

No Stars in Jefferson Park

BY

MAGGIE ANDERSEN

B.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 1999

M.F.A., Western Michigan University

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DEFENSE COMMITTEE:

Cris Mazza, Chair and Advisor

Luis Urrea

Christian Messenger

Lisa A. Freeman

Yasen Peyankov, School of Theatre and Music

ABSTRACT

No Stars in Jefferson Park is a memoir about the beginnings of an Equity Chicago theater company, The Gift, which is now considered one of the most vital storefronts in the city. I helped to start this company just out of college with a group of other working-class kids who didn't quite realize the extent of their competition. A few seasons in, our artistic director suffered a rare spinal stroke which left him mostly paralyzed. The memoir is the story of us (I eventually left acting) and our little theater that kept on growing. The memoir becomes an investigation of the literary tradition of actress narratives but it's also a simple coming of age story, an exploration of the nexus of art and love, and a character-based study of social class.

when I was twenty-five years old, and he was twenty-four, my boyfriend had an accident and he couldn't walk anymore. . .

He said he was going to give birth to us, deliver us into the world. He said we'd be born again, and it might be traumatizing or it might be thrilling. He would spank us as a doctor would a newborn (which I found just unsettling, and silly) and then we would exist in the room as babies, unable to speak or walk, until he called out the age when we began to communicate, the age when we began to take control. He would call out numbers: 1, 2, 3, 4... And our job, as actors, was to become those ages again, to remember those periods in our lives, until he snapped his fingers.

It all sounded a little hokey, to me. We were holed up in a vacant storefront in Edgewater in the middle of winter. I couldn't stop looking out at the street, at the small-time drug dealers, the pioneer yuppies and the dirty snow. The man who was leading this exercise, this exercise called 'The Walk of Life, was named Eric Forsythe. He had studied with Jerzy Grotowski in the forest. He had done trust falls in the most terrifying of circumstances. He had been all over Poland, performing on the street, in taverns and basements. And now he had a cushy job as a university professor who taught graduate seminars in Acting and Directing. Mike had invited him to train our ensemble in the Grotowski method.

Everyone else in the room seemed simultaneously thrilled and serious, which is why I often had the feeling I wasn't supposed to really *be* an actor. (This is something I was always struggling with.) We all lay down on the gymnastics mats with our eyes closed; we curled up into the fetal position. Eric narrated the scene—we were in womb, we were warm and safe, it was dark, very dark, pitch black, so warm, so soft, such comfort. Initially, I

wanted to laugh, but soon enough I wanted to sleep. His voice was just so soothing. Then I heard a slapping sound and someone started crying. It took me a minute to adjust, took me a minute to realize it was my friend Lynda. “Faker,” I thought. “What a faker.” Another slapping sound and another baby wailing. Another and another and another. Suddenly, I was afraid to open my eyes or reconnect with the room. I dreaded Eric’s coming for me, and yet I knew, without a doubt, he was coming. When he finally made contact, it did take my breath away. I sat up, opened my eyes, and the room was cold and slightly horrifying. There was nothing in it but us, a bunch of sleepy-eyed actors, and these ripped blue and yellow striped gymnastics mats; the storefront windows were streaked and smudged with dirt; all my friends were crying, really crying. What a bunch of crazy actors, I thought. I didn’t feel like crying now, and I didn’t really know if I wanted to play anymore. I saw Mike in the corner of the room, not yet comfortable using his wheelchair; the injury was still new. I wanted to close my eyes again; I did not want to play anymore.

But I did. And when we became two, three and four, it got kind of fun because I was flooded with my earliest memories and I was able to see everyone else’s, too. Eric snapped his fingers: “Two!” We all toddled around the room, losing our balance, falling down, falling into each other. Paulie, with his wild curls, drew on the walls and ran with scissors, and that made me laugh really hard. He had transformed right in front of me. Eric snapped his fingers: “Five!” We went to kindergarten and Lynda adjusted to wearing glasses. I could see her discomfort with them, her fascination with them, her awkwardness with them. I wanted to play with her then, so I did. We sat in the corner, away from everyone else and stacked blocks and played hand games. We were shy, but we were together. The boys mocked us from across the room, jeered at us, but we ignored them. And these kind of pretend games

are the reasons I love acting. I really could see all of my ensemble members as children, even though I hadn't known them until much later.

At twelve and thirteen years old, we looked down to examine our newly formed breasts. We looked underneath our arms and between our legs. Alex became a hippie in her teenage years. I saw her short hair growing long again; I saw her sexuality emerging. Gawlik drove recklessly around the space somewhere around sixteen and scared the hell out of me. He crashed into me again and again, making me feel flattered and frightened all at once. We all celebrated our college birthdays together. We tapped into our muscular memories of being that thin and that dumb. We tapped into our muscular memories of drinking that much. There was cursing and faux vomiting and faux making out, of course. Those are things that actors will always love doing. But I didn't, necessarily. (Another sign that maybe I shouldn't have been an actor.) I can't imagine what we must've looked like to the coffee-drinking yuppies and strung-out junkies passing by. A fifty year old woman rubbing up against a man ten years her junior. An angelic looking young man pretending to vomit in a corner. Two disheveled women in pajamas, toasting imaginary shot glasses and laughing maniacally on a Saturday morning. It probably looked pretty strange, and somewhat interesting.

We must've passed quite a bit of time that way. I don't know. I totally lost track. Eric snapped his fingers: "Twenty-four!" and my body filled up with a euphoric feeling. Twenty-four: I had an apartment with my then-boyfriend, with Mike, the one in the wheelchair. I bought my first set of sheets, my first set of towels. I did this all in pantomime. I rushed around the space, inviting my friends over, serving them drinks, bringing out trays of oven-baked appetizers. I tied on a little apron. I showed them around the apartment. *Here is the bathroom, here is the kitchen, this is where we sleep.* Eric snapped his fingers: "Twenty-five!" and

something in me snapped too. I promise you: something in me snapped. My whole body filled with rage and I threw folding chairs across the space, the folding chairs that had been my sofa just a few minutes prior. I kicked them and they went spinning and skidding. I kicked and punched the shitty walls. I cried and screamed and beat the walls with my fists. I cried for twenty-four, raged and raged at twenty-five. I picked up books and flung them; I could not stop. Eric watched sympathetically for a while, then snapped his fingers and whispered: "Twenty-six." I felt myself go limp. Actors are so fucking crazy, aren't they? I looked around and my ensemble looked afraid, and sad. Well, they had all been there too. Mike was still in the corner, and he was crying silently, knowing the rage stemmed entirely from what had happened to him when I was twenty-five. Lynda, I found out later, had followed me around the space and picked up after me, taken things away from me, caught the chairs I had thrown, made sure no one got hurt. The point is: twenty-five was a hard year. The point is: They were all there too.

