’ve turned out differently. Anyway, there is no neat answer for it like the ones for Liz and Sookie. I can only point to this summer as the fulcrum of marriage, where we’d reached the beginning of a rapid descent.

A few days before Jacque's parents came home, Jacque began to run a temperature and I immediately called Andrew.

"His fever is 101.3 and he has a stuffy nose. Do you think that it's from playing in that mud pit?"

Jacque had been going to a nature camp that week that was advertised as "Mud Camp." It was at a nature retreat run by the Episcopalian Church his family attended. There was a mud pit several feet deep with a pool slide and the children got to play in it every day as long as they brought an extra set of clothes. I thought it was a sneaky way to take kids captive and tell them about Jesus.

"No. He is not sick from playing in the mud," Andrew said. He was irritated by my calling him at work.

"I mean," I said, "they all swim around in it, like a pool and obviously they don't treat the mud with chlorine..."

"Caroline, you have a classics degree and I am a doctor, this is my field. He didn't get it from the mud."

"Well, could you take a look at him or call something in for him? Since this is your field and all."

"Give him Children's Tylenol and fluids. I'll look at him when I get home," And with that he hung up.

I looked at Jacque, curled up on the couch and watching his shows with a lethargy that was unusual, and it broke my heart in a place that I didn't know I had-- the place in

the heart that dealt with motherhood: perhaps it was called “the motherboard.” I saw it as some sort of red velvety crevice of full-blown emotion inserted near the ventricle of a woman’s heart to perpetuate the human species.

“Okay, Buddy, we are going to run to the store for some medicine for you.” He didn’t complain about turning off the television and slid his feet into his crocs. I felt the cold icepack of a hand print on my shoulder as I walked Jacque to my car.

That summer I was thirty-two. I was older than Davis was when he died; older by two years. It felt like a betrayal, living longer than he did, the memory of the exact contours of his face and body becoming more and more hazy with each year.

That July I went to a psychologist and spoke to him about Davis, the accident, the loss, and other things that happened afterward, memories that I had placed in lockdown. The psychologist, Dr. Collins, was kind and he helped me, but the instant I talked about feeling Davis’s presence (this was after several visits of course), and the icepack incidents, he wanted to refer me to a psychiatrist as well as a neurologist for a CAT scan. I knew that telling Dr. Collins about being visited by a ghost was the wrong idea, but needed to hear myself say it out loud. And I did. And that was the end of my counseling sessions.

Andrew got home well after dinner time and checked Jacque while I looked on.

“Is his fever down?” Andrew asked.

“Yes, it’s down to 99,” I said, then added, “I gave him Tylenol and something for his congestion from the store.”

“It hurts. My nose hurts. It’s so stuffy it’s hard to breathe.”

“It’ll get better soon,” Andrew said. “Just be sure to drink lots and lots of water and take the medicine Caroline gives you.”

“Can’t you call him in an antibiotic?”

“It’s a minor sinus infection, his ears are still clear. Let’s wait on antibiotics,”

Andrew said standing up to leave the room.

“It’s not like it’s chemotherapy for heaven’s sake,” I said following him. “He’s a child, he shouldn’t have to suffer with this. You people act like it’s asking for heroin when someone wants penicillin.”

“Antibiotics are over-prescribed and soon they won’t work on anything anymore,” Andrew said so calmly and evenly and with such condescension. He was in the kitchen now, making himself a sandwich for dinner. He had delivered his final verdict. Behind me, Jacque whimpered on the couch.

Jacque came into my room around midnight, crying.

“My nose is so stuffy, Caroline. I can’t sleep.”

I remembered from my childhood that my mother had placed a humidifier by my bed when I was sick, but we didn't have one. Andrew was awake, but laying there and not helping. After Jacque calmed down, I took him into the bathroom and ran a shower, letting the room steam up with milky fog that covered the mirrors and the shower doors. "Now Jacque, I want you to go in the shower and sit on the little bench in there. Isn't that neat that there's a place to sit in the shower?"

He took off his pajamas and got into the shower and sat down.

"I made it a tiny bit warmer, so there'd be more steam. Is it too hot?"

"No."

"Okay, I'm going to go downstairs and get some clean clothes for you out of the dryer for after the shower. Just sit there and I'll be right back."

I walked through the bedroom and Andrew was still in bed staring at the ceiling.

"Aren't you going to help?"

He gave no response.

As I went downstairs I cursed Andrew repeatedly in my head. I walked to the opposite end of the house to the laundry room and began to dig through the dryer to find a clean set of pajamas and underwear for Jacque. The little clothes were mixed in with mine and some were still a bit damp but I finally found a dry tee shirt and underwear.

I heard Jacque crying when I got to the foot of the stairwell. They were loud sobs and moans. Then I ran, I ran up the stairs and into the bedroom, where Andrew hadn't moved from the bed, and then to the door of the master bathroom. I opened the door and

it was steamy inside, the steam took my breath for a minute as if I had inhaled water, but I coughed and continued to the shower door and opened it.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

Jacque took several deep, hiccuping breaths and said, “I just hurt. I feel sick.”

I grabbed a clean towel from the cabinet beneath the sink, turned off the water, and wrapped him inside the towel.

“It’s okay. Breathe and be calm. Crying is going to make your nose even more stuffy, okay?” I held him for a moment while he was wrapped tightly in the towel.

“Jacque, how long were you in there crying?”

“A few minutes.”

“I’m sorry, I was downstairs getting you some clean clothes. I couldn’t hear you.”

He got dressed and I made him blow his nose and I took him back to his bed in the guest room that also served as my study and library. I tucked Jacque in and walked back into the bedroom. Andrew had rolled to his side, though his eyes were still open and I walked to the side of the bed and kicked the mattress as hard as I could. Andrew inhaled sharply and sat up. Then I went back to the guest bedroom.

Years later, after the divorce and the news of Andrew getting remarried, I ran into Andrew. I had just finished with a doctor’s appointment. It was the yearly one where my doctor stressed that if I wanted children, I needed to get on it. I was still pondering the doctor’s message when I got on the elevator to go to the lobby of the building, and on my

way down the doors opened to let on a man and a very pregnant lady. It took me a minute, but then I recognized Andrew and his wife, whose name I believe was Madison or Maddie. My mother had clipped the engagement announcement from the paper and showed it to me, but I cannot remember. I know she was much younger than Andrew and me. Andrew nodded towards me. The silence was awkward and sad, so I broke it.

“Hello, Andrew. Good to see you. And I see congratulations are in order.”

They both smiled and said hello and thank you.

The wife was giddy and holding a little print-out from an ultrasound.

“Look, we got a picture today. They can do 4D pictures now and you really get to see what they look like,” Madison or Maddie said. There was a slight movement by Andrew, a tug at the elbow to get her to stop but Madison didn’t notice.

I realized she didn’t know who I was.

I took the photograph and looked at it. The baby was curled in its fetal position, healthy, clearly almost finished with its gestation.

I began to laugh. I tried to stop but couldn’t. Madison looked perplexed and Andrew looked worried. The elevator bell dinged and the door opened. I handed the picture back to Madison and said through my laughter as I exited the elevator, “This man needs a child like a hole in the head.”

“Caroline, I still can’t sleep,” Jacque said.

“Is your nose feeling any better? After the steam?”

“It’s not as stuffy.”

I retrieved my laptop from my desk in the corner of the room and brought it back to the bed. “Let’s turn a movie on while we try to sleep,” I said, and perched on the bedside and found the movie on my computer.

“I haven’t watched this in years. It was my favorite, it’s the movie I was telling you about, the one with the heroes.”

The opening scene in *Argos*, the sound of the heavy sea wind blowing while Perseus and his mother were put out to sea in a box, played on the screen of my laptop, the light from which was the only light in the room. It was only a few minutes before Jacque’s breathing took a rhythm and he was asleep. I laid down beside him, and stared up at the ceiling.

I stayed in the guest bed with Jacque that night and waited for the icy ghost hand to pat my shoulder or cup my cheek, but Davis didn’t come back, not then, nor did he visit my dreams that night. But I waited for him, all night I waited, and as the sun rose I fell into a dreamless sleep.

REHABILITATION

1

The grassy patch of land next to the animal shelter was called a park, but other than the statue of a man on a pillar and a shrub here and there, Caroline thought it was not distinguishable from a vacant lot. The volunteers from the shelter, serving out community service hours for minor crimes, used the park to walk the dogs on leashes. They spread out, attempting to lessen the dogs' distraction from the task at hand. Most of the volunteers wore shoddy clothing, not just because their work demanded it, but because it was all they owned. Many of the women showed up in fleece pajama pants and the plastic slip-on shoes from the dollar bin at Walgreen's; the men usually wore tank tops and do-rags. In the midst of this, Caroline walked a small terrier mix named Pip and explained the importance of teaching Latin in high schools to a repeat DUI offender named Jaycee.

“So people don't even speak it anymore,” Jaycee said, “but they want people to keep learning it? Why not learn Spanish? A lot of fuckers speak Spanish. Haven't they been saying for years that we're all going to speak Spanish soon? Like Americans are just gonna wake up one day and speak Spanish...*Hola*.” Jaycee looked at the Shepard mix whose leash she was holding as he tucked his hips under, squatting close to the ground, and shat. “Fucking gross, Gordo.” Gordo stared back at her, then yawned. Jaycee stuck a plastic bag over her hand and bent over to pick it up, but Caroline beat her to it --

Gordo was her favorite. Gordo was being treated for worms and it made his shit stink worse than usual. The worms in Gordo's pile looked like pieces of rice encrusted.

"Good boy, good Gordo," Caroline said and Gordo wagged his stub of a tail.

"Learning Latin makes other subjects easier for students. It expands their vocabulary and-

"Where'd you hear that?" Jaycee was now lighting a Marlboro, though they were told not to smoke while walking the dogs.

"A class I took in college. I had to take teaching classes to get certified to teach."

"Did you make good money teaching Latin?"

"Not really. Well, I haven't started yet. Will soon, though. I took some years off after college, when I got married."

"Sounds like a lot of trouble for a shit payoff. Why do it?" Jaycee danced at a club called The Pony. She told Caroline she made two-thousand on a normal night. Jaycee had an alcohol monitor ankle bracelet and a bad boob job. Her face was pretty but aged beyond her twenty-three years. The phrase "ridden hard and put up wet" came to Caroline's mind.

Caroline shrugged.

Pip hiked his leg to pee on a half dead shrub.

Caroline was required to see Dr. Cohen for therapy once a week. Her office was filled with lavender furniture and art. When she asked Caroline how she felt, the answer was always the same.

“I’m angry.”

“At whom are you angry?”

“Myself...also Andrew.”

“Why are you angry with Andrew?”

“Because he is a complete asshole and I wish he’d sign the damn papers.”

“Why are you angry with yourself?”

“I was dumb enough to marry Andrew.”

“What about the drugs?”

“What about them?”

“Are you angry at yourself for relapsing?”

“I was doing the best I could at the time.”

“Do you ever want to use again?”

Caroline shrugged. Her arms were crossed on her chest, hiding her hands, which were curled into tight fists, her fingernails digging into the skin of her palms.

3

Gordo had finally passed all his worms. He was more active now and pulled at the leash, almost dragging Jaycee's small frame across the park. Pip had been adopted and Caroline walked a fat pug mix named Bluto who stopped every few steps to pant.

"Did you think you could get away with it?" Jaycee asked her.

"With what?"

"Stealing his prescription pad."

"I don't know. I wasn't really thinking about consequences at the time. I just wanted more pills and I knew where Andrew kept his pad."

"How'd he find out?"

"They keep tabs on scripts being written, his DEA number, they have records of everything. And it wasn't the first time it had happened."

"Can't get away with anything anymore," Jaycee said.

4

Andrew had turned her in and filed for divorce. Her mother had cut off all her financial resources: credit cards, trust fund, and gifts. Caroline's attorney had made the deal to keep her out of court and jail: rehab, then community service and counseling. She also had to be available to take drug tests at random. Andrew had moved out of the house, as it was Caroline's, and the house was silent except for the screeching of the cicadas when she came home from the animal shelter except. Suddenly the house seemed too big, though Caroline was not ready to part with it. Summer was in its last throes and would

soon give way to fall. She kept her hands and mind busy as they told her to do in rehab, and washed clothes, vacuumed the house, and watered the grass. She drank pots of coffee. While the sun set, Caroline sat on her front porch swing and smoked. Cars pulled into the drives and the lights came on in the houses on her street. Over the swish of her sprinkler she heard the voices of children playing in their backyards.

5

When she got home from the animal shelter, she found her mother, Garnet, mowing the yard with a push mower. Caroline pulled into her drive, placed the car in park, and sat squeezing the steering wheel. Finally she got out of the car and approached her mother.

“Hello,” Mother said, having mowed the last patch of grass on the front lawn.

“Mother. You don’t have to keep doing this, I just keep forgetting to call the lawn service. Andrew cancelled it when he left. Please don’t just show up and mow.” She saw that her mother’s forehead was beaded with sweat and that blades of grass had stuck to her forehead. She looked away and acted as if she hadn’t heard her, but got a hurt look in her eyes.

“How’s the animal shelter?”

“You wouldn’t believe it, but I really like it. Even the cleaning.”

“I brought you some mail over, it’s inside on the kitchen counter.”

Caroline resisted another urge to become angry with her mother’s need to check up on her sobriety and go into the house uninvited.

“Oh yeah, what is it?”

“Invitation to your high school twentieth reunion,” Mother replied, studying her nails for chips brought on by the gardening work.

“You opened it?”

“Of course. You know you should submit your resume to them, they love alumna to teach. They are one of the few schools that still teach Latin.”

“I did my time there already.”

“Any word from Andrew?”

“We don’t talk. Our lawyers talk all the time, though, according to the legal bills.”

“Is he close to signing?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know what the hold up is. All the assets are divided. No children to fight over.”

“Stupid girl. He doesn’t want the divorce.”

6

“Caroline, can I see you for a minute?” Chris shouted over the barking of the dogs in their kennels. Caroline was hosing the floor, something she did every morning and afternoon.

Chris was in charge of the animal shelter. She dressed like a man and had closely cropped hair. Her breasts, two lumps mashed under her shirt with a sports bra, were the only thing that kept her from passing as a man. Caroline rarely spoke to her as Caroline

was always on time and did her job and Chris had her hands full dealing with the volunteers who were constantly breaking the rules or not showing up.

Caroline looped the hose back on its hook and walked into Chris's office.

"You're almost done with the hours of service you were ordered to do," Chris said.

Caroline nodded and glanced at a framed picture on Chris's desk of Chris with a woman who was wearing too much make up and a tight dress. Together they smiled back at Caroline, holding a small pouffy dog. It was a studio picture, the type they made at Sears. She decided she liked Chris and whoever her girlfriend was.

"You've done such a great job here," Chris said with a serious expression. "You have a high rate of adoptions when you work the front and you work so hard keeping everything clean. The other workers like you. And most of all, you are so good to the animals."

Caroline nodded and reflected upon her job performance. She just did as she was told. The other workers must be horrible if Chris was commending her for good work. She looked back to the picture of Chris and the lady and noticed their dog was wearing a fair isle sweater and seemed to be smiling.

"You have the highest adoption rate of anyone here and I went to our board of directors and asked that we increase the budget for another paid position. For you. I want you to consider working here after your hours are done--for pay, of course," Chris sat back in her chair, clearly proud and pleased to be offering her a job.

Caroline smiled. It had been so long since anyone had complimented her on anything, much less her work ethic, and it was uncomfortable, unfamiliar to receive praise. It made her happy. It was a step in the right direction.

“Thank you,” she said at last, “I’d like that.”

7

Soulet, Caroline’s neighbor, walked up on Caroline’s front porch with her little boy Jacque. It was evening and the crickets and cicadas were performing their evening symphony. “I saw your Mom here mowing yesterday,” Soulet said as she sat down by Caroling on the porch swing. Caroline hadn’t seen Soulet since returning from rehab. As if reading her thoughts, Soulet said, “We ain’t been avoiding you....we’ve been in Mobile visiting cousins.” Relief ran from Caroline’s neck to her torso. Her friendship with Soulet had begun gradually, and it wasn’t until recently that Caroline had realized Soulet was her best friend.

“Care-O-Line, Care-O-Line,” Jacque yelled and ran to tackle hug her. He’d first called her “Caro,” then “Caro-Lion,” and now, at almost seven, he almost had her name down. She squatted to hug him, and his arms were sticky and yeasty smelling with the scents of sweat, the outdoors, and sunscreen.

Jacque ran to catch the fireflies in the front yard.

Soulet patted Caroline’s hand and asked, “So how you been?”

It was only then that Caroline began to cry.

8

Gordo was putting on weight and his coat was shiny. Caroline had given him a stuffed toy from the treat chest last week, and he'd immediately begun to hump it.

“So gross, Gordo. He fucks that thing all day,” Jaycee said, watching Gordo mount the toy in his kennel.

“It’s his guilty pleasure. Poor guy.”

“Take it away from him, it’s nasty.”

“I only take it away when people are here to adopt. Out of decency. Otherwise, he’s earned it. Only a matter of time until he’s adopted and neutered.”

“No one will ever want Gordo, he’s way too much trouble,” Jaycee said and walked away.

9

Mother was at the house again.

She had started cooking for Caroline, and this made her mind the check-ins less.

“I love working with the animals,” Caroline told Mother with a mouthful of mashed potatoes, “and I’ve never been much of a salesperson, but I can sure convince people to adopt the dogs. I’ve been thinking of getting one myself. It’s too quiet in this house.”

“If you are just out of rehab,” Mother said, “you should probably just get a house plant.”

Caroline got up from the table, put her dish in the sink with a clank, and went to her bedroom.

10

Caroline trained Gordo to sit, shake, and roll-over. They were still working on stay. She read a book on dog training and wanted to work with the dogs that were approaching their review date, make them more “marketable” to the public.

“He was a quick learn,” she told Chris after showing her Gordo’s tricks.

Chris smiled and nodded at Caroline with a slight look of pity.

11

Garnet had pruned the rose bushes along the side of Caroline’s house. She had also bought her some new clothes. “Teaching clothes...or for interviews,” Mother declared.

Caroline nodded. On her way home from the shelter she’d listened to her attorney’s voice mail stating that Andrew had signed the papers and that she could stop by their office to sign them at her convenience. She stared at the clothes: a pleated navy skirt and a pale yellow sweater set that she didn’t have to touch to tell it was cashmere.

“I really don’t think I can deal with teaching a room full of spoiled teenage girls a dead language right now.”

She had whispered it tenderly and not with anger. Mother sighed and began to fold the clothes back into the tissue paper then into the shopping bag.

12

Chris approved Caroline's idea for a weekly "Yappy Hour," where adoptions would be half-price from five to seven on Thursdays. She wrote up press releases and updated their social media with the information, adding video clips of the dogs doing their tricks.

13

"What do you feel caused this divorce?" Dr. Cohen asked

"Well it started when he began to fuck around with nurses and residents," Caroline said.

"So everything was perfect up to that point?"

"No. He worked a lot. I did my own thing. We grew apart I guess. Over time."

"What do you think caused your relapse?"

"I was unhappy. I was depressed. I wanted to be happy. The Adderall made me less unhappy, occasionally cocaine made me super happy."

"You know there is a difference between being happy and being fulfilled."

"I was just aiming for happy. I know that I fucked up."

14

Mother had "dropped by" again, this time it was to hang a painting she had bought Caroline to replace the large framed wedding photo that hung in the foyer.

"Any word from Andrew?"

“He signed the papers. I’m going to sign them sometime this week, whenever I can take an hour off of work to go out to the office.”

Mother flinched at the words and looked at the wedding picture on the floor.

“So are you going to sell the house? Maybe it would be good to have a fresh start. You could stay with me until you figure it out.”

“There isn’t anything to figure out. It’s my goddamned house. I bought it, he lived here, he left. It’s still my house.”

15

On the morning of the first “Yappy Hour,” Caroline went to the pet store and bought a red bow tie for Gordo, and several cans of dog cologne so they would all smell nice.

16

Almost all of the dogs that were nearing their review dates were adopted at Yappy Hour. Even Gordo, who had to be neutered before his new owner, a guy who was the son of one of the board members for the shelter, took him home. Chris was ecstatic. Caroline was fulfilled.

17

She kept trying to call the guy that adopted Gordo to see when he was coming to pick him up. He’d said he was coming at noon and it was almost six and time to close. Gordo lay at her feet at the front desk, still sore from being neutered. She had packed his bag

with his bed, his stuffed toy, his ball, and a bag of the food from the shelter. Gordo had been bathed the way that Caroline bathed all the dogs that were going home: two shampoos, a cream rinse, and a blow dry so they wouldn't smell like the pound. Caroline believed that they knew when they were going home. They acted differently the day of their pick up. Chris laughed at this, but Caroline knew she was right.

She stroked Gordo's head while they waited. Chris began to turn off the lights in the back.

"He probably had something come up. I'm sure he will come tomorrow," Chris said. "Aren't you ready to roll?"

It had been a long day. Several new dogs had come in from a hoarding situation and had to be taken to be vetted then bathed. The smell of the urine from the fur of the wet dogs was stuck in Caroline's nose and she was covered in fur from grooming detail.

"No, I want to wait just a few more minutes. He should've called if something had come up."

Chris nodded and went back to her office.

Gordo lay back down at Caroline's feet.

18

At five minutes after six the phone rang and Caroline answered.

"Hello, Parkway Animal Shelter, how may I help you?"

"Oh, hi. I was expecting voicemail..."

Caroline listened to the guy explain how he had changed his mind about Gordo. New carpet. Refinished hardwood in the living room. The possibility of going to hike the Appalachian Trail at some point...

Caroline heard herself talking, yelling, into the phone before she had processed her anger, before she could properly press it down, compress it into her guts to sit and stir and burn and stay there.

She saw Chris sprint into the room and take the phone from her and begin to apologize to the board member's son. Chris paused; the man was speaking on the other end of the line now. Chris looked at Caroline, disappointed and furious, shook her head and pointed to the door.

SCHADENFREUDE

The summer after my Sophomore year at Higbee School, I met Soulet. I'd heard about her from my Mama talking to her friends over brunch. They asked what was the latest on Soulet and somehow Mama would always know. She was interested because my Daddy was supposed to be engaged to Soulet and this caused Mama's blood to boil even though she herself had remarried several years before. *Sue-Lay*. I loved saying her name; it was a name you couldn't forget.

In the midst of my sophomore year at Higbee, Mama took me with her to brunch as she did sometimes. Her friends would all say, "Hello, Pilar...how grown up you are," or some variation on that, ask me how school is, and promptly, after receiving my answer, turn away and talk among themselves leaving me to drink *Shirley Temples* and fetch extra rolls from the banquet line. This time Mama's friend Weetie asked after Soulet. Mama smiled at Weetie and whispered "rehab" and tapped the side of her nose with her index finger. Weetie laughed and tipped her glass towards Mama at the news. I thought Weetie was a total cunt. I thought Mama was a cunt too, in the global sense, and though I loved her because she was my mother, it didn't change the reality of her character which only got worse with time.

The only one of Mama's group of friends that was decent was Caroline. She had sworn off drinking and she was the only one of them that worked. She taught Latin at

Higbee. She was a second cousin to Mama and only came to brunches or get togethers occasionally, probably as a familial duty.

“I told you,” Caroline said, pointing at Mama, “I won’t listen to you talk bad about her. She’s my friend and neighbor. Her little boy died, for Christ’s Sake.” Her voice, surprisingly stern and breaking, changed the mood at the table. She pulled her napkin out of her lap and put it on her plate.

“Caroline, please. I know you guys are twelve step program buddies,” Weetie said, chewing on the pickled okra that had been in her Bloody Mary, “but Soulet lives off of Cecil’s money like a parasite. She married him just to take him to the cleaners in the divorce.”

“Jacque drowned. She found him. I can’t imagine what hell she walks through every day. Grief broke up that marriage. This happens every time I come out with y’all...if it isn’t Soulet, it’s someone else you’re talking about who did nothing to warrant it. And this time in front of Pilar. Great role models....for vapidty.” Caroline leaned forward over the table towards Weetie, pointing her finger in Weetie’s face. Seeing me watching, she backed off and placed her arm back at her side, then turned to face me.

“Pilar, I’m sorry, sugar. I didn’t mean to upset the brunch. I hope to see you soon...come by my classroom and see me anytime, okay?” Caroline tucked her bob behind an ear, smiling. I smiled back and nodded. Then she turned on her heel and left.

When Caroline was safely out of earshot, Weetie turned to me and said, “Pilar, Soulet is a lesson to all young ladies in what not to do. She should write a book called, ‘How to End Up Alone.’”

I'd heard about Jacque's drowning of course. Soulet had a pool in the backyard and she ran inside to grab her phone and when she came back out it had been too late. Mothers in our social circles clucked their tongues and shook their heads at Soulet letting her seven year old swim, even for a couple of minutes, unattended. But to be fair to Soulet, the kid had been swimming since he was a toddler, he was even on a swim summer swim team at the country club. It's eerie to walk past the swim team pictures in the hall at the club now, see his little bespectacled face smiling on the front row, holding a ribbon. Of course everyone freaked out. Free CPR certification and swim lessons were offered at both the University Club and Memphis Country Club to avoid future tragedies. Women in tennis skirts kneeling and bending over the resuscitation dummies, alternately mashing the chests and blowing in the gaping plastic mouths while fathers looked on, drinks in hand.

Mama had married a man named Logan. His eyes were very far apart and sometimes he looked more like a hammerhead shark. He was from here in Memphis and rich from generations of yielded cotton. I suppose his money made up for his looks and gut. When they married, Mama started fertility treatments, hoping hormone injections would knock the cobwebs from her uterus, and a year ago they had twins--a boy and a girl who both looked like little hammerheads and in no way felt like my siblings, half or otherwise. Mama promptly found a nanny and returned to her normal routine. She was already on

her second nanny. Kenzie, the beautiful nanny who was also on the pom-squad at the U of M, had been replaced with Brandy who was older and had much larger girth.

Up until school let out for that summer, the summer when I met Soulet, Logan hadn't really had a conversation with me. Since he was a college football booster for Alabama, he'd kept telling me that I could go to Tuscaloosa to school when I got out of high school. He said this as if he was telling me that I was to keep a room at Versailles. During these short and one-sided talks I smelled the mossiness of scotch on his breath and realized that was the reason for his eyes losing focus and appearing to gaze in different directions.

I was fifteen and had been going through an awkward phase that had lasted ten years. My face was like a wad of pastry dough with features buried deep in the mush. I had no waist and my legs were thick. I caught my mother looking at me and often she seemed to be deep in thought as to how to fix me, just as if she was surveying the living room to redecorate. I was good at only two things: tennis and academics. I always had a book in my hands. My brain craved knowledge and retained it perfectly. As a teenage girl I would've traded the attribute of scholarship in an instant for the ability to cheerlead or obtain a group of friends if I'd been given the chance.

I was good at tennis, though. Mama had taken me to every type of lesson and activity: ballet, tap, drama, jazz, vocal lessons, cheerleading, tumbling...I could not do any of it, I didn't want to. Tennis took a lot of work, but I became good at it. I like it because when I set my shot up, in that instant I plant my feet on the court and bring the racquet back to hit the ball, and I picture everything I'd like to send away from my life:

most of the girls at school, Logan, Mama, the constantly whiney hammerheads, and then I hit the ball. My coach says that the speed of my shots and accuracy in hitting is going to get me a college athletic scholarship. I think Mama was happy I played tennis because the uniforms were cute.

Other than tennis, my freshman and sophomore years of high school had been a disappointment to her. I was not social and wasn't any future candidate for Homecoming Queen. While I made straight A's, I spent most of my time at my computer learning foreign languages with Rosetta Stone or sneaking online to chat with Parker, a girl I'd met at the tennis camp in Arizona that I'd been sent to last summer.

Parker was beautiful and complicated and loved Camel Lights and J.R.R. Tolkien. She was a hell of a tennis player, too. The last night of the camp, we shared a kiss beneath a desert moon whose light made her blonde hair glow. It made it almost white. We didn't speak of the kiss in the chats, but I know we both thought of it. Then Mama found the copy of *The Love Songs of Sappho* Parker had inscribed with a chaste note that she sent me for Christmas, and I was forbidden to speak to her again. I couldn't text or call because Mama took away my cell phone. Luckily Mama was not at all savvy with technology and we found other ways to communicate. Over Skype (which Mama probably thought was an airline) and email accounts we created, we plotted and were attending the same tennis camp, this time in Palm Springs later this summer after the four other training camps I was to attend.

My Sophomore year concluded, my heart aching daily for Parker, yearning for our chats or to visit her at her house in Vail, counting the days until the Palm Springs

camp, and slowly, as if some strange gestational period had ended, I emerged from my pastry dough cocoon with cheek bones and colt-like legs. My waist shrank and I rolled the waistbands of my shorts to keep them on. So when I emerged from the pool house one day in a bikini, Mama was shocked but pleased. Logan took vigil by the pool and watched my every move while sipping scotch. Brandy, nanny to the hammerheads, had the day off and Mother was busy taking care of the twins, but she still noticed Logan's shift in attention.

The next day Mama said in a way that was meant to reassure a four year old, "Pilar, you are gonna go stay at your dad's until tennis camp."

She was sitting on my bed, a little fat hammerhead on each knee. I can remember thinking how she'd be so pretty without the hateful look that she carried on her face all the time.

"I thought I wasn't allowed over there because of Soulet."

"She's better now. Your Daddy's had the idea to go open up some blues bar in Clarksdale, so you'll be with Soulet. Let's hope this bar works out better than that dump he had down on Beale," she said, letting little Buck tinker with her earlobe. He fingered her large diamond earring as he sucked his thumb. Musette sat on the other knee staring blankly at me.

"I don't understand," I said. "Just a few months ago you told your friends she was a cokehead," I said.

“Don’t be vulgar,” she told me, “I did no such thing. It’ll be fun and it’s just until tennis camp. Only a couple of days. Logan and I need a bit of space and privacy, and so we are going to Seaside a few days early.”

I wondered if this had anything to do with his watching me at the pool the day before, and the sudden dismissal of Kenzie. Things between Mama and Logan had shifted; there was a fissure in the marriage in which Mama had so much invested.

“Your dad brought a key by this morning,” Mama said and left the room.

“Why didn’t he come say hi to me?” I asked, but got no reply.

Daddy had lost his shirt when the plane down on Beale didn’t fly. He was staying at Soulet’s house, an old white house with a wrap around porch in Central Gardens. He said he was going to marry her. Since Daddy would only occasionally take me out for dinner or a movie, I had yet to go over to Soulet’s. Mama had been sure of that. While she neglected me, she didn’t want to give another woman the opportunity to do so as well.

Mama dropped me off in front of Soulet’s house and pulled away before I could turn and wave good bye. I went up the walk carrying my suitcase and racquet bags and climbed the steps to the porch. When no one answered the front door I used my key. Inside, the walls of the house were covered with art, and the hardwood floors were padded with persian rugs. I heard a TV in the back of the house and walked into the back room where Lifetime Movie Network blared from a large flat panel. I was nervous to meet her, but excited too. I found Soulet asleep on the couch with a down comforter

covering the small lump that was her body. I studied her face and decided she was attractive but not in the Memphis Country Club sense where all the women looked vaguely the same because they all went to the same person for Botox. Mama and her friends had me expecting her to look cheap and rough, like someone who chain smokes and draws on their eyebrows. She was several years younger than Mama and attractive in her own way. A more natural way. Her dark hair was long and straight and her skin was an olive color. Her cheek bones were sharp and she had thick dark eyebrows. She looked like she could be a character actor to play an Italian, Jewish, or Greek person, but I knew she was nothing that exotic, her family had been in Memphis for generations and went to the Episcopal Church. I watched a trail of drool run from the corner of her mouth as she knitted her brows in her sleep, and then I sat down on the love seat and changed the channel to Sundance.

I felt a bit stuck and out of habit had thought of going for a drive before I realized I couldn't. Just when I had gotten my license and the relief of driving my own car, the freedom of knowing I could leave a situation, Mama had taken the car away when she found out about Parker. She didn't want me driving off to talk on the phone with her or meet her, even though I had explained that she didn't live here in Memphis. When she confronted me about Parker, I hadn't been able to explain to her, for I didn't really understand it either.

“We are just close friends,” I'd said.

“Close friends don't mail each other books of Lesbian poems,” Mama replied.

I began to cry.

“Pilar, don’t make your life harder than it has to be. We all have to put our feelings aside sometimes and just move on.”

“People don’t care about that stuff anymore. It’s really not a big deal. Things have changed.”

“The hell they don’t care. Just because it’s on TV doesn’t mean they don’t care. I care, Pilar. Your mother cares.”

“You shouldn’t be watching this,” Soulet said with a bit of panic, her voice still gravelly with sleep. I hadn’t noticed that she’d woken up. I was watching an indie film about a nun who was a missionary in Africa. In this scene she was being eaten out by the white guy who was in the village for some reason that was never really clear. She still had on her habit, but the white guy from the village had just pulled it up above her boobs. I jumped. Soulet pondered the TV screen. Her dark hair was ratted from sleep but her eyes were large and very awake. I didn’t know what to say to her; the presence of her tiny body, now that it was awake, took up all the air in the room.

“Isn’t that the British actress that won all those Oscars? What’s-her-face?” Soulet asked.

I blushed and didn’t answer.

She watched the screen for another minute and then shook her head with a bit of disgust that quickly became indifference.

“I’m Soulet Fontaine. You must be Pilar Alabaster,” Soulet said. “We both got fancy names, huh? Yours is probably a family name of some sort. I had no such luck. Ma named me that because it was the name of a fortune teller she went to see down on Gayoso every week while she was being called on by Daddy...Madame Soulet.”

I looked at her and tried unsuccessfully not to smile, but didn’t tell her that my name came from a romance novel my mother had read while she was pregnant.

“Turn it back to Lifetime. I have to have my stories on. It calms my nerves,” she said and reclined back on the couch. I changed the channel and felt her eyes on me, wanting me to talk.

“So, what’s the real reason your Mama suddenly thought it was okay for you to stay over here?”

I shrugged.

“Does it have to do with that pervert she married?”

Again, I fought unsuccessfully to hide a smile.