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Jane Addams opened her Hull House so that immigrants might feel more welcome in Chicago, a city of factories and smokestacks on the river, bloody pigs in storefront windows. She decided that the immigrants needed theater to alleviate their homesickness, to cure their American blues. Yiddish musicals, scripts translated from German, Italian operettas, Polish tragedies. Henrik Ibsen produced Ghosts at Hull House when Norwegian producers said it was too risky. His country may not have been ready, but Chicago was. Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats brought Irish plays to Hull House, and Lady Gregory gave some advice to the inexperienced producers.

I studied in Ireland as a junior in college and wrote about it on postcards to a boy I loved. Across a continental divide, across an ocean, I wrote to him about the theater. "Did you know Lady Gregory spent time in Chicago?" I wrote. "And gave advice about starting a theater company?"

"Never engage professional players," she said. "They have been spoiled for your purposes. Engage and train, as we of the Abbey have done, amateurs." She advised them to train shopgirls and school-teachers, counter-jumpers and cut-throat thieves, but never, never professionals. "And prepare to have your hearts broken."

*

The Gift Theatre had their first meeting at Brendan Donaldson's studio apartment at the intersection of Belmont and Clark. I was twenty-two years old, had been out of school for about a year, was still living with my parents and they weren't quite sick of it yet. I lived with them in the three-flat where I had grown up on the North Side of Chicago. I walked from our first floor apartment four blocks to the Brown Line which I could've walked with my eyes closed because I'd lived in the same place my whole life— never even left to go to college. I went to a state school, never (really) left. So: Chicago was mine in an emotional way, and I wanted to own it the way it owned me.

I walked past Philip's house and Elijo's house. Philip, my lifelong friend, had just recently passed away. I always suspected he'd die young, what with his gang affiliations and his history of selling drugs and stealing cars, but no: he died of an infection, sepsis, liver failure, and anyway, that didn't seem like the way he should die. I walked past his house and felt anxious about the new people moving in because they were prettying it all up, because they looked like assholes, because they drove Audis, because they wouldn't have an extra key for me when I locked myself out or watch out for me when I came home late at night. Elijo was some sweetheart boy, heavy-set single mother, who (luckily) played baseball like a dynamo and ended up on a scholarship so he actually went to a pretty good high-school and did okay. I got lucky with a scholarship too, which sent me packing to the suburbs every day. My school had a state-renowned theater program and that's where I could play everything I wasn't, wanted to be and couldn't be anymore.

I smoked a cigarette while I waited for the train. I always smoked cigarettes. The women in my family smoke cigarettes. They just do. The women in my family are avid readers and graduates of pretty good colleges. They are secretaries and bookkeepers who could be more. They are mothers who love their kids and their lives and don't seem to mind.

They laugh loudly, complain more loudly, are smart but make the mistake of thinking they're smarter than everyone else. They have taken me all over the country and all over this city.

They took me to see a gorgeous little production of *Godspell* right here in Lincoln Square. We rode the el down to Steppenwolf to see plays about dysfunctional families and passionate love affairs. Then we mixed it up with flashy musicals at the Oriental Theatre and *American Buffalo* at Remains. You can see how I fell in love with storytelling. I just couldn't decide if I was supposed to be a writer, actor, director, or a little bit of both. Or the saddest possibility: nothing at all.

The train came and I got on and rode past the big library where I get my books and where I used to meet boys. I had a steady boy now since college and I liked him. I mean, I loved him, actually. And he loved me too. He always said I reminded him of the tough-talkin' girls in movies, the sad and strange pretty ones. I was never offended. He also liked that I was interested in the same things. Theater and books, stuff like that. In some ways, I knew more than he did. He'd taken lots of acting and directing classes in college but I had seen hundreds of plays. He could make a better academic argument than I ever could, but I always finished the books. And I always cried at the end. We were both laughably Chicago—whatever that meant. Our dads were cops, I guess. We had grown up in Catholic schools and started drinking at 15. But what was Chicago anyway? Everyone was always saying we were and we were so proud of that. But what did it really mean?

I rode the train away from my neighborhood, before all the restaurants and wine bars cropped up, before our street festivals were well attended, before our taverns all got facelifts. I rode past the hospital where I was born which was now a haven for squatters. I loved the new art gallery-coffee shops and the black and white movies at the park, but I hated the yuppies moving in who thought they were better than me and my family. I rode

past my Catholic school where I was an honorary member of the Filipino Posse, where I learned all the Spanish I needed in the courtyard, where I made out for the first time in the same chapel where my parents got married. I rode past Wrigley Field where my father and I rooted for the Cubs when the stadium was empty every weekend. Now it was impossible to get a seat. I loved that it was “cool” now, where Mike and I bar hopped sometimes, and only two and a half miles from where I lived. But I missed something about me and my father walking home down deserted streets, just the two of us.

Belmont and Clark. That’s where I would get off. When I was in high-school, it was gay nightclubs and brightly colored mohawks and a music scene and real dive bars and real drug addicts. I used to go there with my friend Jeff to buy CDs. (All my memories are of boys.) Sometimes his stupid friends with blue hair and pacifiers in their mouths would ask why he brought the girl scout. And finally I had to say, “Sue Sky? You were in my girl scout troop, you asshole.”

So there I was, back at Belmont and Clark, and there were still plenty of druggies wandering around and the gay clubs were still pretty bumpin’, but somehow it seemed more polished, and I felt conflicted about that. Was I still excited to be there? Of course. I was on my way to start a theater company, and it was still a secret. It was all so impossibly romantic. There was still the possibility of instant fame and epic failure. But also, I had never had friends who weren’t born in Chicago. They lived in apartments I had never seen, in neighborhoods I didn’t know by heart. They didn’t have cars or families here, nothing to fall back on. They would become part of my personal constellation now, my hopelessly emotional geography. You will ask why I loved them and I will try to explain.

You will ask why I loved Mike Thornton and why he loved me. I don’t know. I’ve always been afraid to ask. But I think we fell in love with each other’s stories. I think he

loved my raw and my refined. I had grown up in a neighborhood that his father and his father's friends called the ghetto, but my family had a summer cabin and theater subscriptions. And yet I had never had a proper bedroom or spent any significant amount of time without a job. Mike had grown up in the neighborhood I wanted to live in as a kid. It was quiet and far away and almost like the suburbs. His parents had a big swimming pool and bigger parties. He had a huge amount of space to himself and never had to have a job, which gave him plenty of time to get smarter.

He always sang songs to me. "Brandy, you're a fine girl. What a good wife you would be..." "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine..." "The boys are all wild about Nelly, the daughter of Officer Kelly..." Maybe he loved me the way I loved Chicago. In an emotional way he could describe only with images and music. He loved my history, my grit, my potential. He loved me in a purely emotional way that made him want to own a piece of me? Yeah. I guess that's it. And at the beginning, he didn't own me—not even close. But the beginning of this story is the end of me without him.