“Sorry, but Logan’s always been a bit dense...and horny. We called him Igor in high school. I guess that was mean, but I never really felt bad about it. Look, there are no big rules in my house except just use your common sense and don’t get yourself into trouble or worry your Daddy. He’s got enough to deal with...opening that bar in the middle of nowhere... And he worries about me. Says I’m fragile. Other than that, you are welcome to do what you want, within reason of course,” She got up to stretch. She smiled when she saw the flat panel present the name “John Stamos” on the credits of a Lifetime Movie.

“People underestimate his ability to play a villain,” she said as she arranged her yoga mat with a view of John Stamos, and then launched herself into downward dog.

We watched three more Lifetime Movies after the one with Stamos in it and played several hands of gin rummy. She made grilled cheese sandwiches with slices of apple in them and gave me a slice of canned pear with a dollop of cottage cheese on it.

“My Granny used to make me those on the nights when we would play cards together,” she said when I noticed I was staring at the pear.

Soulet barely ate half her sandwich before putting her plate in the sink. As I continued to eat, she began to pack a cooler full of ice and Cokes in glass bottles and moved a large backpack, the type people took camping, to the set of French doors that led to the back yard.

“Ok, come out on the front porch,” she said, leaving the stuff by the doors.

She brought along two cokes for us and we sat out on the porch swing. Her rose bushes were still blooming even though it was well into summer. There was a breeze and it was beginning to cool down though it would be another hour until the sun went down. I started to relax, and held the bottle to the back of my neck to cool it off.

“I don’t really want to go to tennis camp, it’s exhausting,” I said. “I wish there was a camp for kinda just hanging out. Just reading or hanging out by the pool. I really just want to sleep late and read my summer reading list. Most of the books I’ve already read. They have a camp for everything these days. A girl at school went to a surfing

camp in Maui,” I said, trying to start a conversation. But Soulet was watching the next door neighbor’s front porch where the entire family had gathered. The man was wearing blue scrubs and his wife was stylishly dressed in a sundress and sandals, her blond highlights looking shiny and expensive. There were two children, a boy and a girl. The girl looked to be about Kindergarten age and the boy was probably two or three years old. The children were taunting a large German Shepard that could have been part wolf. The parents were watching them and drinking beer from longneck bottles. They raised their hands in a wave to Soulet and she nodded slightly in return.

“They just moved in a few months ago and chopped down a tree that was in my yard. It was close to the property line but it was in my yard. It was my tree. What harm does a tree do to anyone anyway?”

“Yeah, people can be assholes sometimes,” I said, testing her with the language to see if she minded. In that one day, I had already talked to Soulet more than any other person in a very long time. I think I would have agreed with about anything she said. She was kind to me. I cannot recall a time during my high school years when someone made me dinner who wasn’t paid to do so.

“Just an innocent tree,” Soulet said, staring blank-faced at the family on their lawn, “then they add on that front porch to the house, which is fine...I think every house needs a porch, but they don’t have any railings on it and it’s a five foot drop and they let their kids play out there while they sit and drink their beer and get buzzed. Not smart. It worries me to death, especially that little guy. He barely has the hang of walking.”

Soulet showed me to the guest room and gave me a set of towels in case I wanted to take a bath.

“I’m going to be out back in the treehouse. If you need anything you can come out back and get me. I will come down out of the tree,” she said as if this was as normal as saying she was going to bed early.

I watched from the second floor window of my room as she walked from the doorway of the French doors below into the backyard carrying the cooler with the backpack on her back. The backyard was large and the treehouse was in a tree near her fence. In the center of the yard there was a large concrete slab in the shape of a kidney bean where there must have been, at some point, a pool. She paused briefly on the concrete slab before walking to the base of the tree and disappearing in the shadows of the branches.

I wandered through the upstairs of the house and paused at a door decorated with crayon drawings on construction paper of dolphins swimming with people in an ocean. I opened the door a crack and by the moonlight through the window saw a child’s room with an unmade bed and toys spread about the floor. I stepped inside the room and winced in pain and saw that I had stepped on a Lego. I felt I deserved the pain for snooping around in Soulet’s. I went back to the door and ran my fingertips over the waxy crayon drawings, tracing the outline of a dolphin with my finger. No classmates or friends of mine had ever died. I felt a pang of sadness for Jacque but also for Soulet, who

seemed like she would've been a good mom. Any morbid curiosity I had subsided as I made sure the door to his room was shut.

“So what’s the almost stepmother like?” Parker said as we began to Skype.

“She’s nice, really nice. She made me dinner and we played cards,” I said and added, “she’s a bit kooky, but in a good way.”

“Do you think she would mind you talking to me? Where is she right now?”

“She’s real laid back. She’s actually hanging out in the backyard up in a tree house right now.”

“Are you fucking kidding?”

“No, I have no idea why. Maybe she does crafts up there or something.”

“That’s so cool, very...hmmm...I don’t know what that is,” she said and we both giggled.

“What are you up to?”

“My parents left for Cabo today, so I’ve got the house to myself.”

“So what are you doing?”

“Honestly,” she laughs, her laughter was so full and throaty, “I’m reading off my summer reading list. Tonight it’s *Wuthering Heights* and thinking about you. About seeing you at camp.”

She never said things like that and neither did I. Our conversations were more like that of typical best friends minus the talk about guys. We were also careful about our

emails and texts, because her parents were crazy strict and monitored her stuff. Hearing her say it, out loud, made my blood pulse hard in my neck, and my face grew hot. Before I could stop myself I said, “I think about you all the time. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

I read “To Kill A Mockingbird,” from my summer reading list, until midnight. When there was still no sign of Soulet I went outside in my nightgown to the base of the oak tree. I looked up trying to see inside the tree house. The tree house was a small wooden playhouse with cutouts for windows that even had small shutters.

“Soulet...It’s Pilar. Let me come up there. I’m lonesome,” I whispered in a stage whisper, and as I said it I realized the truth of it, and just how lonesome I was, and how spending the evening with her had given me a reprieve from that loneliness.

There was no answer.

I was about to walk back to the house when a rope ladder fell heavily toward me.

The rope rungs were scratchy against the arches of my feet as I climbed to the top and stepped into the treehouse. The light from the windows of the neighbor’s house sent slices of light through the cutout windows of the treehouse. It was obvious from the drawings of dragons and Spider-Man on the walls that it was, or had been, a little boy’s hangout, and as my eyes focused I saw Soulet sitting on the floor next to the small cut out that served as a window, holding what appeared to be a bull horn with head phones over

one ear. It took me a minute to realize that it was one of those things that private investigators or the FBI use to hear what's going on from a distance, to spy on people.

“Where'd you get that?”

Soulet was unbothered by the question.

“I was in a hospital for a bit with a guy that runs the ‘I-Spy’ down on Madison. You know, the place with the GPS trackers and the nanny cams, and he had extra. He said I needed a hobby.”

“Isn't this illegal?” I asked, thinking that this was completely fucked up.

Soulet ignored my question and handed me the headphones. I sat down and placed the headphones on my ears and pointed the bullhorn in the direction of the neighbor's house. I could hear the clanging of bowls, what seemed to be kitchen sounds. There was a light on in a first floor room of their house on the other side of the fence. Soulet handed me binoculars and took the headphones off of my right ear.

“The wife can't sleep. She stays up almost all night sometimes. Tonight she's baking.”

I looked through the binoculars and saw her: blonde hair wrapped up in a bun, a large gray t-shirt mixing something in a bowl with a large wooden spoon. After a minute, I became bored with watching her and handed back the headphones and bull horn thing.

“Okay. There is nothing going on here,” I said.

“That's exactly what I liked about it when I started coming up here. I used to not do it very much. It was just normal stuff, boring almost. A perfect family. People living in a Pottery Barn catalog. At first it was reassuring, soothing even. I wanted to see the

secret behind having a life like this. But these folks are so normal and so happy, it began to piss me off.” Soulet put the headphones back on one ear and held up the bullhorn, then used her other hand to lift a bottle of Coke to her lips.

“Isn’t that awful that it pissed me off? That I wanted to see something go wrong for them? Nothing major, but just something other than perfect? Maybe they would have a fight over a credit card bill or she would cry when no one else was watching because she hadn’t ever gotten over an old sweetheart. I don’t know. I guess that’s what grief does to you. Misery loves company.” She took a swig of the Coke and added, “So I started coming up here more and more. Eventually I started to see them argue: the porch project was expensive so they fight a bit about money, they both travel a bunch for work and they resent each other because they have to parent alone a bunch, she nags him about getting the house dirty, and sometimes they yell. I get some sort of sick pleasure when they fight.”

“What were you in the hospital for?” I asked, my curiosity overpowering my shyness at this point.

“I was sad. Still am. Some days are not as bad as others. But I’ll always be sad. There’s somethings you just can’t move past, I know that now. I went to the hospital because I used to do things that weren’t *healthy for my body*,” Soulet said, making quotation marks with her fingers, “but coulda fooled me, the stuff made me forget for a while. See, Jacque...my son died.”

Though I had known this, the crack in her voice when she told me alarmed me. She put her headphones back on her head and looked back to the neighbors window. We

were up high and I could see Caroline's large house out the other cutout makeshift window of the tree house. I wondered if Soulet ever spied on her, Caroline, who'd taken up for her at the brunch. She lived alone since she got divorced from the doctor and I supposed there wasn't much going on there to listen to.

"Hmph! See, come over here and look at this." Soulet waved me back over to her side of the treehouse. She put the gear back on my head and handed me the binoculars.

There were now cakes on the countertop cooling on racks, not yet iced. A soft jazz was playing, nothing like Kenny G or elevator music, but something more like Billy Holliday we listened to at Higbee for African American History Month. The blond moved into the frame, laughing along with the guy who'd been wearing scrubs earlier. He was now in polka dot boxers and an Ole Miss T-shirt. He embraced her and they began to sway slowly to the music, cheek to cheek.

I found myself smiling and thought of Parker and the way she'd pushed a lock of hair back from my eyes as she leaned in to kiss me. I wanted to bake cakes and dance in a home we shared, somewhere no one would give us mean looks or stares, somewhere Mama wasn't. My body warmed at the thought of it.

He kissed her gently on the top of her head next to her large blonde bun and they continued to sway.

I looked at Soulet, who seemed to be on the verge of tears, but out of some anger or frustration, I thought. Then it dawned on me that I should be ashamed of watching these people, and I was. But not enough to stop watching.

After dancing, her husband left the kitchen and the woman set about icing the cake. Only after she was done did she turn the kitchen lights off, and then the house was dark and quiet. Soulet and I stayed in the tree house for a bit, just for good measure, to make sure that the woman had gone to bed.

When we finally went to sleep at dawn, Soulet and I slept on the couches in her TV room with the French doors open, the ceiling fans on high to keep the mosquitoes away, and Lifetime on a low-volume. Soulet gave me the down comforter and wrapped herself up in a throw blanket that depicted the Elvis postage stamp.

Noises woke me up before Soulet. I saw a bounce house being erected in the back yard of the neighbors' house and heard the loud hum of the air compressor and a man explaining that the bounce house did not serve as a babysitter and that children needed to be supervised while jumping.

I went to get a glass of water from the kitchen and saw from the window the silver balloons tied to the column of the neighbor's house, one was shaped like the number seven.

I began to cook the coffee and the scent in the air stirred Soulet. She opened her eyes and stared vacantly at the TV screen for a minute before getting up.

“Pilar, I usually take my coffee outside to drink if you want to join me. I just have to turn off the sprinkler system so hold on a sec.” She went out the French doors into her backyard, and I stood holding my coffee and watching her. She paused at the sight of the

tall bounce house that was now fully inflated and visible above the fence-line, and then looked down at the kidney-bean slab of concrete in front of her. She came back inside without turning off the sprinkler.

“Let’s go to the front porch.”

Shiny SUV’s soon began to arrive along the street. Parents hopped out and assisted their children to the neighbors’ with the cumbersome wrapped gifts in their arms. Scrubs Man was there, in khaki’s today, greeting the guests.

“Come on in, we are doing cake first, so they can wear off the sugar rush in the bounce house,” Scrubs Man said with a laugh and shook another dad’s hand.

Soulet was silent as she watched. When she returned her coffee cup to the saucer, it rattled. I looked across the street and saw Caroline in her front yard weeding a flower bed. We waved at one another, and she shielded her eyes from the sun with her hand to watch us on the porch for a moment.

The distant voices of children screeching in the neighbors’ backyard grew louder as more of them arrived and found their way to the bounce house. Soulet began to tap her foot in a quick tempo.

After the word “cake” shouted by an adult several times, there was a pause, and then twenty little voices exploded into the lyrics of “Happy Birthday.”

Soulet bolted from the front porch and into the neighbor’s yard. She climbed the stairs onto the front porch and began to pound on the front door. I stayed on the front porch but stood from my chair to watch.

“I can’t get a moments peace around here. This is supposed to be a quiet street. Not Disney World,” Soulet yelled and began to slap their front door with an open hand.

Caroline ran across the street and pulled Soulet away from the front door, but Soulet kept yelling.

“Always puttin’ it in my face,” She yelled. “They are always there. Right there. Rubbin’ my nose in it,” she screamed, her face wet with tears.

Caroline was moving Soulet away from the house, stopped and put her arms around her.

“Why does that kid get a birthday party?” Soulet asked in broken sobs.

The blonde woman had come to the front door and stood looking confused and a little scared. Caroline told her it was under control. The blonde woman hesitated before shutting the front door.

“I need to go downtown,” Soulet said, “I need to get something. I need to go now.”

“No, you don’t,” Caroline said, “You aren’t going anywhere.”

I had wondered from the porch and was standing a few feet away from them on the neighbor’s lawn, my arms crossed and completely unsure of what role I was to play in this. Not even when my parents quarreled over the details of their divorce had I ever witnessed such an outpouring of emotion, especially in public. I hadn’t ever really seen grief before. I remembered the word “subtext” from my sophomore AP English class vocabulary list. Subtext was the official language of the little world my mother and I swam inside. No one said what they really felt, what they really feared. No one made a

display of themselves, perhaps no one cared enough to. It was a safe world in which we were cocooned, and I knew then that I wanted to be back inside that world and far away from this.

“I should’ve been watching him swim. I shouldn’t have gone to get the phone. I should’ve been watching. I should’ve been watching. I should’ve been watching. My sweet boy,” Soulet wailed the words over and over. It sounded like a chant or a prayer, almost intelligible, like in movies set in the Middle East where chanting comes over loud speakers and people bow on small carpet mats towards Mecca in prayer.

Caroline had to call her ex-husband, the doctor, to give Soulet something to calm her down. I stayed at Caroline’s house and listened as she phoned the neighbor and explained about Soulet. She phoned my father as well and explained that she would drop me off at the camp in Arkansas herself.

“Don’t tell your Mama about this, okay, Pilar?” Caroline pleaded, and I told her I wouldn’t.

The first night at camp, Parker and I stood naked facing each other in the dorm room we shared for the duration of the camp. She took my hand and led me to her bed. Every night that summer we slept in the same bed, and on the last morning of camp I awoke and stared at her sleeping profile, her skin tanned a deep golden brown from being on the courts, was a stark contrast to the stiff white sheets that housekeeping put on the

beds. I knew that this was an important thing that was ending. I knew, even then, that there would be times in my life that I'd wish to go back to that moment in that extra long twin size bed with the rough sheets. Perhaps someday I'd wish to climb back in that bed and start over right there, and return home from camp and tell my mother that this was how I was and how I always would be.

By the time I got out of camp at the end of the summer, my father had broken up with Soulet and moved in with a woman who worked at his new bar down in Clarksdale. The next time I saw Soulet was at my father's funeral. I was about to start my senior year. My boyfriend, Sullivan, was with me. Sullivan was Weetie's nephew and played lacrosse for Higbee's brother school. I had given up Rosetta Stone and mythology and become a cheerleader and girlfriend, having had pushed Parker and that whole incident out of my mind. I just stopped writing her and blocked her from my chat. Soulet hugged me and she asked if I would come by her house after the funeral because she had a few things of my father's that he would want me to have, and I said I'd come that evening, but I never did.

I guess she got my address from Caroline because that fall she mailed me my father's watch and a set of cuff links. I was at brunch with Mama during Christmas break when I heard about Soulet's suicide. Sullivan and I had just gotten into Ole Miss that week, the week before my cotillion. I'd earned a full scholarship for tennis. Mama was over the moon and her pride in me made me feel complete. She kept saying that I'd "arrived." After years of nothing, so incredibly much was happening for me so fast and it kept me busy. Yet at night, when the house was quiet, I became anxious. I'd grown

accustomed to my social life and the pleasant distractions of the awards I accumulated, taking me from thoughts of other stuff about myself that I swallowed and buried deep in my gut, stuff that I hurled away from me with every swing of my tennis racquet.

“She’d been up in the treehouse for days when they found her. She’d taken a bunch of pills,” Weetie said solemnly, though I could tell the weight of her words excited her. Caroline had stopped going to brunches with them so there wasn’t anyone there to rein in Weetie. I should have said something to make her stop.

Yet I didn’t.

SENIOR INTERNSHIP PAPER

BROOKS MUSEUM

SENIOR INTERNSHIP PAPER

MARISOL MAUREEN SHAY

Class of 2013

I. Why I Chose The Brooks Museum

My mother had wanted me to intern at the Mid-South Adoption Advocacy Center for my Senior Internship. I was adopted as an infant by my mom and dad¹, the first of three adopted children, and my mom used to volunteer there. I think it is run by The Church and while I have been raised to be a devout Catholic, I'm having a hard time lately with some of their (The Church's) beliefs.² Plus, I wanted to intern for a place that was new and meet new people. I have been an artist since I was old enough to hold a crayon. It seemed like the obvious choice to try to intern for an art gallery, art school, or museum. The galleries around town didn't answer my emails and calls. I later learned most of them are small operations and seldom open. Memphis isn't exactly SoHo. The one art school wasn't in need of anyone until their summer camps for kids and obviously

¹ My mother and father are in the process of getting a divorce and I live with my mother and two younger brothers.

² I transferred here to Higbee for senior year because I was asked to leave my Catholic School at the end of junior year. I had been asked to enter artwork in a contest to represent our school. I entered a triglyph entitled "Hypocrisy" detailing double standards in Catholic Dogma. My mother cried for a week and wouldn't talk to me.

this wouldn't work for a September to April internship. So I went to the Brooks Museum, the museum in Overton Park over near the zoo, and spoke with the Public Relations and Volunteer Coordinator, Andrea. What was super strange is that they were about to open an exhibit of works by an artist named Marisol and this made me think that perhaps it was meant to be, or "kismet," as Ms. Freedman³, my old art teacher, said when things work out. The Brooks was a bit of a drive from my house and Higbee School and my mother did not understand why I didn't just go work at the Dixon Museum which is much closer. She is convinced that Midtown is a bad part of town ("filled with liberals and hippies") and I told her about the Marisol Exhibit and how the artist's Catholicism played a huge role in her artworks and she didn't complain after that.

I liked Andrea. I knew immediately I wanted to work with her. Her background is in communications and she used to run a small record label and booking agency for musicians. She said she stopped doing all that because she had to have some sort of steady income ("there's no money in music"). She is artistic and wears a lot of black and her short blonde hair in a spiky mess. She is also cheerful, which is something you don't see every day. When I started my internship, I was new at school and didn't really have any friends and I looked forward to talking to her. She does Zumba once a day and plays in a park soccer league for women over thirty-five. She says she has lost seventy-five pounds in the past year and a half. She is one of those people who really all you notice is their smile and their light, so I don't really think she needs to change anything at all.

³ Ms. Freedman was my elderly next door neighbor and a painter. She babysat my brothers and me a lot, but she also taught me to sketch and to paint with watercolors, oils, and acrylics. She died at the beginning of junior year.

She's the one that interviewed me and gave me the internship with the title "Docent/Event Coordinator."

Andrea's boss and, thus, mine, too, was Garnet Pigeon⁴. I read her bio on the website before I interviewed, as was suggested to me by my advisor at Higbee, Ms. Hopper. Garnet Pigeon was over development (getting money/funding from donors and organizations) as well as acquisitions (getting new exhibits and works for the museum). She has worked at the museum since the early 1970s. She went to college and graduate school in New York, like I want to. She was older and somewhat of a curmudgeon to me, at least at first (she introduced herself by saying, "So you want to make a living in the arts, we will have you changing your mind in no time").

Andrea and Garnet were a sort of "good cop/bad cop" team that kept the museum running. I knew I had made the right choice on where to intern. I could learn a lot about art from both of them.

II. What I Did at the Brooks Museum

The first thing I had to learn about is the museum itself and the artwork inside. Nearly twenty-thousand school children tour The Brooks every year. Since I, myself, was in school until afternoon and did my internship during the late afternoon and on some Saturdays, I missed giving tours to all but a few school groups. My job was to give tours to VIP's whenever needed; usually these were folks with money to give or had given money in the past. So I learned the history of the museum: it was founded in 1913

⁴ Mrs. Pigeon is the mother of Caroline Pigeon, my Latin teacher here at Higbee School. I was glad that I kept my mouth shut about how I detest Latin before I knew this.

when Bessie Vance Brooks gave \$100,000 to the city to start an art gallery in memory of her late husband. In 1916 the large Beaux Arts building was opened and since then various additions have been added and it became independent from the city in 1989. I also had to learn how to give a tour, which meant memorizing both a script and the layout of the twenty-nine galleries the museum houses. I am bad with memorization of words so this process took quite some time. I had to give practice tours to Andrea and Garnet. Garnet was not much help but heavy on the critique. Among other things, she said that I shouldn't wear my school uniform when I gave tours for the sake of sophistication and aesthetics. I was told to wear all black: pants or skirt and blouse.⁵ Andrea gave me pointers on making sure my voice carried over a crowd and told me many times that she was "sure I could do it." I worked with index cards as I had done in Ms. Ramsey's public speaking class that I was taking at the time and memorized the tour script as I wandered through the galleries which gave me context for each blurb. Soon it fit together, the words and the paintings, and I began to give tours. But I did not give many tours, as I was soon given other duties by Garnet, thus leaving Andrea and the other docents to give tours.⁶ For the first six weeks of my internship, when I wasn't giving tours, I wandered the galleries looking at art and watching the new exhibits go up.

⁵ Later that same week, Garnet came in with a Goldsmith's bag, having bought me a "uniform" to give tours in, which was a relief because I didn't have anything like that in my closet and I knew my mother was still working out the particulars of child support with my father who was already angry to be paying the tuition at Higbee. The uniform was much prettier than I had pictured: a black pencil skirt and a black button down blouse with a scarf that tied into a bow at the neck. My mother still dresses me (when I am not in a school uniform) as a child: floral church dresses with sashes at the waist. This was my first grown up outfit, and my eyes filled with tears when I thanked Garnet, which made her aghast at first, but later she gave me a hug.

⁶ The other docents were grandma types from the neighborhood around Overton Park. They loved giving tours.

In October, right after my birthday⁷, Garnet began taking me on donor calls with her. The calls were where I spent most of my time. She explained to me that only 12% of the museum's funding comes from government sources and said that the rest was up to her to gather. Garnet's car had heated leather seats and the windshield had a sensor that could tell if it was raining and the wipers came on automatically. She dressed extravagantly and wore extra jewelry when she went on calls to donors and I found myself staring at the gigantic stones on her rings as her hands rested on her steering wheel or looking at her earrings sparkle as she spoke with a donor.⁸ She noticed me staring one day in the car and explained that her job forced her to play up wealth. The rich donated money much more freely when another rich person was asking. She said, "Don't get me wrong, I love clothes and jewels, but for this job you play it up, it's like war paint. No one wants to play for a losing team."

We were received into the living rooms of families whose last names I recognized because there were streets, buildings, libraries, stadiums, hospitals, gardens, and scholarships named after them. I never saw Garnet leave without sealing a deal, never, not once. Sometimes she wanted more money than she got, but usually that wasn't the case. I mimicked her posture, crossed my legs the same way, gave handshakes, and spoke in complete sentences with perfect grammar. People often asked if I was her

⁷ Garnet insisted we have a surprise party for my birthday in the break room. Andrea looked confused about this and later told me that her boss never does anything for work birthdays, so to consider myself honored. Andrea got me a coffee table book ([The Twentieth Century Art Book](#)) and Garnet got me a pair of black heels to go with my uniform. I still don't remember telling her when my birthday was.

⁸ Though Garnet was in her mid sixties, she looked much younger. She had a beautiful face with prominent cheek bones and blonde hair without a touch of gray. She looked like a socialite, which she was I guess technically, but her mind was "like a steel trap" (something my dad used to say about smart people).

granddaughter, which gave her the opening of explaining how important the museum's special programs were to high school aged youth.⁹

Garnet told me about the difference between “old money” and “new money” in a modern context. I had learned the term “old money” from reading The Great Gatsby in American Literature, but didn't know it was still “a thing.” She insisted it was very much still “a thing” and important to know about in any type of fundraising, especially for the arts. Garnet prefaced the talk with the obligatory phrase, “I'm not saying this to be ugly,” which meant that what she was about to say was, in fact, very ugly. I listened anyway, probably more so to the “ugly” stuff, for which I am ashamed.

She explained that one could ascertain the difference between old money and new money from both the house (location and age) and furniture. Old money people usually stayed within the city limits and didn't move to the suburbs. They usually lived in older houses or historic houses instead of new builds. Their curtains were usually old and faded but always lined white which made them look uniform from the outside. New money people lived in the suburbs in McMansions¹⁰. Their furniture was usually new and they often bought “sets” of furniture at furniture stores rather than collecting it “stick by stick.” New money people had shutters that were not able to actually close, they were just nailed to the sides of the windows. Old money people always gave just enough to help them with their taxes or left money through their estate when they died. New money people were much more fun to deal with, according to Garnet, because they wanted to

⁹ Eventually she answered “I wish” before launching into her spiel about the museum's youth programs which flattered me.

¹⁰ I introduced the term “McMansion” to Garnet. This delighted her.

belong to the club and were desperate to please. She acted a bit differently with the new money people in their living rooms that smelled of new sheet rock and new paint and had, as Garnet had predicted, “matchy-matchy” furniture. Garnet was slightly, five to ten degrees, more aloof with the new money people. She said that this made them want to please her. She was always polite, not cold exactly, but very formal. She said that it was just psychology, perhaps devious in a way, but necessary for her job, which was basically, as she put it, “begging rich people for money.” She also added that old money and new money spend exactly the same; the thing of the most import is to get as much of it, old or new, as possible.

The old money people Garnet already knew; most of them seemed to be her friends or acquaintances. Some of the younger old money people had gone to school with her daughter, Caroline, or her son, Trey. These calls were usually casual visits where they caught up with one another’s life and business was limited to a brief few sentences as we were leaving. She said those visits were usually just a formality.

For all the visits, both to old and new money people, her countenance and aspect changed like an actress walking out of the wings and onto the stage. She was no longer grouchy or pessimistic. As she reapplied her lipstick in the visor mirror of her Mercedes Benz, before getting out and ringing a door bell, she transformed into another person. When I asked her about this, she told me not to be naive, we all wear masks most of our lives and added that fundraising was a little like Kabuki Theatre.

Some days when I watched her drive to yet another large house to sit in a living room, she looked tired, sad even. When I asked her if she was okay once, she said that

she was, but she was looking forward to retirement. I asked her when she was supposed to retire and she said, “Four years ago.” She explained that her husband had died years ago after a long illness and afterwards she had thrown herself into her work. She said she showed up each day at the barn for work just like mules do when put out to pasture.¹¹

Garnet’s biography said that she was a painter. When I asked if she still painted she said that sometimes one’s passion and one’s talent are not one and the same. In short, she told me she was better at getting money and art than she was at painting.

III. What I Learned During My Internship

I learned a multitude of things to carry forth into my professional and personal life from my internship at The Brooks. First and foremost, I learned how hard it is to juggle a professional career with other responsibilities. I was with Garnet for donor calls most of the time, which were unpredictable as to the amount of time meetings would take.¹² I have a new found respect for mothers who work¹³ and teenagers who work jobs alongside their studies as it was hard to keep so many balls in the air.

¹¹ Garnet asked frequently about my life. I told her about my father leaving after my mother pushed to adopt again in the middle of junior year. I heard him say to her once that she is a hoarder of children and that she didn’t take care of the ones she already had (though he hasn’t made any effort to take care of us either). My mother has never worked, though my father doesn’t make a lot of money and yet I’ve been responsible for most of the mothering of my brothers. My mother hasn’t left the house in several years. I did some research online and found there is a disorder that meets her symptoms: it is called “Agoraphobia.” Garnet asked if I would ever look up and try to meet my birth parents. I told her I haven’t had a chance to consider it in quite some time.

¹² I was responsible for picking up my brothers, Thomas and Gus, up from elementary school aftercare in the evenings. Most days I had to race to get there in time. They charge \$10/per minute for each minute you are late.

¹³ Unlike my mother who is addicted to true crime shows like “Dateline Mystery” or “48 Hours Mystery” and rarely leaves the worn brown recliner my dad left with us. Little Gus asked me the other day what DNA evidence was. Crime shows are the soundtrack for our home life. I love my mom, but I get angry at her sometimes.

Secondly, I learned so much about art while wandering the galleries and memorizing my script for tours. The subject of most interest to me was Maria Sol Escobar, who goes¹⁴ simply by “Marisol.” She was born in Paris and her parents were Venezuelan. Her mother was a patron of the arts before she died¹⁵ when Marisol was a teen. Her dad supported and encouraged her to be an artist. At sixteen, her family moved to Los Angeles and then travelled throughout Europe before coming back to the United States and studying in New York City at various schools and with Hans Hofmann. She was a friend to both Andy Warhol and to Willem de Kooning and a member of the Pop Art Movement. After moving from painting to sculpture, her work began to take on a sense of humor and gave commentary about pop culture. For instance, she sculpted *Playboy* creator, Hugh Hefner, holding not one but two pipes. When asked why, she answered it was because “he had too much of everything.”

Biographers say that her teen years were very formative for her because of her mother’s death and that she was heavily influenced by her Catholicism¹⁶ as well. It was also when she began to paint. She also performed acts of penance as a teen. Marisol walked upon her knees until they bled, went for long periods of time without speaking, and tied ropes tightly around her waist¹⁷.

¹⁴ Marisol is still alive, but in frail health. She lives in New York City.

¹⁵ Suicide

¹⁶ I wasn’t lying when I told my mother that.

¹⁷ Soon after my father left, I came home from school one day to find that my mother had taken the hair clippers I use to trim Thomas and Gus’s hair and shaved her head. The pile of hair was in a pile on the kitchen floor. She fasted for several days and prayed in her room.

Another thing I learned while interning is how important connections can be. At school Ms. Hopper always pounds that into our heads, but it is actually true. I filled out college applications for schools in New York, the schools I had always wanted to go to, my top pick being Parsons School of Design. I would have to find scholarships for school, I knew that. Garnet saw the application materials in my bag and helped me by writing recommendations which held weight because of who she is and because she was an alumna of Parsons. She also made some phone calls on my behalf and had one of the museum staff photograph my portfolio to send off with my applications¹⁸.

I walked Garnet's dog, Gordo¹⁹, in January when Garnet went on vacation. It was prior to school and my internship resuming after Christmas, and so it worked out quite nicely. Her house was near the golf course of the Memphis Country Club, a large stucco Mediterranean villa with a red tile roof; the inside was filled with art. In Garnet's reading room, I peeked at some of her own paintings. I had expected her style to be more abstract, but they were all works of realism with a touch of the surreal: paintings of her children when they were young, mainly her daughter, in grassy fields or forests with deer and foxes. In one painting, which was my favorite, her daughter is probably college age, standing in front of a shotgun house that has a family of parrots in a tree, and a barn owl is perched on her daughter's shoulder. All of her paintings were signed and dated, and

¹⁸ This was after a thorough critique by Garnet and my changes made to said portfolio. She told me my work is very good and that most private school girls don't have an eye like I do and end up painting shoddy [sic] folk art of cotton bolls and cotton fields. She also paid my application fees. I objected saying that I could not accept that (even though I didn't have the money). She said that I was to walk her dog, Gordo, for her when she went on vacation to earn the money.

¹⁹ Garnet said she had wanted to name him Matisse but the people at the animal shelter had named him Gordo and that is all to which he would answer.

from the dates it seems she stopped painting in the late 1990s. The aforementioned painting of her daughter was the last one she did that I saw while I was in her house.

I got the acceptance letter from Parsons granting me admission and a scholarship a few weeks ago and just as my internship was ending. Garnet had a party for me at the Brooks²⁰. The party was in the restaurant they have there in the museum called Brushstrokes. One of the bus boys played the piano. Champagne popped. I wore my museum uniform and heels and had pictures taken. Garnet cried which made Andrea cry. I was already crying. Garnet gave me a leather sketch book and some pencils and told me to come back to the museum to sketch.

My internship ended right before spring break and, although I miss it badly, I once again have more time to spend with my family and working on my own art in preparation for my move to New York City. This internship changed my life for the better, and I also learned how one can work in the Arts in capacities other than being an artist. Over spring break I took Thomas and Gus to Overton Park everyday and worked on sketches as they played on the playground²¹. It was good to get them out of the house and let them run and play in the sunny weather. I sent Garnet a sketch that I did that week. The sketch was of the exterior of the museum with Garnet in the foreground, clad in her jewelry, an owl perched on her shoulder.

²⁰ She asked me to invite my parents and friends. Of course, my mother wasn't able to leave the house and my father wasn't reachable. I took Gus and Thomas and feed them plenty of cake and Shirley Temples. When we got home that night, I found my mother crying on the couch and I sent the boys upstairs to get ready for bed. Mom said she was crying because she couldn't come to the party and that she couldn't be better. I know she cannot help it. So many Sundays, she wakes and gets ready for Mass and freezes at the door, never able to walk out. I tell her, tenderly yet with firmness, that she has to find a way to get better because I will be gone soon and the boys need her.

²¹ On Friday of that week, when we returned home from the park, we found our mother pruning rose bushes in our yard.

UNPLEASANTRIES

The Auden Primary School had hardwood floors and the student body wore uniforms like in the movies: little blazers and ties, plaid skirts for the girls. They carried monogrammed backpacks from L.L. Bean and their bodies were usually tan by mid-March when they left Memphis to vacation in their second homes in Destin or Seaside. The drop off lane was filled with newer model SUV's and luxury sedans that had slight residue on their bumpers where the parents had removed the Romney stickers in late November.