I got off the train and walked to Brendan's apartment where I rang the doorbell and walked into a room of privileged children who had been groomed for this kind of life, kids who had polish and poise and above all, the confidence they could do anything they set their mind to. And the other half? Kids, like me, who wanted to make their parents proud. Their moms and dads who worked so hard, their moms and dads who thought the actor's life was a little much. Even when I took a voice class and the instructor encouraged me to tone down my accent, my mother said, "How pretentious." Who did I think I was? I had no idea. But I loved Chicago, the way it let me be so fully myself, even the ugliest parts, and the theater because it reminded me I had the potential to be someone else entirely. And then there was Mike who somehow accomplished both.

Mike had dreams of starting his own theater company since high-school, but in college, he took a class called “Alternative Approaches To Acting,” and that’s when the name came to him. It came from Grotowski’s book, *Towards A Poor Theatre*: “Acting is a particularly thankless art. It dies with the actor. Nothing survives him but the reviews, which do not usually do him justice anyway, whether he is good or bad. So the only source of satisfaction left to him is the audience’s reactions. The actor, in this special process of discipline and self-sacrifice, self-penetration and molding, is not afraid to go beyond all normally acceptable limits...The actor makes a total gift of himself.” The company would be called The Gift.

A year after dropping out of school, Mike told me he’d found the group he needed to start, and not only the right group but the right play for them, too. He gave them a time and place, and told them to show up. Nobody asked any questions. He chose Brendan’s apartment because it was centrally located, but also, most of us were still living with our parents or in even more embarrassing apartments. So: ten of us crammed inside on a muggy evening in August. I distributed the scripts and we sat on Brendan’s daybed and on milk crates. The apartment crackled with the energy of young actors who wanted nothing else but the chance to perform. They didn’t want marriage or children or financial security, yet; they wanted stage-lights and applause, validation. They wanted to be different than their parents; they wanted to be interesting; they didn’t know how interesting their parents were. Brendan, a cigarette-skinny twenty-year-old boy with a mess of black hair, set out an ashtray, a butterfly jewelry box, and most of us lit up.

Many groups had done this before us; we weren’t original, but we didn’t know it. So many cocky kids have thought they were the next big thing, thought they could change the world with their storytelling. In our minds, we were the first ensemble to emulate

Steppenwolf Theater. I know now that some hungry, foolish, brave group of kids does this every summer. They graduate from college, go to Chicago and put on a show. We may not have been historians, but we had instincts and a sense of urgency. If I knew then how many companies had failed, how intense our competition was, I might not have stayed in the room, but I like to think I would've.

I sat on a stack of records in the living room and waited for Mike to arrive. He's the one who had called us here, to read a play, to invest in a couple hours of make believe. Some he had met at the School of Steppenwolf, others were neighborhood kids he'd grown up with who had very little formal training, if any.

I looked around the room and smoked a cigarette without a trace of guilt. Brendan asked, "Can I get you something to drink? You sure you don't want a chair?" Brendan Donaldson: Couldn't even get into the bars in Chicago yet. His parents were paying his rent. He had dropped out of Indiana University, left his crazy girlfriend and come to the city to be an actor. A Southern boy without an accent. Mike told me that during a particularly psychological acting exercise, Brendan had re-created his high-school morning shower for everyone. His high-school morning shower in which he panicked and begged his parents not to make him go to school. Everyone there made fun of him. They made fun of his friends, too. This story made me always want to be near him.

I'd known the neighborhood guys in the room for years now and the Steppenwolf kids for a few weeks, and everyone expected me to bridge the gap, make the necessary introductions. I must admit, I enjoyed the role. I enjoyed that Mike was the star pupil and that they had all heard about me. They had heard the story of us.

He told them how we'd met at my Catholic all-girls high-school, working on Oliver! What else? I thought he was immature because he was always doing pratfalls and hogging all

the attention. He thought I was pretentious because I wore a skull cap and carried around books of poetry in my pocket. But then one day he wore an Angels in America T-shirt and so I had to go up to him and talk to him, and take him seriously. We were the only kids in the high-school play who had seen the production. Shortly after, he impersonated our dance choreographer so well that I fell down on the floor and laughed, and that was the beginning of our friendship.

But: we were not high-school sweethearts. We didn't really feel the attraction until we were doing a Sam Shepard play at the junior college together, and then he said it hit him like a ton of bricks. He started referring to my dock worker boyfriend as "Shakespeare" in a mean and mocking way. He started giving me rides home and sneaking handwritten poems into my backpack, but I wouldn't break up with old Shakespeare. Mike went away to college and I stayed in Chicago to go to school. It all happened rather slowly. He wrote screenplays for us to star in, so we spent all his breaks making movies. Then I would usually go off to a keg party somewhere and he would sit in his bedroom and sulk and read actor biographies and plays and memorize monologues or write his own. He went back to school and had affairs with older women, graduate students, actresses, women who could match him intellectually and artistically. I met the women, and didn't feel intimidated by them, but they did make me more and more curious. He would call me from their apartments, drunk, in the middle of the night, to tell me he loved me. I laughed, went off to study abroad and forget him. But when I came home from that experience with a new perspective (I had gotten out of the Midwest now)—and he was still the best thing I could imagine, I was taking the bus to Iowa City every other weekend to see him, to sleep in the same bed with him, to enmesh my life with his. He told his new friends that I was the most beautiful girl he'd ever met, the smartest girl he'd ever met, and that made me feel like I had quite a lot to live up to.

I asked the Steppenwolf kids about their classes. They took improv workshops in the morning and did Sanford Meisner Scene Study in the afternoon. They made out with each other in Meisner and got drunk with each other in Lincoln Park bars they would never go to once they officially moved to Chicago. They had their egos crushed and inflated by their teachers.

I asked the untrained actors about their jobs. Connolly was working as a collections agent. He was in his thirties at the time, at least ten years older than the rest of us, but he didn't look it. He had grown up just a couple blocks from Mike, and we had met him doing a play at the local Irish community center. Connolly had a big, giant head of sandy hair and squinty blue eyes, an endearingly childish sense of humor. It surprised me that he had never married, but he said that's why he could pursue an acting career, which he had come to late in life. He had done some improv, but Mike said he was more than that. Connolly told funny stories about the people he had to call on the phone but he also told stories about the woman who said she was going to kill herself, and actually did it. Some of his stories could haunt you for days. The kids who had the luxury of playing in a theater all day needed John Connolly as much as he needed them.