From the window of her third story condo that overlooked Auden School, where her son, Teddy, was in first grade, Edie used her son's binoculars to watch Carson Yates sit in her BMW 7 Series in the school parking lot. Carson's boy, Shelby, was in Teddy's class. Carson used the five minutes prior to the dismissal bell to dig out her make up bag from the console and touch up her lipstick and powder her nose. Edie had watched her like this every day now for a month. After the make up, Carson fiddled with her hair, put the blonde mass into place. Carson usually arrived in tennis whites, a short pleated skirt and fitted top, much like a cheerleading uniform for someone in their thirties.

Carson had dismissed Edie with a cold freeze at the orientation in August: given her the once over--head to toe and back up to head, a smirk-- and immediately turned back to her circle of friends to whisper. That wasn't the worst of it; Edie was used to that reception from women. It wasn't what had pissed her off.

Eddie spat on her own hardwood floor and muttered the worst curse word she could think of and went back to looking out the window.

Last month, Edie had hosted a party for Teddy. It was his seventh birthday. She labored over every detail: the favors, the Spiderman cake, the pizzas (gluten free crust in case of allergies), the snacks (organic shit because that is what the mothers at Auden used), and activities. It was to be a sleepover. Just four of his closest friends from school were invited, including Carson's son, Shelby. It was the first time Teddy's friends had been invited over and he had been too excited to sleep the night before. It was important. This was his first birthday since his daddy died.

All the mothers said their boys were coming to the party, but no one showed. Teddy heard that Carson had thrown an impromptu party at her own house on the same night with the same guest list, minus Teddy. Edie imagined the cars of the other parents in front of Carson's Tudor Revival house right down the street. She could see the boys through the living room window playing. Carson.

It hurt too much to revisit that night of the party. Teddy's face, the look in his eyes. *I don't understand, we're all friends at school.* She shook her head to erase the memory, like someone would an Etch-a-Sketch, and it faded but faintly remained. She turned her thoughts back to Carson. She'd plotted revenge, but hadn't come up with anything yet that would not carry a prison sentence. She dreamed about it. She wasn't religious, but she prayed about it, even though she was well aware that prayer wasn't exactly meant to provide anyone with a revenge plot. It would come to her. She just needed to give it some time.

Eddie put the binoculars down and left the condo to get Teddy from school.

Teddy sat at the table working on his homework. They were learning about Mardi Gras and Louis Armstrong. They ate king cake and listened to jazz. Last month they studied Martin Luther King, Jr. Teddy had become slightly obsessed with him. The teachers didn't discuss how or why he died or that it happened right here in Memphis--none of the unpleasantities Eddie thought were essential to know. A great man dying for his beliefs in a great cause. One night when Eddie was bathing him, Teddy had speculated that MLK had been mauled by a black bear. The next day she took him downtown to the Lorraine Hotel and told him the truth.

"They called Louis Armstrong 'Satchmo.' He lived down in New Or-leeens," said Teddy from the table where he was coloring a picture of Mardi Gras doubloons and beads.

"That's right and it's 'New Or-lins,'" Eddie said as she pulled a clean pot out of the dishwasher.

"Miss Kate calls it New Or-leens."

"I used to live there, it's New Or-lins. Moved there from where I grew up."

"Did Dad live there with you?"

"I was there just a few months when I met your dad. I was a waitress at a casino. He was playing music there. I came back up to Memphis with him. We were going to have you."

James. *It only takes one hit song... sell one song and you can live off that money forever*, he'd say. After a while she'd wished he would just get a steady job bagging groceries at the Big Star and buy powerball tickets--it had better odds. He lived from gig to gig. They lived in a shit hole. James didn't own a car, rode a bike everywhere, guitar strapped to his back, which was good because he was fucked up most of the time. She took the bus and altered dresses at a bridal shop. He was handsome. He was funny. She loved him, but after Teddy was born she'd kick him out when he wasn't sober. They lived apart a lot of the time, but that last year he had been clean. He'd taught Teddy to ride a bike and catch a baseball.

The settlement from the accident had come quick and been substantial. The driver of the delivery truck had been drunk when he hit James in the bike lane. The drunk driver trying to *deliver the world on time*. Edie and Teddy moved out of the tiny apartment that harbored an army of palmetto bugs and communal coin laundry, and Edie bought the condo in this historic brick building in a prominent neighborhood. She could afford a house with the settlement, but would not have known what to do with the space. She'd never had this sort of money before, and she put Teddy in Auden without a second thought. He deserved the best.

“Was dad excited about me, when I was born?”

“It was the happiest day of his life he always said,” Edie said and Teddy beamed with pride from the table.

James had been on a bender somewhere near Little Rock.

Eddie didn't go to college. Her mother had told her over and over to learn a trade. *Do something with your hands and you'll never be hungry*, her mother would say this with a Pall Mall hanging from her lip as she sewed a beauty pageant dress or a robe for a nativity play at the Baptist Church. The Pall Malls killed her, but her business as a seamstress put food on the table.

Eddie had always worked and didn't know how not to after she received the settlement. She now had a one-man storefront on Union doing design and alterations.

Late winter and early spring was her busy time because of the Cotton Carnival. It was like Mardi Gras but with cotton rather than Lint: a chance for society people to have balls, dress up like royalty and elect Kings and Queens and Princesses and Courts. It was like Dungeons and Dragons for rich people.

Garnet Pigeon was in for the final fitting of her gown for the ball. Garnet was a matriarch of a well-known family and in her mid-sixties. Her gown was tricky, as it had long sleeves and a boat neck to cover Garnet's wrinkled sun spotted décolleté and arms. She stood on the alterations platform, reading *RSVP*, the local society magazine that was basically just pictures of rich people at galas, as Eddie hemmed her dress for two inch heels.

"I'm glad you talked me into the matte satin rather than the brocade," Garnet said, admiring herself in the mirror, smoothing her blonde pageboy hair with one hand and holding the magazine in the other.

“It’s a better choice. The other would have been overstated with the jewelry,”
Eddie replied.

“Well, you have good taste. Fashion sense. That’s why you’re busy all the time. I hate carnival. What a bunch of assholes. Every year I say I’m not going again, but then Raegan, the neighbor’s daughter, is going to be princess this year. I’d be a bad person if I didn’t go...most days I’d rather just be a bad person,” Garnet said, flipping the pages of the magazine. Eddie chuckled.

“Is your son still set to get married this summer?”

“Sure is. I got to meet her last month. It’s in June, after they graduate. They’re gonna live here. I’ll need you to do a dress for me.”

“Did you like her?”

“She’s beautiful and dumb as a post. She’ll do just fine here,” Garnet said, while Eddie was pinning the hem of her dress.

“What about you? How’s Teddy liking Auden?”

“It’s fine. He’s getting straight A’s. Making friends.”

“What about you? You makin’ friends?”

“Well, Verlaine comes by and entertains us but that’s about it. Nothing new.”

Garnet seemed to considered this and studied Eddie’s reflection in the three-way mirror as she pinned the hem. Garnet said nothing.

“All done, you can go get dressed. I can hem this and get it pressed for you and it’ll be ready on Thursday.”

“Oh my, look at this. Franklin and Carson Yates have their picture in here. Doesn’t their boy go to school with Teddy?” Garnet presented the magazine to Edie.

“Yep. He does,” Edie said, glancing at the height of Carson’s up-do and trying to assess the designer she was wearing.

“I’m surprised he posed for a picture with Carson,” Garnet said as Edie placed the last pin in the hem of Garnet’s dress.

“Why’s that?” Edie asked as she ushered Garnet back to the changing room.

“He hates her. I remember her parents pleaded with her not to marry him, but she loved him, she has the kindness of a pit viper with everyone else, but just loved the bejesus out of him. Love is seldom the reason people marry here. He came from a different background. Played ball in college and got hurt or something. He drinks himself silly now. Her dad got him a job at an investment firm. Edie, people here are just smoke and mirror sorts,” Garnet said from the dressing room with a laugh.

Garnet dressed, and as she left the shop, she cupped her palm on Edie’s cheek and smiled and sighed. Edie realized that Garnet pitied her.

Verlaine was their neighbor and visited them regularly, appearing around dinner time when he got home from work as an associate at a law firm downtown. He always looked a bit ruffled, his button-down shirt slightly wrinkled, khakis without a straight crease, hair curling at his collar and ears, needing a trim. He was in his early thirties but a dedicated gamer. He brought his system over and played with Teddy. Today he was

going to the school with her for the *Doughnuts with Dad, Muffins with Mom Day*. Teddy had asked him without telling her and Verlaine had taken the morning off from work.

“I’ve lived here all my life. That school is cliquish. Those parents all grew up together, they don’t need new friends or take to newcomers too well. Don’t take it personally,” Verlaine told Edie as they left their building, but she saw concern in his eyes. He knew about the birthday party. Teddy must have told him.

Verlaine was in love with Edie. She knew this and refused to think about it. She refused to think about it because she knew it could work between them. It was practical and easy. She never had been good with practical and easy when it involved men. Verlaine had become her best friend since they had become neighbors and, in that way, she did love him.

“Well, I do take it personally. How else could I take it?”

“People around here, people like that, are like characters in a very fucked up Tennessee Williams play,” he said.

Edie didn’t say anything. She didn’t know who Tennessee Williams was. Verlaine quickly realized this and elaborated.

“Edie, you are single and twenty-eight. You are independent and attractive. You probably rock their belief system a bit. You look really nice today by the way,” Verlaine said taking a step back to look at her before they walked into the school. She wore a white pants suit and had set her hair.

“Thanks and thank you for coming today, it means a lot to Teddy.”

“I’m happy to come. Has anyone ever told you that you look like that woman in *The Godfather*, you know the Sicilian Bride?”

“The one who can’t speak English and gets blown up in the car? Yeah, I’ve gotten that before,” she said, and she had. It seemed that every man within a certain age range had that character etched into his memory. The childbride with her hair braided into elaborate ropes on her wedding day and slipping out of her nightgown on her wedding night. A lamb to the slaughter. She sighed as Verlaine opened the door to the school.

“It’s going to be fine,” he said.

The classroom was filled with parents and the children were all running around getting them doughnuts and muffins. Teddy led Verlaine around by the hand, showing him his different artwork on the wall and the desk where he sat.

Eddie spotted Carson across the room with a gaggle of the other mothers. They all wore ballet flats, the ones with the gold medallions on the toe, just to signify their cost and their designer. Eddie thought the medallions ruined the lines of the shoe that made them dainty. Carson made eye contact with Eddie and smirked. Eddie smiled a brilliant smile back at Carson, but let her eyes dance a bit, let them glitter with a bit of madness. *Don’t sleep too soundly. Don’t mess with my boy. I gotta long memory and nothing but time.* Carson appeared a bit shocked to receive such a look, but righted her expression after a beat and turned back to the other mothers clustered around her. Eddie knew the message had been received.

“Mommy, here is your muffin,” Teddy said, handing her a plate.

“Thanks, Sweetie,” she said, taking her plate and kissing his cheek and again he was off introducing Verlaine to more of his friends.

Eddie studied the room. The fathers all looked like Tim Russert, but without the light of intelligence behind the eyes. They were all fat faced and bloated, wearing suits with Gucci loafers. They all had their mother’s maiden name as their Christian name. When she’d first noticed the homogeneity of the fathers at the beginning of the year, she was perplexed that these skinny well-kept women would be interested in these soft bodied men. Then she realized it was more about their bank accounts. James would have stood out in this room. Handsome, rail skinny, didn’t own a suit.

Carson’s husband, Franklin, was across the room. He was bloated like the others. He threw his plate in the trash and looked bored sipping his coffee. He saw her looking and smiled at her, the sort of smile that came with a wink across a crowded bar. She smiled and waved. She looked away and over to where Verlaine was entertaining Teddy and a group of boys, teaching them an elaborate handshake.

Carson walked over to Franklin and touched his arm and then pulled his hand out of his pants pocket in order to hold it. He jerked it away with a look of slight disgust and walked over to a bulletin board decorated with hand-drawn pictures of manatees. Carson stood watching him at the bulletin board, her brows knitted. She turned her head and saw Eddie watching. Eddie looked down at her plate.

The children gathered at the front of the class to sing a song about loving their mom and dad. It had choreography. Teddy kept giving her and Verlaine a thumbs up and falling behind in the motions.

As they were leaving, Verlaine went to find the bathroom, and Edie stood alone in the hall. Carson strode down the hall and stopped and leaned in to whisper to Edie.

“Yep, it’s Tuesday all day long. In case you need reminding. Nice suit,” Carson said with a smile and walked on by.

This perplexed Edie until she got home and realized that in her nervousness while she was dressing, she hadn’t changed her panties to the nude ones to wear under the white pants. She had worn the ones that had the day of the week written across the rear.

Verlaine was playing with Teddy after work. He had told Teddy that he was the strongest man in the world and was lifting pieces of furniture to prove it. Teddy shrieked with laughter. Edie loved watching Verlaine with Teddy. She was often too sad or tired to chase Teddy or make him collapse in laughter as Verlaine did regularly with energy and ease. Verlaine was the only other witness to her little boy’s life and for that Edie was grateful. She began to wonder if this is what it felt like to have a family, what it felt like to have both a friendship and partnership with a man, a good man who didn’t make her blush with anticipation but worked hard, loved them both, and was able to show it.

Teddy was now sitting *indian style*, or *criss cross apple sauce* as Verlaine called it, on the floor and trying to shuffle a deck of cards as Verlaine bent his fingers trying to

show him how. Verlaine looked up and caught Edie staring and smiled. Edie darted her glance away and went to the kitchen to start dinner.

The gala for the Auden School Annual Fund was at a ballroom on Saturday night. Edie had purchased a ticket at a PTA meeting at the beginning of the semester, back when she thought she would be asked to join a committee to help with the silent auction. She had volunteered and signed up, but had never heard back. The ticket, affixed to her refrigerator with a magnet in the shape of Arkansas, had been a constant reminder. She had all but decided that she would not go, but the *Muffins with Mom, Doughnuts with Dad Day* earlier in the week had left her restless and angry. Verlaine had offered to take Teddy to see a movie and get pizza while she went to the gala. Edie had to go alone and was relieved when Verlaine did not ask to come with her. He hated dressing up any more than he had to already.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd bought a dress; she always made them herself, but for this event she'd bought one from the Neiman Marcus website and had it overnighted. It was white with a lace overlay and had a high neck and capped sleeves with a short flouncy skirt. She had bought heels as well, the kind with the red soles. She had her hair done, pulled back in a twist and a braid pinned across her head, almost like a head band. Her nails were done in the nude pink shade called "Mademoiselle" she'd noticed her clientele wearing.

She entered the room with her chin up and gaze down. When she looked up she saw that people were staring. Carson was across the room wearing a skin tight low cut dress in emerald green. They sized each other up like a bull and a matador. She went directly to the cash bar and got a ginger ale as the Tim Russerts stared at her, Franklin Yates among them. No one greeted her, and she planted herself at the end of the bar.

A cover band that played Memphis Soul-stuff from Stax began their set. People danced and drank. After a few songs a woman with an impressive silver coif and Barbara Bush pearls went to the podium, welcomed them, and said something about the annual fund, asking them for more money.

Eddie waited until after the silent auction to make her move. Everyone was drunk by that time. She'd kept a silent tab, and Franklin had drunk five scotches. He was standing alone at the bar. Carson had come over several times, asking him to dance, and he had refused her. Eddie moved down the bar until she was next to him.

"Hi. This is a great time, huh?" Eddie said, and Franklin turned and smiled. He was one of those men that you could tell how they'd looked when they'd been younger. She could tell Franklin had been handsome, without the paunch and softness around his face time had brought about. His shoulders were broad, and she remembered Garnet saying he'd been a ball player.

"It is now," he said, leaning in to deliver the words. Her nose prickled from the smell of peaty wood smoke on his breath. She smiled and held his gaze.

"Do you want to get lost for a few minutes with me?" she asked.

He didn't say a word, but placed his palm on her back and guided her through the crowd.

They did it in the BMW 7 Series. As she was on his lap, thrusting her hips hard out of anger and to make it over faster, she thought about James, how gentle he had been with her and how much she missed his touch and how good he had been to her, especially that last year when they had finally become a family, and she thought of his body broken and just lying there when she had to I.D. him, his beautiful face unrecognizable and his hands, how they were broken and he couldn't play music with broken hands, and she thought about Carson and the birthday party and her mother and her hometown in the mountains where she had been called a bastard and never knowing who her father was and Verlaine who she liked and who Teddy loved and knew she would marry him and how she already felt guilty for what she was doing right here and now and how the anger had to stop and how the heat of Franklin's breath tickled her neck, the sourness of its odor invaded her nostrils as he finally began to moan.

When it was over, she got off of his lap and slid into the driver's seat. He zipped up and got out of the car.

"Just give me a second to freshen up and I'll be right out," Edie told him. He was standing outside smoothing his shirt and straightening his tie.

Her panties were still on one leg, she pulled them off. Folded them neatly to where the “TUESDAY” showed, and slid them into the makeup bag in the console of the car.

Carson was near the entrance to the ball room when they walked back in. They walked ten yards apart. Carson was talking to two of her friends but her eyes followed Franklin as he made his way back to the bar. Then she saw Edie. Edie made her way to Carson and leaned into her to whisper into her ear.