After I had introduced everyone, I looked at my lines again, feeling annoyed that Mike had asked me to read a character that only existed for one scene, but it was absurd of me to want more. I hadn't acted or auditioned since I graduated from college and even then I only took a couple of classes, did a couple of amateur shows. I had been an English major after all, with a specialty in Practical Writing. Meaning: while many of these kids had studied in conservatory programs, filling their days with psychological acting exercises, I was writing press releases and news stories, and occasionally treating myself to an acting class. Nobody

in the room was a professional, but some were certainly more seasoned than others, and I was not one of them.

I looked up from my script at some point, looked around at this room of ragtag actors, having no idea they would become my ensemble, the people who always made the roach-infested dressing rooms and the most demanding roles feel like some kind of home. Eventually, I would cast them all as my family inside the theater. Brendan was my brother, even then. He passed out glasses of ice water because the apartment really was getting unbearably hot. He wore a T-shirt that said *I Hate Vegetables* even though he'd been a vegetarian for years; he wore corduroy pants in August and wizard costumes to school sometimes. Connolly was my father, looking out the window at the arcades and sex shops as if he'd seen it all, drinking his coffee from a thermos. Lynda was my sister, because I knew she missed hers (who was still back home in Boston) and I tried to fill that void. Also, she loved me when I was a terribly insecure actor. She knew, like my own sisters knew, that love was fierce.

But today we couldn't have imagined any of that. We couldn't have imagined the magnitude of our future successes and disappointments, our future love affairs and funerals. Today we were simply going to read Boys' Life, a Pulitzer-winning play about the quarter-life crisis, in a cramped living room that smelled like cigarette smoke and sweat. The doorbell rang and Brendan hit the buzzer. Mike came bounding up the stairs; he always did make an entrance. He always did take stairs two at a time, even at his heaviest. I love to remember him walking because he always did it with such flair. All of a sudden, he was there, filling up the room, all six feet and two inches of him, all two hundred and twenty pounds of him. When he took off his sunglasses, the room seemed to come alive. "How do you like the

apartment?” Brendan asked, smiling self-deprecatingly. Then all of the actors bombarded Mike with questions about their characters and the room became a swirl of nervous energy. “Who is this woman, Mike? I just can’t figure her out.” “How long have they known each other, do you think?” “Does he really sleep with her? Do you think it ever happens?”

Mike tried to answer all of their questions, and then he made sure to kiss me.

“Thank you for making the copies,” he whispered.

He had called me just hours before the reading, panicking, because he didn’t have scripts for his readers. I drove to his parents’ house on my lunch break, picked up the book from his mother and made copies without my boss knowing. Sneaking away from work and being his assistant was more fulfilling than the job I had at the newspaper where I currently worked for eight dollars an hour. It felt like artistic collaboration in some way. I felt like I was part of something important. That nighttime magic of theater that made the old look young again.

Mike planted himself in a bean bag chair and looked around at each one of our faces. “Let’s put on a play,” he said softly, and then he smiled. Everyone opened their scripts. Mike was only twenty-one years old and a little pretentious, a little full of shit, but he was talented. Also, he had the ability to command a room, maybe because he had grown up an only child. His parents instilled in him early on that everything he said was profoundly important, and he tried to make sure it always was. Profoundly important, or funny. “Take a deep breath,” he said to us. “Have *fun*.” He winked, and we all became happy children.

Mike looked down for a few seconds, then he threw his head back and began the play.

“*Do you remember the nineteen-seventies?*” he asked, and suddenly he was just as high as he’d been the night before. His voice was flirty but his eyes became troubled. He became a

man full of marijuana and resentments. His transformations always excited me, like good jazz on a record player. The living room turned into a theater, a proscenium stage, blood-red velvet curtains. We put on a play in a studio apartment. Mike conjured the flawed character of Jack, the only married one in the play who takes his son to the same playground where he picks up women. He begged his single friends to describe their sex lives, he insulted their girlfriends and bullied them, he crossed every single line. Mike did it so well that I was half in love with him and half anxious. I had seen him play child molesters and serial killers in college, but this one was somehow more disturbing. I didn't suspect he would ever become those things, but I knew he might become a Jack.

I knew that in Iowa, when I would arrive at his apartment sometimes and find flowers from other girls in the theater department. "She's a good kid," he'd say. "She has a little crush on me, I think." Sometimes I would make fun of him for really enjoying the onstage kisses and then the stage wives would start meeting us out at bars without their real-life husbands. Once, we were drinking margaritas with one of them, and she started crying because she had fallen in love with Mike and felt rather embarrassed about it. I knew he had had some part in these girls falling in love with him. I knew he might become a Jack because he was too good at it; he enjoyed it. The first scene crashed into the second.

Brendan played my ex-boyfriend, and he pleaded with me for another chance. He was so earnest, so pathetic. I tried to resist, but he broke me down, and soon we were crawling toward each other on the floor, so close to each other, that we could smell each other's breath. Mike read the stage directions: "They kiss." And I began to worry about what Mike really felt when he made out with his classmates in Meisner, because my body felt electric.

The play stayed on track. The men struggled with their demons and the women struggled with the men. Until the end, when one of the men got married and Mike made a scene at the wedding. His friends finally left him, alone and drunk, at the table while they danced the hokey pokey. His wife crossed the studio to sit beside him in the bean bag chair. She put her head on his shoulder and he stared straight ahead. *"Know what I'm thinking?"* she said. *"You're not the worst man in the world. No you're not; you're just not."* Then she paused and said, *"But you'd like to be."* The tears came rushing out of my eyes, and when they came rushing out of his, I remembered why I loved him. His mouth turned upside down and he couldn't sustain the villain any longer.

We all clapped, felt a rush of pride together. A reading like that can be more magical than the show itself. The world comes alive with possibility. It's like love. You can never recreate the first time. It's like a first kiss. It can never happen again.

"I'm going to start a theater company," Mike said. "The Gift. I know some of you were planning to go home, wherever home is, at the end of summer. If you stay, you have a place here. I'm asking Sheldon to direct."

Sheldon Patinkin was one of the founders of Second City, a guest director at all the big houses, head of the theater department at Columbia College, a legend in the Chicago theater community. He was Mike's improvisation teacher at the School at Steppenwolf. They had met just a month ago. Most of the time, Mike's dreaming was charming, infectious even, but this time, it just seemed foolish.

"Bring me the White Pages," Mike said.

Brendan fetched him the phone book; he licked his finger and began to flip through it. I walked around the room, complimenting everyone on their performances, trying to distract from my own, and also, hoping they would compliment me.

“Found it,” Mike announced. He dialed without hesitation.

“Sheldon,” Mike said in his best business-man voice. “I’m here at Brendan Donaldson’s apartment with some of the kids from school...Yeah...We just had a reading of Boys’ Life.”

We all stopped where we were and watched him.

“I know it’s not Sexual Perversity, but it’s gonna be great. Listen, man...I’d love it if you’d consider directing.”

Mike fell silent and I looked out the window, tried to find stars in the sky.

“Next Saturday would be *wonderful*,” Mike said, pumping his fist. “Thank you so much. See you in class tomorrow.”

Mike hung up the phone and we held our breath.

“He said he’ll listen to it next Saturday. We’re gonna do this, guys. Let’s go to the L&L and get drunk.”

I looked down at the neon signs, and promised myself that I would get better, that I would blow them all away with my talent. I was flattered that Mike would include me in his dreams, but wondered how I would ever live up to the expectations. (I imagined that everyone expected Mike’s girlfriend to be talented, but more so *I* expected that of Mike’s girlfriend. Otherwise, I was just his girlfriend, which I already knew I was good at.) I slipped over to Mike as he packed up his messenger bag.

“Hey Bruiser,” he said.

“Was I okay?” I whispered.

“You were fine.”

“I know, but was I good?”

“Of course you were.” He paused. “How was I?”

I raised one eyebrow. *Are you fucking kidding me?* And that look was enough for him.

“Let’s go to the bar,” he said, still smiling. “Let’s celebrate.”

I was lonely for the words he wouldn’t say as he walked ahead of me down those steep and rotting stairs, but I followed him anyway. I would’ve followed him anywhere. I stopped on the last step and grabbed his ears, kissed the back of his neck. I knew he depended on me to keep his ego grounded, so I hurried to think of a note. “You should sharpen your point of view on that scene with your wife,” I said. He nodded. “I felt that too.” Then he turned around and grabbed me between the legs, smiling devilishly. “Thank you.” I swatted him away. “Thank you,” he said again, grabbing at me hungrily. I took this for granted at the time—his ferocious, insatiable appetite. Instead, I listed my favorite moments as we walked around the corner to the L&L Tavern. (I always knew to tell him my favorite parts, though he rarely remembered to tell me.) “When you cried,” I said. “I wanted to kill myself.”

We entered the smoky bar and ordered a pitcher of strong German beer. We drank several before the night was over, and Mike and I held court, as we always did. We held court like the working class kids we were. We pressured everyone to drink more and drank the beer that was always on special. We made fun of everyone equally to show them we loved them, and I think they all knew we did. We made fun of Connolly who had a hundred ideas for screenplays but had never actually written one. We made fun of Brendan for his wizard hat. “Oh Brendan, you’re so *weird!*” we mocked. It was a family of misfits, and Mike and I were their parents. Most of them were new to Chicago. They had come from Knoxville, Boston, Virginia Beach, Maine, and Winterset, Iowa, and without discussing it, Mike and I felt an obligation to make them feel at home in our city. We laughed with them, too loudly.

And this was how our theater was founded. Mike had found a way to make his girlfriend, his geeky high-school best friend, and all of his new friends and crushes from Steppenwolf, *happy*. He had found a way to make them (and himself) feel worthwhile. (Which is no small feat, you know.) We re-enacted our favorite scenes, swapped stories about our favorite actors; we ached for plays to go on long after they'd ended.

When we re-emerged into the city after midnight, after hearing about the other actresses who had done plays in Boston and New York, I felt a strange discomfort seeping in. The feeling had nothing to do with so many talented women around, all of who seemed to be in awe of my boyfriend, because he seemed to be in awe of me. Also, they were respectful of me immediately which set them apart from other women in the industry. No. The discomfort had more to do with a gnawing insecurity that I felt as we walked down the street, past The Manhole and Berlin, the neighborhood's most popular gay bars. We walked past twenty-four hour diners and Dunkin Donuts, the still-crowded Belmont el station. We *walked*. We held hands and *walked*. And I told Mike the lines of Boys' Life dialogue that wouldn't leave me.

"You must be talented," one of the boys said to his date.

"Actually I'm not," she said icily. Then she took a beat and said, *"Not talented enough."*

Mike told me to give myself a break. Then he gave me the cheesy pop quiz that he gave me whenever he sensed my insecurity.

"Who's the smartest girl I know?"

"I am." (And I said this reluctantly.)

"The prettiest?"

"Me?"

“You got it. Bonus round. Who’s my best friend in the world and the love of my life?”

“Me.” (And by now I was smiling dopily and the darkness had vanished.)

He opened the car door for me.

I’m better, these days, at knowing if I’m good or if I’m bad at something, when I’m wrong and when I’m right, and I certainly don’t expect my boyfriend to be the judge, but then I really wasn’t sure, and Mike’s opinion mattered because he was the smartest, most talented person I had ever met. He was an artist, even then, and I loved the theater and him so much that I left very little room for myself. They *required* so much that there was very little left for me.

We went home to his parents’ house, to his bedroom in their basement, and I fell asleep, thinking only of our barroom laughter, our new friends, smeared words on freshly photocopied pages. I should’ve been memorizing lines, breaking my script into beats, but all I could do was feel grateful to Mike, and hold on to him tightly.

He popped a couple Advil the next morning and went back to Steppenwolf. (He was never late for an acting commitment. If it was any other day, he might sleep until one o’clock in the afternoon, until his very disciplined cop father finally lost his temper. However, if he had an opportunity to be an actor, he was out of bed in an instant, in the shower and out and back in bed kissing me, smelling like Irish Spring soap, long before he had to leave.) He tried to keep the reading a secret that day from the unfortunate classmates who hadn’t been invited; he didn’t want to hurt their feelings. Meanwhile, I drove to an airport suburb to write local feature stories for a suburban, family-owned newspaper. The editor paid me eight dollars an hour for my time. I would’ve been better off if I had been proud of this, proud of

the fact that I had landed a reporting gig, no matter how small, but instead, I started wanting everything that Mike had. And that was *my* mistake.

2

The School at Steppenwolf receives floods of applications each year; they host auditions on both coasts. People of all ages apply so they might train with the theater company who achieved the dream, the company that helped put Chicago, a city of neighborhoods, on the map of world theaters. The company that started in a church basement.

Steppenwolf was founded in Highland Park, an affluent suburb of Chicago, in the 1970's. A bunch of recent college graduates wanted to spill their guts on stage. They found a church basement where they rehearsed and performed. They weren't afraid to be naked on stage, as long as they were telling good stories. The word spread and audiences embraced the crazy kids because they were getting tired of musicals and Neil Simon. They wanted Sam Shepard and David Mamet -- playwrights who took risks and actors who eagerly dove into madness.

By the 1980's, Steppenwolf ensemble members had started getting television and film roles. Laurie Metcalf landed the role of Aunt Jackie on Roseanne, John Mahoney played the embezzling father in Cameron Crowe's Say Anything. Steppenwolf accumulated such a following (and such a budget) that they built a brand new theater at North Avenue and Halsted, just blocks from Cabrini Green, a cluster of Richard J. Daley's housing projects, human filing cabinets they were called, one of the most immoral city planning decisions ever executed.