“It’s Tuesday all day long.”

When Edie got home, Teddy was in bed asleep with Verlaine asleep in the trundle. Teddy’s hands still clutched a video game controller. She watched Teddy for several minutes, as she did every night as he slept. When she was pregnant with Teddy she had taken the bus to and from where she worked at the time, a bridal shop called “White Lace and Promises.” Her bus stop was right past the playground at Auden, and after work that fall she’d linger as she walked past, watching the children play on the slides and swings, uniforms grubby from the day, crunching the orange leaves underfoot. As parents came to pick them up, the children would shriek with joy, running to them, small arms outstretched, and together they’d gather the pile of belongings: a back pack, lunchbox, and perhaps a painting of a skeleton or black cat or later, a turkey and pilgrims. She had wished for Teddy to have this, this cozy warm picturesque stability, this magical

childhood. She would linger and watch, memorizing each moment, then hurry to her stop to board the bus.

She removed the controller from Teddy's hand, turned off the television, and went into the living room to the window. She picked up the binoculars, put them in their case and into the drawer of the sideboard, then sat on the couch. The leather of the couch was cold against her thighs. Soon, she thought, it would be spring, everything would be alive again, Memphis would be green and sunny. The days would continue to get longer. They would be fine. Everything would be growing and alive. She felt the shame filling up the pit of her stomach, the guilt making her dizzy, and she decided she would sit very still until she recognized herself.

DEAD LANGUAGE

October 19, 1995

Caroline reached out to hold her baby, a girl, who had just belted out her first cry. The nurses worked to clean the baby off as Caroline waited with her mother, Garnet, by her bedside. Caroline saw the pink body, its limbs flailing every which way, demanding the warmth of her mother back, the warmth she knew just minutes ago. She arrived a week after she was due. The baby cried as they weighed and measured and sponged off her little body. Caroline saw that the girl had a full head of dark curls.

“You shouldn’t hold her, it’ll haunt you,” Mother said to Caroline.

“It’ll haunt me either way. I want to hold her.”

Finally, a nurse placed the baby in her arms. Caroline tried to memorize every movement of the baby, every expression on the new face. The crown of the baby’s head smelled like sweet cream.

August 2013

Caroline’s cell phone began its numbing swan song, an eight count bleeping rhythm, to wake her. She pawed at the screen of the phone on her bedside table without opening her eyes, and was able to turn it off. It was the first day of school at Higbee and Caroline had done little to prepare her lessons for the four Latin classes she was teaching. Last when asked to attend faculty meetings, she’d told the headmistress that she had

shingles when in truth she'd curled herself up in a ball in her bed with the duvet pulled up over her head ignoring the phone calls from her attorney pleading with her to accept the divorce settlement and sign the papers. The divorce had been going on so long that the attorneys had even grown tired of billing, and yesterday she'd relented and signed the papers at her attorney's office. It was over, and now the school year was beginning.

Her duvet was cream-colored with thick brown stripes. As the late summer light streamed through her bedroom window and filtered through the duvet, Caroline had imagined that she was in a cozy chalet with white walls and ceilings with wooden beams. A scene from *Heidi*. She was white-knuckling it, as they said at her meetings, she was trying not to go out and try to score something from a doctor's office. The meetings were chock full of cliches: *one day at a time, keep your side of the street clean, give it to God*, and her least favorite: *it is what it is*. She hated the meetings and listening to the same people whine about their problems which were everyday, first world problems, problems of white privilege. A few weeks ago she'd quit going after listening to a women complain about a backhand shot she'd missed while playing doubles. Being inside her duvet chalet helped her much more than the twelve step meetings.

She got up from her bed, went into the bathroom and showered. After she dried herself off, she stood at the mirror and wiped the steam away with her palm. She combed her hair back with her fingers. It was recently cut into a sensible bob with expensive highlights to cover the few strands of gray. Thankfully her face was not aging, not noticeably at least. She had the features of a doll: big eyes, pert nose, pouty lips. She hurried to shower, primp, and dress. As she fastened a necklace around her neck, She

remembered what her mother had told her on her wedding day eight years ago, while she fastened Carolyn's pearls around her neck. Garnet had said, in the half-joking way of southern women, *if you marry for money, you end up earning every penny*. Caroline had replied that Garnet *had written the book on that subject* and watched the twitch of pain smack her mother's face, and she felt a twinge of both satisfaction and hurt.

She hadn't married Andrew for money, but because it had been a solid practical decision after making so many that had been displeasing to her mother; yet it seemed that some of the bad decisions made Caroline much happier than the marriage had. Although she fully expected, clean and sober on that bright June day at Idlewild Presbyterian Church, to someday have the feeling with the doctor that she'd had with Davis.

A few years later she accepted that it is useless to try to recreate something. She imagined it must be like participating in a Civil War reenactment, being willing, excited at first, then ending up itchy from the wool costume, playing dead in the dirt. Ending up embarrassed and wanting out of the situation.

She arrived two hours early that first morning and halfheartedly stapled some laminated photos of the marble busts of Ovid and Virgil to the bulletin board in her classroom, then added some pictures of Roman Art she'd found in a *National Geographic*. She liked to keep things serious and academic, she didn't like to patronize her students with bulletin boards that said things like "Latin is FUN!" or Taylor Swift song lyrics translated into Latin.

She liked her students, but she felt that education had taken a turn to where educators were supposed to tap dance for their students and make everything enjoyable, when the most valuable lesson or acceptance that they could gain at their age is that life isn't always fun. Life doesn't give a shit whether you are having fun or not.

She kept her students at arm's length, though she was kind, and tirelessly tutored them when called upon, but expected them to work and hated excuses.

She was debating over what to place on the second bulletin board when a student came into the room and sat down in a desk in the back. Caroline checked her watch and there was still over an hour before classes started.

"I'm sorry, I know I'm early," the girl said. "I transferred here so I'm new and got here early because I wanted to find my way around...this is my first period class." She was slender and her hair was a cascade of dark corkscrew curls that framed the olive complexion of her face. She seemed earnest and familiar to Caroline.

"Uh-huh," said Caroline. "You look familiar. Where did you transfer in from?"

"Saint Monica's."

"What's your name?"

"Marisol. Marisol Shay."

"I'm Caroline Pigeon. Well, since you're here, come help me with this bulletin board. My hand is tired from the stapling."

The girl rose from the desk, left her book bag and purse in the chair, and walked to the bulletin board. Caroline handed her the stapler and a folder filled with laminated papers.

“Just staple what’s in the folder up on the bulletin board. It’s just vocabulary lists and verb conjugations. It won’t take long. No real design work involved.”

“Okay.”

“By the way, the first part of first period is in the auditorium for the benediction and headmistress’s welcome speech. I just wanted you to know that. Do you know where the auditorium is?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good.”

Caroline placed her potted plants on her desk, succulents that she had just purchased. The plants from last year had died from her lack of watering while she was in her chalet. The girl centered and straightened the papers into neat columns on the bulletin board and stapled them there. Caroline watched her work without realizing she was staring.

“All done!” Marisol turned and smiled.

Something about her smile and the shape of her eyes made a synapse fire in Caroline’s brain and her pulse quickened. She could feel the beat of it where her throat met her jaw. She’d seen that smile before.

“It looks great...wonderful, thank you,” Caroline managed to say.

She had tried to learn everything she could about Marisol to confirm her belief, which was more than a belief: she just knew.

After Labor Day weekend she brought a wall calendar into the classroom and asked the girls to write their birthdays on it. She watched the calendar go around the room from desk to desk: Catherine Ann Garner with her bone straight flat ironed hair and tendency to wear too much eye make up; Sicily Magden who was exceptionally bright and socially hopeless; Elise Donovan with a trust fund of cotton money and a penchant to cut tiny gashes on her forearms; Taylor Morgan who was worshipped by the other girls because she was beautiful, smart, and kind: a trifecta seldom obtained by teenage girls; and Shoshanna Epstein who wore Doc Marten Boots and looked like she might carve her initials in the desk at anytime with a hunting knife, whose eye rolls at the other girls Caroline sometimes appreciated. Those were the girls Caroline found the most interesting, the ones she'd gotten to know best so far. Then, of course, there was Marisol.

“Why?” Shoshanna asked, interrupting Caroline’s thoughts.

“Why what?”

“Why do we have to write our birthdays on this calendar?” Shoshanna asked the question slowly as if she were speaking to a five-year-old.

“So we can sing happy birthday in Latin,” Caroline said, and Shoshanna rolled her eyes. “And I might have birthday treats as well.” There were oooh’s and ahhhh’s from the class at this revelation, but Caroline instantly regretted it, realizing the trouble of remembering to buy cupcakes or candy for each birthday. Yet she had to know Marisol’s

birthdate, and she didn't have the security access in the system to get any information other than contact information. She watched the calendar circulate through the class, desk to desk, and tried to continue teaching the lesson. She was still at the board when the bell rang, explaining a certain irregular verb tense. The girls collected their books, tossing them in their backpacks, and looking to Caroline for the homework assignment.

“You've all done so well this week. It's Friday, so no homework.”

The girls squealed and filed out of the room as Caroline erased the board. As soon as the last student left the room, Caroline shut the classroom door and ran to the calendar where it sat at the corner of her desk.

She flipped to October and looked at the nineteenth. Marisol had signed her name there.

Right before fall break she went to the guidance office, a room with several tables, and walls decorated with college pennants collected over the years from the admissions officers who visited the school. She made a left and stood in the doorway of the junior guidance counselor, Parson Richards, who had been her friend and neighbor growing up.

Parson sat at his desk with his head in his hands. A half eaten doughnut rested on a paper plate next to his mouse pad. On his desk was a framed photo of his son, Dashiell. The floorspace of the office was crowded with filing cabinets, and net sacks containing soccer balls. Parson was also the soccer coach.

“Hey, Parson.”

Parson looked up but took his time about it.

“Is this an okay time?”

“Yes, it’s fine.” He tried unconvincingly to smile.

“I need to get a few class schedules from you. Some of my Latin III students...just want to see what their course loads are like.”

“Are they struggling?”

“No, not yet. I’m just keeping tabs to see that they don’t.”

“Because if they are struggling, we need to intervene early--”

“They aren’t, Parson. Jesus. I’ll let you know if they are.”

He pressed his finger tips on his eyelids, “What are their names?”

She gave the names of four students, including Marisol, and he typed and the printer whirred to life, spitting out the schedules.

“How’s Aubrey doing?”

Parson looked at the floor. “Aubrey and I got divorced about six months ago.”

“No. Oh no, I’m so, so sorry.” And she was sorry for him, but thought he’d probably be better off without Aubrey, who was completely hateful to most everyone for no real reason. Caroline had a vivid memory when, in high school, Aubrey called Bernice Watson “Side Berns” for reasons all too obvious and cruel to everyone. Bernice kept that nickname for four years. People didn’t change that much.

“Yeah, thanks. We’d been separated for a while. She moved out right after I came to work here, when I quit at the law firm.”

Caroline nodded and vaguely remembered his former incarnation as a junior partner at a firm downtown. He was often on the news and in the paper because of the high-profile cases that he handled. She began to apologize again and say goodbye but Parson interrupted.

“I think it was the money. I’ve never said that to anyone. My parents said it, my friends said it, but I would never hear of it. But I know, it was the money. She missed the big money. I just wanted more time with Dashiell, I was never at home with that job.”

He looked up at her. His eyes were teal, the same color as the waters depicted on her Greek Isles calendar in her classroom, and were the same as when he was eight years old. Even her mother had adored Parson, saying he reminded her of Paul Newman. She remembered how good friends they once were. So close. She preferred his company to that of the girls on the street then puberty had come along and made things impossible for their friendship. Strange feelings crept between them. And yet she remembered that one summer. He had returned from his second year at Tulane and she’d just graduated from high school. Their houses had adjoining yards separated only by a small path and gate that had never been locked. They had pretended it was coincidence that they both came out in the back yard at the same time each summer evening. Parson lingered a bit in his back yard where Caroline could see him. When she came outside he went into his pool house and Caroline followed. Wordlessly they would meet there each night that summer.

The pool house was a furnished studio apartment with a double bed and had been decorated in a beach theme by Parson’s mother. They undressed in the dark, the only light

a wash of moonlight from the sky light, and slid under the covers of the bed, which had a pattern of nautical flags. They hushed each other's moans with kisses. He looked at her the whole time, watched her below him, cradling her face with one hand. She couldn't hold eye contact with him, her eyes darted quickly away to the painting of a mermaid on the wall by the bed or the wooden anchor that sat upon the dressing table. Afterwards, in the safety of her own bedroom, she thought of his eyes, how they searched her face as if they were trying to memorize it, and only then did she think that their get togethers could mean something to him, something more than a curious and sticky summer affair.

Then the summer ended and their meetings stopped. Classes resumed and whenever they saw each other, which was only when they were home for a holiday, they acted as if nothing happened. They had run into each other many times over the years at family engagements, at the club, at weddings and parties and they were always friendly to one another. When Parson took a job at Higbee, there was no tension between them, there hadn't been for years, if ever. She had considered this and thought of all the other things, other happenings, in her life that had been placed in deep six never to be spoken of again. It was something she had learned to do as a child, to shatter each emotion, each disappointment, each sorrow, each loss, and grind each of them to shards and then swallow them. Her mother was an expert teacher and example; Caroline had been hesitant to learn, but had become an apt pupil.

Parson pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“I hear you. It’s not your fault. Okay? And things will work out for the best. Divorce is supposed to wreck people. It’s normal, the depression is normal, but you still have Dashiell.”

“Yeah. I do.”

They were silent for a moment, both in contemplation. Then she patted him on the shoulder and walked out with the schedules.

Back in her classroom she looked over Marisol’s schedule and transcripts and saw that Marisol was involved in studio art and that seemed to be her only interest and extracurricular. Caroline looked up her home address on her phone and saw that it was in a modest neighborhood. She told herself that she would not drive by the home, at least not yet.

She told her mother the day before Thanksgiving, after several months of debating if she should keep her mouth shut. She went inside her mother’s house and found her in the kitchen checking on the turkey settled in its brine. Caroline had made a pecan pie for the family dinner. They would gather tomorrow: Caroline, her mother, and Caroline’s brother Trey who would bring his wife and children.

Caroline began to string the green beans on the countertop while Garnet fussed over the turkey and began to break up slices of bread to stale overnight for the stuffing. They worked in silence. It was a silence, not all together comfortable, that they had procured over the years.

“Mother, I need to talk to you,” Caroline said after stringing the last bean.

The sitting room had a busy red and white toile wallpaper and the same pattern adorned the upholstery of the chairs. It was overwhelming. As a teenager, Caroline thought it would be the perfect place to take a hit of LSD.

Her mother looked down her nose at Caroline due to the redness on her face and waited for Caroline to say something.

“Mama, she’s in my class,” Caroline said and tucked a blonde lock behind her ear, feeling as if she were in first grade reciting lines in a play in an auditorium: anxious and uncomfortable.

Her mother lost her poker face, which confirmed to Caroline that she already knew about Marisol. Garnet had probably kept tabs on the girl the whole time out of curiosity or love even; after all she was her granddaughter.

Now, her mother did not even ask who “*she*” was.

“You haven’t said anything to her, have you?” her mother asked.

“She just transferred this year...she looks like Davis and checked her birthday and it matched. I don’t even know if she knows she’s --”

“Well, don’t say anything to her, no good can come of this. Something you can’t have. You have to move past--”

“I want to tell her so many things, I just--”

“If she wants to find you, then she can do it when she is eighteen. I mean, with the Internet, she could probably look it up herself in an afternoon.”

“But what if she doesn’t?”

“Caroline, what do you expect her to do with all this? What do you want to have happen?” Her mother’s brows were knitted and she used the disgusted tone that she often used when she spoke with her daughter, the one that said to Caroline: *you are a common stupid girl, a pretty little fool, a beautiful idiot.*

“I don’t know,” Caroline said, but that wasn’t the truth of it: Caroline wanted to know her, to be able to love her. She wanted her daughter back.

During the holiday break, Caroline was restless, and decided to drive past Marisol’s house. It was December, close to dark by four in the afternoon, and Caroline was able to use the gloaming to her advantage.

The neighborhood was blue-collar: proper mid-century ranch homes on small lots of land, modest cars in the driveways; most of the homes laden with Christmas lights and garland. The trees that grew in the yards along Marisol’s street were bare, and garbage bags filled with leaves lined the roadside for pickup.

When Caroline first saw the house, she double checked the street number. If it wasn’t for the light in the front window, she would’ve assumed that the property was abandoned. There were no bags of leaves on the curb in front of the house; instead, the front yard had a thick floor of leaves, soggy from the recent rains like piles of bran flakes left in a bowl of milk. The house, like the others on the street, was a small rancher, but it was not twinkling with Christmas lights like its neighbors. It had dark gray siding and large windows on the facade. She noticed a large statue of the Virgin Mary in the

flowerbed by the front door. The statue's concrete painted to give Mary dark hair and blue robes. Beside it was an overturned bird bath, its basin now half covered by leaves.

Caroline circled the block and parked in front of Marisol's house, but on the opposite side of the street, and turned off her headlights. Lights were on in the large picture window nearest the front door. Inside, two small boys ran around the room, dodging a bulky recliner and matching sofa. A woman with cropped hair sat in the recliner watching the flashing light of a television, the screen of which was out of Caroline's line of vision. She figured this was Maureen, Marisol's mother. Adoptive mother. There was movement in the back of the room. It was Marisol, setting the table that was set up close to the recliner. She hadn't seen Marisol out of her school uniform before. She wore sweat pants and a sweat shirt that had been modified by cutting the neck out of it so it would hang a bit off of one shoulder. Her hair was in a large bun on top of her head.

Marisol spoke to the boys playing chase in the living room and they ran to the table and took their seats. Marisol approached the recliner and bent down to say something to Maureen. Maureen shook her head "no." Marisol paused a moment, and went to the table where she began to serve the little boys supper. Once she'd spooned the food on their plates the three of them joined hands and bowed their heads to say grace.

Caroline winced at the thought of the word "grace." It was what she had planned to name Marisol. She turned her headlights back on and drove away.

She returned the next night, and every night after that, like a pilgrim in search of a miracle.

The teachers took turns chaperoning events, and this duty was delegated by lottery. Caroline lucked out this year and didn't have to chaperone the junior class trip to an amusement park four hours away as she had last year; however, she was chaperoning the spring formal, which was to be held in the ballroom at the Peabody Hotel downtown, the week before spring break. Caroline was actually excited about it: she would get to see Marisol at her senior formal, and because the chaperones would be at the hotel well after midnight, they each received a comped hotel room out of the deal. She planned to make the best out of it and order a room service breakfast the next morning and watch a pay per view movie before going home.

In the days before the formal, her classes spoke of little else. She watched the girls before the bell rang pantomiming to one another how the neckline of their dress was designed, where a ruffle was placed, or motioning across their upper torso to indicate an empire waisted gown. They were specific when describing what color their dresses were. *Citron. Orchid Blue. Opal. Sea Glass. Lapis. Amber. Saffron. Midnight.*

Marisol was struggling in Latin and Caroline was padding her grade. On tests, she didn't take as many points off for errors, or ignored them entirely. She had allowed Marisol to get extra credit by painting pictures of some scenes from Greek Mythology to hang in her classroom. She gave the rest of her class extra credit opportunities as well, of course; it was just that they really didn't need the extra points: for all her faults and her depressive nature, Caroline was a good teacher who prescribed a light load to her

students. To put it mildly, Marisol seemed to have no natural aptitude for Latin, but how she tried! Every free period, she came to Caroline with questions. Caroline studied her face as she spoke, wishing for her to change the subject and just talk to her about herself.

“Which scenes do you want me to paint?” Marisol had asked Caroline at her desk after class.

“I want you to choose. Do two separate scenes from different myths, or one of the works we read in here. And then when you bring the paintings to me, I want you to tell me about what you chose and why.”

“Thanks for letting me do this. I’m really trying.”

“I know you are. Latin is a hard subject. No worries. Are you all ready for the spring formal?”

Marisol flinched a bit at the question. They had always just discussed Latin, and nothing else.

“Almost,” Marisol said. “I am sewing my own dress and it’s almost done. I’m just going to stop in to see my friends...I’m not going to stay too long.”

“Well, I guess I’ll see you there. I’m a chaperone so I get to stay until the bitter end.”

The ballroom was decorated lavishly in shades of yellow and cream, the tables suited with fine linen, and the center pieces on the tables were tall towers of roses, peonies, ranunculus, and ivy that were both bountiful and extravagant. Back lights projected bright almost neon purple light to the walls and ceilings, making the room look even more expensive, although it reminded Caroline of the UV light emitted from the

beds in a tanning salon. Caroline remembered the formal events when she was a student at Higbee; it had been the same way back then and she had almost longed for the crepe paper and disco ball affairs of the fictional public schools portrayed on television and in movies.

The girls arrived in droves in their colorful dresses, dates in tuxedos, and the dance floor filled up. It was Caroline's job to monitor for spiking of punch (which was usually done by the girl's dates, if at all), couples lurking in dark corners, and unbecoming dances. Otherwise, Caroline's job was to take pictures of the groups of girls with their phones when asked, telling them to smile before she hit the button, but seeing through the view finder that they more often puckered their lips as if they were offering a pouty kiss to the camera.

"Thank you, Miss Pigeon!" They cried in unison.

"You are welcome. You all look stunning," she told them as she handed them back their phones. And they did look stunning. She realized then what she'd known deep down for some time: she loved these girls, her students. Most days they were the only people she spoke with, and they looked at her with such longing for approval, approval she doled out with encouraging words.

"Will you take one of us?" Parson asked one of the girls at the table. He had snuck up behind Caroline.

One of the girls, Annalise Bishop, giggled and took Parson's phone. Caroline felt her cheeks flushing as Parson put his arm around Caroline's shoulder like they were a

couple of kids on the same little league team. Caroline waited until Annalise began to count, then put bunny ears on Parson. The girls at the table giggled again.

“So you got dance chaperone duty too?” she asked and looked at Parson, who wore a tuxedo.

“You look pretty tonight, Caroline.”

She automatically looked down at the gown she was wearing, a long chiffon gown fitted in the waist with a boat neck. It was a light pink. *Blush* or *buff* or *nude* she thought the girls would call it.

“You look like one of your friends from Mount Olympus,” he added.

“You clean up okay yourself,” she said and punched him lightly in the arm. He looked great. The sadness of the fall had been erased from his eyes and the mischievous twinkle had returned. She often saw him from her classroom window leading the soccer team on a run around the school grounds, tapping the girls on the shoulder as he ran past them making them turn and look around. It made them laugh and run harder to catch up to him.

All evening she searched for Marisol, even checking the sign-in list at the front of the ballroom, but she did not come. Oddly, this didn't surprise Caroline, for there was something evasive about the way Marisol had answered when Caroline asked her about the formal. She'd wanted to see the girl and was disappointed, but felt spared as well. It would've been a hollow victory for her to see her child dressed for her senior formal, yet not to be able to take her picture with her date in front of the mantel in the living room.

The Queen of Spring was crowned, and the senior class song, a sentimental ballad about friends staying close, was played. After that, only a few students lingered at the tables. These students were among the school's most studious and they were involved in animated conversations with their dates; Caroline overheard words like "semiotics," "Jung," and "Marxist."

She watched as Parson approached the deejay's table and, after a moment of conferring with him, walked towards Caroline extending his hand. The song was an old song, she remembered from high school: Eddie Vedder wailing about a lost love over grunge chord progressions. The song made her both happy and wistful. She took Parson's hand and he led her to the floor in a mock formal way and embraced her in a proper dance posture.

"Do you remember the ballroom lessons our mothers sent us to at the country club?" he asked.

"Yes. Learning the fox trot to *Don't You Want Me Baby*."

"It was a very sexually charged song for middle school students. Lots of sweaty palms."

"But you were a few years ahead of me. I don't think we were in the same class. So we never danced together." She avoided his gaze, looking instead over his shoulder at the last group of students who were leaving their table.

"But we did once. It was at one of the big dances they had at the club house at the end of the lessons. All the classes were there. I think we danced to a song by *The Cure*...actually I know we did. You wore a black dress."

They danced the rest of the song in silence.

After the last of the equipment was packed up by the vendors, Caroline walked through the area with one of the hotel staff and signed off on the paperwork. She stopped in the lobby and picked up her coat from the coat check, and when she turned she saw Parson, standing by the elevators, staring at her. She looked around. The lobby was empty and quiet except for the tired night staff behind the check-in counter. Even the grand piano was closed and locked for the night, the player long since gone home. She walked over to meet Parson and, wordlessly, followed him into the elevator and up to his room.

When classes resumed after spring break, Marisol brought one of the paintings to Caroline.

“I chose to paint the reunion of Persephone and Demeter...and I’ll get the other one to you soon.”

“It’s fine, take your time.” Caroline looked at the painting: the mother and daughter together again, and spring was slowly sweeping over the frame indicated by bold colors over-taking the dead grays of winter. Trees, flowers, and grasses revived with life by heavy brushstrokes of colorful oil paint, so much paint it added texture to the canvas. Persephone and Demeter met in the middle of the canvas dressed in flowing robes and clasping one another’s hands. At the bottom Marisol had put her initials, “MMS,” and the year. It was very accomplished.

“Now tell me a bit about the story and why you chose it.”

“I liked how the Greeks had come up with an explanation for how the seasons changed and why. And it was one of the oldest myths, and I found that interesting. It was also a really good opportunity to do a bit of a color study with the changing of the seasons occurring in the scene.”

Caroline waited for her to say more, but she didn't. They both looked at the painting.

“It's wonderful. Great job.” Caroline leaned the canvas against the wall of the room where she intended to hang it.

“Thank you.”

“I didn't see you at the formal. Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” Marisol said, and started to say something else, her brows knitted in worry, but stopped as the bell rang.

“Okay, well, I will add your extra credit,” Caroline said, and stood watching Marisol gather her things to get to her next class.

Marisol waved to her as she left the classroom.

Later that evening, Parson was in her bed. They lay facing one another, naked beneath the sheet. She was able to look him in the eye now.

“So I was thinking we could go to the coast, maybe after the graduation?” Parson said. “Just for a few days, and Dashiell could stay with my mother.”

“That sounds nice. You know, Dashiell is always welcome to come around. I know you don’t want to introduce us too soon, but I want you to know that I want to get to know him whenever you feel it’s right.”

The air conditioning jolted to life and she rubbed the chill from the blast of cold air from her shoulders. Parson pulled the duvet from the bottom of the bed and draped it around her.

He sat starrng at her.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No. What is it, Parson?”

“I’m embarrassed to say it.”

“No, tell me.”

“One summer, I did summer school at Tulane my last semester there so I could start law school on time...and I practically lived at the library,” As he said this, her hands tightened into fists.

“I always studied on the top floor, away from everyone,” he said, “and one day I was leaving and I saw you at one of the tables with a stack of books. You were reading. I started to walk over to you, but you stood up and I saw that you were...well, you were pregnant. Very pregnant.”

Caroline wrapped herself in the duvet to cover herself and stood up from the bed and gathered her clothes from the floor. She walked across her bedroom and into the master bath and began to dress.

Parson continued, louder, "I didn't know what to say or do. So I just stood out of sight. But I saw you everyday up there until I was done with the term."

Caroline returned to the bedroom and gathered Parsons clothes from the floor and placed them beside him on the bed.

"It wasn't me." She paused. "Get your clothes on."

"No, Caroline. I know it was you. I saw you every day. What happened? Tell me what happened."

"You must be mistaken. You need to leave." Her face was hot and her body felt cold. She was in shock, for she reminded herself every few seconds that *yes, this is really happening...Parson saw you...he knows.*

"I don't want to leave. Look, if you don't want to talk about it, we don't have to right now. I never said anything to anyone--"

"I need for you to leave." She pointed to the door. He stared at her and pointed to her face.

"Your lip...it's bleeding."

She put her hand to her face and then looked at her fingertips--stained with blood where she had been biting her lip.

"Parson. I'm going into the bathroom. When I come back out, I want you out of here."

She went into the bathroom and locked the door. When she heard him stir and begin to put his clothes on, she undressed and got into the shower and let the sound of the water block out everything else.

When the hot water ran out and the spray became icy needles on her back, at last she turned the water off, dried off and stepped back into her empty bedroom.

It was May. Caroline woke at four in the morning as she had for the past two weeks. She thought of it as her witching hour. As she came to an abrupt sense of consciousness she grew hot and began to sweat. Still she stayed in bed and wondered if this was the day that the earthquake, long overdue, would hit Memphis. She thought about this often, visualized the plates shifting deep under the green lawns of Central Gardens, deep underneath her new sprinkler system, where the New Madrid Fault Line ran. She imagined the city streets buckling and bending, hills being created where the earth had long been flat, lakes forming as the Mississippi ran over its banks to fill in the valleys and hollows created by the shifting. There would be fires; she pictured it that way: the earth opening in a great fissure where fire and lava could be seen through the huge crack in the ground. She saw all the people of Memphis trying, in vain, not to fall into the pit: the socialites and the session players, the homeless panhandlers and the pious gospel soul singers, the bond daddies and the hotel workers, all clawing away from the gaping crack of the earth. Or perhaps they would all sink into the Mississippi, disappearing in the wake of the choppy water as Davis had what seemed like a lifetime ago: disappearing into the water only to resurface near the Beale Street landing as a piece of local mythology, an Orpheus surrendering to the waters of the muddy River Styx.

Today was the last day of school at Higbee School for Girls. It was her last chance to speak with Marisol before she graduated.

By eight, Caroline was in her classroom correlating and stapling copies of the final exam for Latin III to hand to students when the bell rang at 8:30. In her rush, she had forgotten to program the copier to make the neat stapled stacks.

Higbee School for Girls prided itself on carrying on the tradition of teaching the dead language. Caroline was just happy she could make use of her Classics Degree. The school was known for placing its “girls” in prestigious colleges, but, as was traditional in Memphis, most of the alumni would end up coming home with a degree from NYU, Tulane, or UVA, getting married, and becoming homemakers, real estate agents, or, like Caroline, a teacher at a private school. It was her last day with the girls. They would graduate next week. She glanced at the end of her desk where she’d placed the wrapped book, a gift for Marisol. She silently rehearsed what she would say when she handed it to her after class, and saw the stapler trembling in her hands.

Later, as her students conjugated the verbs on the exam, Caroline watched them, seventeen- and eighteen- year- olds with line-less foreheads, and wondered if they knew that the best time of their lives might be about to pass, or possibly had already passed-- the rest of their lives just falling action and denouement, or even tragedy. They occasionally looked up from their work: *amitto, amittere, amisi, amissus*. They smoothed their palms on their plaid skirts to dry them and began on another verb.

Caroline watched Marisol, who sat hunched over her exam. Marisol crossed her legs at the knee and brushed a rogue curl back from her forehead as she wrote in her exam book.

Then it happened--Marisol looked over at Shoshanna Epstein's paper. Only her eyes moved, but they landed on Shoshanna's and stared for a full ten-seconds, before Marisol began to write furiously on her own paper. Caroline watched as Marisol looked again at the Shoshanna's work, a bit more bold this time, leaning over slightly. Then she glanced up at Caroline at the front of the room. Their eyes met just as Shoshanna scooted her chair back from her desk and clomped up to the front of the room to Caroline.

"Marisol is copying me. She's cheating," Shoshanna said.

The whole class had stilled their pencils to watch.

"Let's step outside the room, Shoshanna," Caroline said. "There's an exam going on."

"I'm so sick of this crap," Shoshanna yelled to the class who were now her captive audience. "I'm so fucking glad to be getting out of here. I call bullshit on this whole process." The girls began to whisper and giggle.

"That's enough. Out in the hall," Caroline said, her mind racing, trying to stay two steps ahead of where the crisis was going as they entered the hallway.

"She was copying me," Shoshanna said. "She has been doing it all semester. Every test. I try to sit where she can't see my work, but she does anyway. You saw her, I saw you looking back there."

“I didn’t see her cheating, Shoshanna, I’m sure this is a mistake, just a misunderstanding. I--”

“No, you saw her. I *saw* you.”

“Let’s get back inside and finish up the exam, and I’ll speak to Marisol after class.”

“This is a reeeeeeally big deal, Ms. Pigeon. It breaks the Honor Code. I have worked my ass off in this class--it’s pointless, boring shit by the way-- and you’re going to let her get away with it.”

“Watch your language, Shoshanna. I said will speak with her after class.”

“It’s just because she’s pretty. That’s all that matters at this stupid place. I see you staring at her. Everyday you stare at her when you think no one’s looking. Everyone notices. It’s creepy. It’s really sad. I feel bad for you.”

“That’s enough. Get back inside and finish your exam.”

Shoshanna returned to her seat and began working again, and Caroline sat at her desk at the front of the room. She straightened her pencil skirt and smoothed the front of her blouse and began to rearrange papers on her desk as her mind raced. The sting of Shoshanna’s words still registered on her flushed cheeks. They all saw her stares at Marisol and assumed she was a pervert. The Epstein’s, Shoshanna’s parents, had made a huge donation to the school several years ago; hence the Epstein Arts Center building that was across the quad. Huge donors (and their offspring) got whatever they wanted. If Caroline didn’t handle the situation, side with Shoshanna, all hell would break loose and she would probably lose her job. It had happened last year when the other Epstein sister

accused the field hockey coach, the kind old Thomas Brimley, of being verbally abusive at a practice. Mr. Brimley was gone by the end of the week. He tried to be cheerful as he loaded his station wagon with banker's boxes filled with his personal effects from his small office in the field house, but his sadness was apparent.

The bell rang and she collected the exams. There were whispers in the classroom and looks back at Marisol, who was looking at the floor, and at Shoshanna, who was glaring back at the other girls. The girls shuffled out of the classroom a little slower than usual, hoping to see another act of the dramatic play.

"Marisol, may I see you for a minute?" Caroline asked.

"I want to stay for this. I want to hear what you say to her. I worked hard on--"

"Shoshanna," Caroline said. "Please go on. I need to address this with Marisol alone."

"Oh, I bet you do," Shoshanna said as she stomped from the room.

Marisol stayed at her desk. Caroline sat down at the desk beside her. She could hear Marisol sniffing though she couldn't see her face.

"Marisol, did you cheat on the test?"