My grandmother, mother and aunts were among the first Steppenwolf subscribers. They bought me a subscription to the theater when I was still in high-school. We carried Mace with us, per my cop father's recommendation. "Laur," he'd say to my mother. "You don't get it. This ain't a joke. That's a hot zone over there." But I never even noticed the danger. I looked forward to Thursday evenings, leaned forward in my seat, and at every curtain call, found myself trying to clap the characters back into existence.

By the time I graduated from college, North and Halsted had changed. Property values went up; restaurants opened their doors and had trouble closing them. Uncle Julio's served margaritas to the theatergoers. Weed Street, formerly an industrial corridor, became an avenue of all-night partying with warehouses turned into concert venues, nightclubs that hosted fashion shows and high-end gentlemen's clubs decorated with Grecian flair. My

family started valet parking when they went to the theater. I started inviting Mike along on nights when anyone couldn't make it.

When I was twenty-one years old and Mike was twenty with a fake ID, we spent many weekends at O'Rourke's, a small bar across the street from Steppenwolf, because that's where we heard the real actors drank. Also, Mike was performing in Flanagan's Wake at the Royal George next door. Flanagan's Wake was a partially improvised sketch show that had played every weekend since the mid-nineties. After the show, we crammed into a booth with house managers and box office girls, carved our names into one of the wooden booths.

"Michael is gonna be famous," one house manager said to me.

"He's wonderful," I responded.

"He'll have to go to L.A. soon," he said. "Chicago's too small for him."

"Magster doesn't want to go to California," Mike said.

"Our family's here," I said. "All our friends. He can make a living in Chicago, can't he?"

I wasn't aware of Chicago's financial ceiling then—otherwise, I might have agreed to try L.A.

Mike noticed Alan Wilder, one of Steppenwolf's ensemble members, sitting at the corner of the bar.

"Who's that?" he asked.

I told him, and rattled off productions Alan had been in to show how in-the-know I was. He actually was one of my favorites – my favorites were the ones who had never become famous. But before I had finished, Mike rushed off to introduce himself. The house manager and I finished our beers.

"What do you do, honey?" he asked.

“I’m a reporter. I write human interest stories...”

“Your haircut is really cute,” he interrupted. Writing often inspired this kind of boredom in Mike’s new circles. If you weren’t a theater artist, you were less interesting. I could’ve told him that I had done some acting too, that I had done Chekhov and Ibsen plays in college, a Shepard play too, an Albee in San Antonio with Mike. I had studied with Cheryl Lynn Bruce and Dexter Bullard who told me I had a gift I should pursue. But it was good he cut me off. I didn’t want to sound like everyone else. That was the difference between me and Mike: I felt enormously uncomfortable calling myself an actor and he couldn’t call himself anything but. He had gotten Flanagan’s Wake at the age of twenty; he was the youngest one in the cast. I waited for him to come back and save me.

Michael slept in a double bed in the basement of his parents’ ranch house in those days. I slept there most nights, once I had graduated from college and he had dropped out to come back to the city. He had plastered the mirror above his dresser with photographs of us. The two of us dancing at family weddings, the two of us on stage in San Antonio, the two of us visiting relatives in Ireland. Mike’s acting mantras hung on the ceiling so we could read them before we fell asleep. *Stand still -- you are enough. Always find the red rock. The actor gives a total gift of himself.* His bookshelves were lined with Greenberg plays and Lorca poetry, Stanislavsky books and Kantian philosophy, and he had read actually read all of them. Outside of his bedroom, the washer and dryer chugged all night with his mother’s laundry and the barroom exploded with the laughter of his father and his cop friends who sometimes drank there after they got off midnights.

Mike and I burrowed under flannel sheets and a thick down comforter. On weekdays we woke to the sound of the alarm clock reminding me that it was time to go to work and

get screamed at by my high strung editor. On weekends, we woke to Frankie, Mike's father, yelling, "Get out of bed you bust-outs! I'll make you bacon and eggs!"

One morning, I woke to Mrs. Thornton's slippered feet shuffling into the bedroom, something that never happened. "Mike?" she said softly. I hid naked under the blankets.

"This came in the mail last night. It's from the Steppenwolf, honey."

I kept my eyes closed.

"It's thin," he said. "Not a good sign."

He ripped at the envelope, then read for a few seconds.

"I got in," he said.

I pretended to be sleeping.

"I can't believe I got in," he said.

His mother ran upstairs to tell his father, to call everyone she knew. Her son was going to study at the theater started by the guy from Forrest Gump. And the guy from Air Force One was in the company too, and the dad from the TV show Frasier. She probably wanted to show them that her spoiling had done some good. Mike's parents had given him everything he wanted, every opportunity. They bought him a car and expensive headshots, supported his dropping out of college and his pursuit of professional theater. They had sent his screenplays to Hollywood directors when he was just a teenager, and when he thought he wanted to be an English teacher for a semester, they bought him enough books to fill a small library. This was not understood easily by family and friends. My parents didn't get it either. They thought Mikey should get a job. And sometimes, so did I.

Mike shook me, gently. "Bruiser?" he said. "I got it, babe." I had taken him to Steppenwolf his first time, I had told him my love story with the place, and now he was going to be part of it. Now I know so many graduates of this school, so many who spent the

money and the time, and some who really didn't get much out of it. But for me, it was about my family and a childhood love, so it was hard for me to say congratulations. I felt too selfish and too sad. It was something about that letter. I felt it marked an important difference between us. But I did say congratulations, I did *mostly* mean it, and just like any theater actor, I grew with each performance.

*

Before Mike started at Steppenwolf, before we found "our tribe" of artists, we relied mostly on friends outside the theater. To challenge us intellectually, to make us laugh, to fill our weekends, to be an audience for our lives. My girlfriends, Amelia and Julie, were Mike's favorites. They had grown up Northwest side, like him; I met them in high-school. Our single-sex Catholic education and their educated fathers prepared them for the world in interesting ways. They were well-read, hard-drinking, witty, funny and generally pissed off. They showed affection best with their insults. They were Shakespeare's Beatrices, and Mike and I never had a dull moment with them. We went to dumpy Irish bars and concerts at the Double Door, got into legendary fist fights and played pool. We drank margaritas, argued politics and went to the movies, grilled at the local forest preserves, drove to Wisconsin and spent weekends there. What else do 22 year olds do? We worked so we could do these things. We laughed.

When Mike started getting cast, Amelia and Julie saw his plays with me. After curtain call, he met us out wherever we were. And when he was gone most nights and weekends, they took care of me. They probably were Mike's last friends who were not some degree of sycophant. They didn't want anything from him. They were my last friends who I had enough time to blow entire days with, the last people who made it worthwhile to blow entire

days. And then The Gift came along and made life interesting again, just when it threatened to get boring.

3

Say what you will of the original Mayor Daley, but he was a supporter of the arts. By the 1960's, he had relaxed the codes that had been incorporated after the Great Chicago Fire. He allowed storefront theaters to be built in addition to the existing opera houses and auditoriums. Small theaters materialized all over the city. Laundromats and offices transformed into black boxes and studios. They sprung up in every neighborhood, each one with its own fingerprint. The Organic Theater produced Bleacher Bums in 1977. It ran for several years and even did two European tours, but the administrators have admitted that they were constantly teetering on the brink of extinction, despite this commercial success. The director summed it up best when he said, "Off-Loop is not for the faint of heart."

On my way to my first professional audition, I tried to convince myself I had the heart for Off-Loop Theater. I walked down Southport Avenue, which had been boarded up and dicey when I was a kid. We had only ever gone to visit the Cooney Funeral Home for the wakes of fallen policemen or teenage suicides. My relatives and family friends drank away the tragedies in D'Agostino's, a smoky pizzeria across the street. The funeral parlor and Dag's were really the only two thriving businesses in the area at the time. I walked past Southport on the way to Cubs games, and always tried to forget the last time I had been there.

But the day I met Sheldon Patinkin, Southport was busy. Handsome, gray-haired couples walked their dogs and drank coffee from carry-out cups. The Music Box had reopened and advertised an independent movie festival and a live organ player. The Mercury, a 1912 nickelodeon, had been completely renovated; it was a major theater now. At Coobah, the neighborhood foodies indulged in Afro-Cuban cuisine and mojitos. The Nail Bar salon offered champagne and pedicures, twenty variations of the bikini wax (The J. Lo, The Friendly Skies, The Bermuda). Southport had certainly come up and I was on my way to read for Sheldon. I thought maybe I could come up too.

I entered the fieldhouse of Sheil Park where Mike had rented a room for the reading. The fieldhouse had several that they rented out for twenty dollars an hour. It wasn't glamorous but it was all we could afford at the time. The building smelled like a swimming pool, and I was disoriented by the competing sounds of a karate class and a group of moms and tots singing nursery rhymes. I stopped in the bathroom to look in the mirror and was embarrassed by my overdone make-up and my cleavage. I had once studied with a Los Angeles casting director who said, "Maggie, if you come to L.A., you gotta show those rockets off." But I wasn't in Los Angeles now. I was in Chicago, in a theater community where talent seemed worth more than physical beauty, I was just blocks away from the Ivanhoe Theater where Tennessee Williams had thrown a temper tantrum and smashed a bottle of wine on the floor, and I was overcompensating for my lack of experience.

I tried to wipe the blush off my cheeks, then I hurried down to our room. I immediately recognized Sheldon from the author photo on the back of the new Second City book. He sat on a metal folding chair in a circle of actors. Connolly smiled at me with squinty eyes, drank the last of his coffee. Lynda wore her Red Sox hat for good luck. Only Brendan and Mike were missing.

Sheldon sat silently with his legs crossed and stared straight ahead. He was approaching seventy at the time but looked younger. He wore a closely cropped beard and glasses that made it difficult to see his eyes. He wore a collared shirt with a pack of cigarettes in the chest pocket. This was before the doctors made him stop.

I said hello to everyone to show Sheldon I was easy to work with. I went right up to him, made sure to move confidently and stretched out my hand. "I'm Maggie," I said. "Nice to meet you." He whispered his name to me: "Sheldon." He spoke in a hoarse whisper, as if more volume might make him sound old. That was the moment I got nervous. We were

auditioning for him, all of us, I realized, and he could take all or none, or the worst possible scenario: everyone but me. I felt the competition rise up in me and hoped that anyone else got cut before I did. Things I do not miss about being an actor: The constant, neverending auditioning. The constant, neverending performance. The constant, neverending competition.

I took a seat and looked at my lines. The more familiar I was, the more I could connect with Brendan. In the distance, I heard small voices singing and the grunting of grown men.

Mike and Brendan rushed into the classroom, panting, and I was excited for the role-playing where Mike and I were business associates who didn't know each other intimately, professional acquaintances who didn't sleep together every night. Sheldon smiled at his most promising students, then he stood to greet them. "Hey buddy," Mike said. "I'm sorry, I couldn't find parking."

"Relax," Sheldon said. "Take a minute."

"No, let's go. I'm ready."

Sheldon and Mike ducked into a corner where they whispered to each other for a minute; I made room in the circle for Brendan. Mike and I had been up with him until six that morning. The three of us had become quite a trio. Brendan was lonely in a new city and we liked having him around; he was a new audience for our lives. Mike turned away from Sheldon and winked at me. "Make-up?" he mouthed. "Shut the fuck up," I mouthed back.

"Okay," Mike said. "I want to thank Sheldon for donating his Saturday to us. I'd like to begin right away."

Mike took the seat across from me and his face looked bloated and red under the fluorescent lights. He looked older, like a hard-drinking man, and I thought of a state fair we

had been to where he won a prize because the carnie who guessed ages pegged him as ten years older than his actual age. “Whoa buddy,” the guy had said. “You’d better slow it down.” Mike imitated the carnie for the rest of the day, crossing his eyes and saying, “Whoa buddy, slow it down” in a way that amused me immensely, but now it gives me the creeps. Like the carnie was some kind of prophet.

Mike looked at his friends and smiled. “*Do you,*” he said in a weak voice. He cleared his throat and tried again. “*Do you remember the nineteen-seventies?*” His voice was rough with cigarettes. His scene partners leaned forward, eager to respond, but Sheldon cut him off. “What is wrong with your voice?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Mike cleared his throat aggressively. “I think I smoked too much last night.”

“Go warm up. Everyone take five.”

Then Sheldon and Mike had a private conversation that we were not privy to.

I went outside with Lynda whom I trusted completely with love scenes with my boyfriend. From the beginning, I would’ve trusted her with anything. She loved women as much as she loved men. She loved her family and couldn’t stand being so far away from them. She was in Chicago when her nephew was born, when her aunts and uncles died and, while Mike said that’s what you did for the sake of art, I understood why sometimes she didn’t think so.

When Lynda and I came back inside, Mike was standing in the hallway, drinking water from the fountain. Then he loudly repeated ooh-hoos and ah-has with his mouth stretched wide and his hand over his diaphragm. I wanted to go to him, but I knew he was in a private zone now where I wasn’t welcome. He was far away from me now, and in a way I couldn’t wait for the play to end so I could have him back. When we resumed reading,

Mike's voice had returned. "Take two," he said. "Sorry, everyone." He took a deep breath and began again.