"Please don't turn me in. Please don't, I won't graduate. I'm already set up to go to college next year...an art school...a good art school in New York...I have a full ride. Please," Marisol said, her voice breaking with sobs.

Caroline retrieved the box of tissue from her desk and handed several to Marisol, who kept her head bowed as she dabbed at her eyes.

“First of all, Marisol, calm down. Stop crying or you’re going to look guilty.”

Caroline spoke in a hushed voice, glad that this next class period was her planning period, time she usually used to chain smoke cigarettes in her car. The sobs slowed down. Caroline patted Marisol’s back.

“Listen, you’ve got to tell me that you didn’t cheat. Then you have to tell anyone and everyone who asks you that you didn’t cheat. You hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Say it, tell me you didn’t cheat.”

Marisol looked up, her eyes still red, but she was no longer crying.

“I didn’t cheat.”

“Good girl.”

Marisol reached out and embraced Caroline. *Thank you, Ms. Pigeon*, she said over and over, but Caroline didn’t hear it as her face was enveloped in Marisol’s dark curls and the scent of the crown of her head.

After school was dismissed, Caroline stood at the window of her classroom and watched the students disperse down the sidewalk to the parking lot to their cars, or get into other cars, usually the cars of their boyfriends from the brother school down the street. Many of the girls were posing for photos with friends, rolling the waste bands of their plaid skirts up to feature their legs in the picture.

She spotted Marisol. She was walking with a cluster of friends, holding the wrapped gift Caroline had given her earlier. Even though the internet made people easy to locate, she'd written all of her contact information with her inscription. The book was *The Aeneid*. Caroline had always preferred the stories of the Greeks, but this was written by the Romans. The inscription was simple: *wishing Marisol success and giving her best regards*.

She watched Marisol gather with her friends for the picture, the girls slinging their bags into a pile on the ground. Marisol had her purse on her arm and carried the gift at the bottom of a stack of old notebooks from her emptied locker. She placed the purse on the pile of bags on the ground and looked down at the stack of notebooks, then gathered them again and tossed them into the trashcan at the side of the sidewalk, and then she stepped into the frame of the photo and smiled with the others.

Caroline didn't feel like going home. Didn't feel like going into the large cold house that was starting to feel like a fortress. Instead, she drove past Marisol's house. The yard was neatly mowed. The rose bushes bloomed with the statue of the Virgin Mary among them, and the bird bath was standing. The woman with shorn hair, Maureen, was potting flowers into planters by the front door.

Caroline drove on past and promised herself she would not drive by again.

The headmistress had sent her an email late in the afternoon, asking to meet with her the following morning about the incident. She knew Marisol would not be punished;

she would hold to the story. But in all likelihood Caroline would be let go, and she felt that was just. After all, Shoshanna was right.

She drove to the river and sat at the banks, breathing in the brackish air, watching the barges float downstream towards New Orleans. It was days like these when she was tempted to use again, when her nose tingled for a mirror and a pile of white powder. She yearned for the way her nose burned when she snorted it and pinched the nostril shut so the membranes would absorb every particle, making her happy, making her brain work faster, making her cheerful, making her rail thin, and making her forget. It was how she'd spent years of her life, disappointing her parents but in a state of euphoric bliss. Not remembering and trying to forget.

When the sun set, she drove to her mother's and pulled into the circular driveway outside the large house and took the keys out of the ignition. Across the street she saw people on the lawn of the Memphis Country Club and heard their laughter occasionally as it floated across the greens of the golf course, music playing in the distance.

Caroline sat in the driver's seat, unsure of her next move. The crickets began their symphony and after a while she dozed off. She awoke as her mother quietly opened the car door and began to stroke Caroline's blonde hair, then brought her inside the house.

CRISSCROSS APPLE SAUCE

Pilar's new life confused her in many ways. Just graduated from Ole Miss, she stayed in Oxford, Mississippi, rather than returning to Memphis, her hometown. She thought often of the tarantula in the classroom at the elementary school where she was a teacher's aide. The tarantula's habitat had an index card taped to the side of it labeled in magic marker, "Ariel Tarantula Do Not Tap On Glass." One day she saw what looked to be Ariel's skin peeling off her body, exposing bright pink flesh beneath it that was covered with a sprinkling of downy black fuzz. She wasn't moving. She had been losing her coarse fuzz for the past few days, and a dusting of hair covered the ground of the habitat. Pilar asked the lead teacher Ms. Hawke, in a hushed voice so as not to alarm their five-year-old students, if Ariel was dying. The students stood around the habitat and tapped on the glass, urging Ariel to move or eat a cricket.

"Naw, she's molting," Ms. Hawke answered with a reassuring smile and waved Pilar's question away with her hand. Everything she did was reassuring. Ms. Hawke was like the white haired and rosy cheeked grandmother from commercials for greeting cards or hard candies. Pilar knew deep down that she was going to stay here in this classroom as Ms. Hawke's assistant until she retired, whenever that might be. The medicine the doctor had prescribed Pilar for depression and anxiety paled in comparison to being around Ms. Hawke. When she mentioned this to the doctor he had considered it for a

moment and nodded. He wrote another prescription, tore it off his pad, and handed it to her. It had said, *Surround Yourself With Positive People*.

“Molting?” Pilar asked.

“Every few years they shed all their shell, their exoskeleton, it’s called,” Ms. Hawke told her.

“So all of her is going to peel off?” Rachel asked.

“All of it,” Ms. Hawke said.

Pilar googled “tarantula molting” on her computer that night and watched a four minute time lapse video of the long process. The subject in question was a Chilean Rose Tarantula named Esther. Her back came off first, and eventually she flipped to her back while her legs were shed like a woman laying on a bed taking off her pantyhose. Pilar was somewhat nauseated after the video, but she was even more fascinated.

In the evenings, Pilar gave tennis lessons at the Country Club for extra money and the use of the facilities. She had played tennis at Ole Miss and knew the tennis pro at the club, whose name was Thomas. He had got her the gig. Thomas was way past his prime, tennis-wise, and pretty much in every other way she thought. To her, he was ancient at forty-five. It was late February and tonight Oxford was expecting a bit of snow. Any snow in Oxford rendered the town paralyzed. They each had been stood up by their tennis students, so they played each other on the indoor court before heading home. Rather than drinking water from the cooler at the side of the court, Thomas drank a pitcher of bloody

mary's from the clubhouse straight from the pitcher, somehow managing not to get the tomato juice on his tennis whites. He did, however, have a bright red mustache.

“Good shot,” Thomas yelled after he missed a drop shot she had sent his way. He was nearly drunk and not fast enough to make it to the ball. She had been using the same shot in their volleys to run the score up so she could leave sooner. She turned and walked back to the fault line, pulled a ball out of the pockets of her bloomers, and bounced it on the court. When she looked up, Thomas was sitting in the center of the court, crisscross applesauce as the kids in her class called it, gazing down into the pitcher that sat in the diamond of space between his folded legs.

Pilar sighed, dreading the next hour where she would become his listening ear.

“What’s wrong, Thomas? Get up, let’s finish the game,” she said this as she willed him to get up, and paused, waiting for this to happen. When she saw that he wasn’t going to budge and heard a snuffle, she went to his side and sat down on the court.

“What is it?” She already knew.

“I just miss Jaycee so much. I’m so stupid, stupid, stupid,” he said as he hit his forehead with the butt of his hand.

Pilar agreed with him. He was stupid. Jaycee, his wife had left him, for his infidelities and even after she left he continued to see other women while trying to woo Jaycee back. Most recently, he had been carrying on with Stephanie, an undergrad who sold Thomas pot.

“Wait, don’t tell me. You saw her. Did you go see her last week for Valentine’s Day?”

“Yes. I went to see her and little Thomas. Brought flowers and candy. Asked to come back. She said she’s filing for divorce,” he said. His tears were rivers on his face and his face was prematurely lined and tanned like leather from years on outdoor courts. His hair was a straw-colored blond. He looked like a cross between John Denver and the Croc Hunter guy.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Pilar said, and yet she wasn’t, not really. Thomas was her friend, but she couldn’t imagine anyone having to be his wife.

“I had to get a lawyer today. I’m going to die alone. All alone. I’ll probably choke on a TV dinner and Chuck Woolery will eat me rather than starving. He’ll do it to save himself.”

Chuck Woolery was, of course, his dog, a small terrier Thomas had taught to catch Frisbees and perform acrobatics. He used Chuck Woolery to lure in college girls. Chuck Woolery was a “chick magnet” and a “love connection,” according to Thomas.

“Well, y’all have been separated for a few years now. It’s probably time,” Pilar said, looking up to the ceiling of the indoor court, wishing she was at home on her couch watching a reality show, wishing she was anywhere but here.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “You have Sully. I wish I had something as strong as you guys have.”

Her body tensed at the mention of Sully. He had been calling her phone relentlessly in the past week, as had her mother calling on his behalf. She hadn’t answered. She never wanted to hurt Sully but it would be crueler of her to stick around.

“Actually, Sully and I broke up. On Valentine’s Day,” she said.

“Why?”

“He proposed to me and I didn’t want that,” she replied almost matter of factly.

“But y’all were together since high school, how could you not want that?”

She saw the remote spark of possibility in his eye, and the alcohol erased any type of poker face he might normally have.

“You know,” he said, “I’ve always felt something for you...” he followed the statement with patting her leg and letting his hand linger. She removed his hand and rolled her eyes. He looked disappointed only for a moment, then sighed as if to say, ‘Worth a try.’

“Well, what do you want?” he asked.

“Just to be who I’ve always been, to learn how to do that.”

“I have no idea what you just said,” Thomas said, then gulped from the pitcher, now near empty, and she watched as a trail of the red liquid dribbled down to the tip of his chin and a fat droplet splattered on the stomach of his tennis whites.

The next day, school was cancelled. The woods and pond on the land where Pilar rented a shotgun cabin were covered in a blanket of snow. She had made coffee and a fire, let her dog out, and attempted to watch a movie, anything to avoid looking at her phone, where a barrage of texts and voicemails awaited her. Sullivan had stopped calling and texting, but her mother had remained compulsive. It was her mother who scared her.

She started up her Jeep, letting the engine heat thaw the snow from the windshield, and used a broom to sweep the snow from the roof. The Jeep had been such a status symbol as an undergrad and now, in the real world, it was a pain in the ass. The gas cost her an arm and a leg and there was no air conditioning, but today she appreciated its use and shifted into four wheel drive.

She drove the four miles to the Square in the center of town, and there she saw the children from the neighborhoods nearby having a snowball fight on the lawn of the courthouse, and that many of the stores were open despite the weather. She told herself that she was going out to get some lunch and then go to check in on Thomas, and yet, as if by reflex, she made a right on Van Buren and pulled into a parking space in front of *Namaste*. The yoga studio's lights were on, as were the second floor lights of the apartment where the owner, Faulkner, lived. There was such a frost on the front window that she couldn't tell whether the ten o'clock class was meeting. Another reflex seized her and she found herself walking to the door of the studio and turning the doorknob.

It was locked.

Careful not to slip on the icy sidewalk, she turned and began to shuffle back to the Jeep.

Behind her, the bells that hung on the door chimed, and someone said her name, and she turned to see Faulkner in the doorway of the studio.

"Pilar," she heard along with the chiming of the bells that hung on the front door of *Namaste*. She turned to see Faulkner in the doorway of the studio.

In addition to the classes she taught at *Namaste*, Faulkner also taught yoga classes for students at the school where Pilar worked. Pilar had been assigned to facilitate the lessons, making sure the children behaved and paid attention. They all had. Faulker had them doing “super hero” stances and folding their bodies into poses like “pretzels,” their little brows knitted in concentration to please this willowy teacher that they worshipped. Before long, Faulkner had insisted Pilar join in. She did, and though they agreed to trade yoga lessons for tennis lessons, neither one had yet to take the other up on this, until now.

“Hey there,” Pilar said. “I didn’t know if yoga was happening today. I got the day off and thought I’d see if I could get a class in.” She felt embarrassed as she said it, realizing how ridiculous it sounded, and yet the embarrassment was eclipsed by the relief of seeing Faulkner there, standing in the doorway in woolen socks, yoga pants, and a fisherman’s sweater. Her small hands cupped a mug of tea.

“Come in, come in, get out of the cold,” Faulker said, waving Pilar into the studio.

Pilar took her boots off in the small lobby. On the walls were framed photos on of Faulkner when she’d been a ballet dancer in New York: Faulkner in pointe shoes in various impossible poses, her hair pulled tightly into a bun; young Faulkner wearing elaborate stage makeup complete with false eyelashes; beautiful Faulkner in elegant costumes. Faulkner had spent her late teens and most of her twenties in New York as a dancer, but her knees had began to go, and so a year ago, when she was twenty-seven, she retired and became a yoga teacher.

Pilar’s phone began to vibrate and she saw “mama” pop up on the screen. She turned it off.

“Let’s go ahead and do a class,” Faulkner said.

“Oh no, I don’t want to trouble you, there’s no one else here.”

“Please stay,” Faulkner said, “I’ve been waiting so long for you to come by.”

Pilar began to blush as she went to retrieve a yoga mat.

By Monday, after the snow had, for the most part, melted, and school opened again. For the next three days, Ariel molted. Pilar kept vigil during school hours by standing in the area of the classroom by the blocks where the habitat was, watching Ariel’s body slowly remove itself. It was both disgusting and exhilarating, and yet she could not look away. Ariel’s transformation only held the attention of the four-year-olds for a moment or two, before they ran on to the blocks or to the dramatic play area to play house. On the morning of the fourth day of her molting, a shell of a tarantula was in the habitat with her, giving the appearance of two of spiders in the habitat. The only indication that the shed exoskeleton was not another tarantula was that the abdomen area looked like a cross section of a nautilus shell, many cavities now empty, dried up, looking as if they would crunch underfoot. Ariel’s fuzz was already growing in over her bright pink skin. However, she still wasn’t moving.

“Is she okay? She hasn’t moved all day,” Pilar asked Ms. Hawke at the end of the day.

“She’s fine. Just exhausted from getting all that off of her. She’ll perk up in a while,” Ms. Hawke said.

“We need to get that shell out of there somehow. It’s confusing her,” Pilar said, still peering into the glass at the furry shell.

“She’ll recognize herself, let her be,” Ms. Hawke said, and looked with concern at Pilar.

Thomas watched Pilar as she practiced her serve. He sat courtside with Chuck Woolery, even though Chuck Woolery wasn’t allowed inside the club, talking to her, and she listened to every fourth thing he said. She was focused on the ball. Pilar’s arm was like a whip, hitting the ball so fast it was a yellow blur and delivering it just inside the fault line of the court.

“So at least it won’t get messy,” he said. “I’ll get to see little Thomas a lot. She’ll keep the house. We’ll sell the jet skis and the fishing boat.” He seemed to be more cheerful this week. The weather was warm and daffodils had sprung up almost overnight. She had been going to yoga at *Namaste* every day, always to Faulkner’s class. The children at school drew rabbits and Easter eggs. Her mother’s calls became less frequent after Pilar had texted her a plea for “privacy and space during this difficult time.” It was the same thing celebrities told the press when they went through a divorce, but it was exactly the way she felt.

“That’s great, Thomas. Now you can move on,” she said, pausing to wipe the sweat from her brow and palms with a hand towel.

Chuck Woolery looked to the door of the court and barked. Pilar turned to see Faulkner walk inside dressed in tennis gear.

“Ok, I’m ready for my lesson,” she said and smiled.

“Finally, you’re here,” Pilar said.

Thomas gathered the stray balls from the court while Pilar and Faulkner began a slow and soft volley. Faulkner frequently upset the volley by missing the ball, but her graceful movements reminded Pilar that Faulkner was a dancer. She makes every shot pretty, Pilar thought.

The following Friday, after Faulkner taught the class to the children, Pilar helped her to group up all the mats, rollers, and bands.

“You know, you can swing by my place anytime,” Faulkner said, breaking the silence. “We could hang out.”

Pilar felt an electricity pulse through her body as if a TV doctor had yelled “clear” and placed electric paddles to her chest: the jolt, the shock, making her heart pound and pump again.

“Sure. That’d be cool,” She managed to say.

That night, Pilar watched the evening news as she ate her dinner of left-over spaghetti. The local news, broadcast from Memphis, lead with a story of a polar bear at the

Memphis Zoo. An unexpected April snow had fallen in Memphis and the news footage showed the polar bear rolling on his back in his snow covered habitat with a desperation-- a determination, really--and a love. He was ceasing this last snow. Her first reaction was to smile and laugh. The news intended it as a public interest story, but her smile quickly faded as she considered just how sad it was, and she used the remote to turn off the television. She was only halfway through her silent dinner when she stood, still chewing, went to her bathroom, took off her clothes, and began to shower. Afterwards, she used the mirror and applied makeup she looked herself straight in the eyes for the first time in years.

She pulled her jeep into the spot in front of *Namaste* and the light was on in the second floor.

Pilar turned off the engine and the headlights and reached into her purse for her phone. She hit the screen, directing it to call "Mama." She would recite the same words, the words of the talk that they had years ago about who Pilar was and who she loved. Words that were then ignored, but couldn't be any longer. And as the phone rang and as her mother answered, a huge weight lifted from Pilar's shoulders and peeled from her body. She began to talk to her mother, and trained her gaze on the light in Faulkner's apartment window. She felt so light it was as if she was floating.