"Remember the nineteen-seventies?"

"Sure. Sort of."

The scene sparked; the timing was impeccable. Mike made imaginary toasts to his friend for being "*a great guy in spite of some desperate handicaps.*" And then he toasted to himself, for being perfect, and his dimples emerged. (He clearly seemed to believe this.) Sheldon laughed generously throughout the first scene, and I hoped he would laugh for me, too. Brendan and I had to keep up the energy in Scene Two. "Remember that she's lonely," I thought to myself. But I didn't know loneliness, then. I lived in a two-bedroom apartment with my mother, my father and both my sisters—I was never away from my boyfriend for longer than twenty-four hours. Life was chaotic, certainly, but never lonely. That would all come later.

"Well there you are," Brendan said, turning all of his attention to me.

In the middle of the scene, I gave a monologue about my life being a mess. I remembered the night before and tapped into the way I felt as Brendan and I lay on the floor of his studio apartment at dawn, singing our way through Blood on the Tracks while Mike paced the room, calling liquor stores and pizza joints, drunkenly insisting that somebody had to be able to deliver pizza and a six-pack of beer to him at this hour. Brendan looked over at me and held my hand as I sang softly. "My life's a mess," I told Brendan and I think that he believed me. I may not have known loneliness, but my life sure did feel like a mess.

The couple married, in the play, and Mike got too drunk at their wedding. He let his eyes wander the dance floor and criticized the overweight women and the ugly women until

Brendan got up and moved to a different table. When Mike ranted like this, I was afraid of aging, the way he'd look at me. When he ranted like this, I feared this actor's life of exorcising demons.

"You're not the worst man in the world; you're just not." The stage wife delivered the last line of the play exactly as she had last week; she knew how to repeat, and I realized that that didn't make her uninteresting; it made her a professional. Mike didn't cry this time when she lay her head on his shoulder, and I was proud that he didn't manufacture, but I hoped he had sold the show sufficiently. The two-hour audition was over.

We gave it a minute to breathe, and then Sheldon started a clap. We all followed his lead. "Thank you," Sheldon said. "Thank you very much." Mike looked at him hopefully and asked everyone to step outside. I felt sorry for Mike who had to worry for himself and me and this entire group of actors.

Mike poked his head outside, looking uncharacteristically nervous. "Come on in," he said. We followed him back to the classroom where Sheldon was putting on his coat. "Should you explain or should I?" Sheldon indicated that maybe Mike should. "Sheldon has agreed to direct," he announced to us, still in shock. "In exchange for a bottle of Scotch."

"I have some problems with the script," Sheldon said. "But I really want to work with all of you."

Brendan smiled. Connolly picked up Lynda and twirled her as she screamed in her Boston accent, "Oh my Gawd!"

"You want *me*?" I cried out. Embarrassing, I know, but it flew out of my mouth. Mike burst out laughing and everyone followed his lead.

"Yes, I want you," Sheldon said. When he hugged me the way he had hugged Brendan and Mike, I felt the room go out from under me. Years later, I would remember

this moment of absolute comfort and wish for it when Sheldon called the hospital and said, “How is he?” in such a panicked voice that I sunk down to the floor.

“Let’s have a round of beers,” Mike said. “My treat. Magster: where should we go?”

D’Agostino’s was the obvious choice, I said. Everyone went down the street and I stayed behind to call my mother who was so thrilled, she shrieked into the telephone. She and my father had spent many nights at Second City during their courtship; she knew all about Sheldon Patinkin. But when she told my father the good news, he only said, “Tell her to get a real job.”

I ducked out of the sunshine into the dimly lit dustiness of D’Agostino’s where the cast had seated themselves at a long table covered with a gingham cloth. Sheldon looked a little out of place, but then again, we all did. The only people in the bar were old men wearing ill-fitting baseball caps, small glasses of beer in front of them. Mike and I went to the bar, and he slapped down his credit card.

“You shouldn’t treat,” I said. “You can’t afford it.”

“I’m buying a round. The End.”

(This from a boy who had burned through his savings account, who did not have a job, whose parents paid his credit card bills.)

“But we don’t even have a space. What about a theater?”

“Honestly? I have no idea.”

I was the only one who saw this vulnerability at the time and that made me feel somehow privileged.

The bartender, an unhealthily thin woman with a shock of red hair, sat on a barstool and filed her nails, pretending she didn’t see us. I recognized the situation immediately, but tried to get her attention anyway.

“No Cosmos,” she said without looking at me.

The attitude was a result of the neighborhood’s recent gentrification, I knew; she was protecting herself and her customers. The working guys just wanted some peace and quiet after a long day, and they were more and more often getting interrupted by bourgeois types who complained about the liquor selection and plenty of other things. People who had raised families in the neighborhood suddenly felt like their way of life was being judged, or worse, like they weren’t wanted, like they weren’t part of the “beautification project.” This hadn’t happened in Mike’s neighborhood, so he didn’t completely get it. “What the fuck?” he said to me.

“You know Mary Gladych, don’t you?” I asked the bartender.

“Mary?” She brightened. “How do you know Mary?”

“She’s my aunt,” I said. “You’re Cheryl, right? I’m Maggie Andersen, Al’s daughter”

Cheryl ended up buying us a round of beers then. I told her who Sheldon was and she got his autograph for her son. I told her to let us know if we were too annoying, asked her if the yups were driving her nuts. She told me they were *mostly* harmless, then she told me a few of the sadder stories. They laughed when Jimmy pissed his pants one night; they said this place was depressing. “Life’s depressing,” she said. “We’re just doing the best we can.” Then she said, “Ah, fuck it,” and showed me pictures of her grandchildren.

Most of the time, in the company of actors, my working class background made me feel inadequate. I became keenly aware (when I was around kids who had not grown up in Chicago, kids who had “help” from their parents) of the educational gaps and the financial disparities. But on that day, I was strangely proud of everything I had inherited, and obviously, so was Mike.

I overheard him say to Brendan, “That’s my bruiser. That’s why I’m crazy about her.” He was a showman, even at the bar, especially at the bar. Our relationship was a show that we both loved putting on, and we were deeply invested in our characters. We had decided to tell the same story, and in that story, love was a public performance. Rehearsing a role helps us to inhabit it, after all, and being cast in the role of someone loved deeply is the role most of us really want. But as we get older and settle into our career ambitions and daily responsibilities, it gets harder and harder to love so constantly, to sit in bars all day and love. We have shit to do in the morning.

I delivered a Scotch to Sheldon, and asked where he was from originally. I didn’t ask him about directing Eugene Levy or living with John Candy. That, I knew, could come later. He had grown up on the South side of Chicago, he said, then he conjured the old mansions and boulevards for me. He had studied literature at the University of Chicago, and that was something I wanted to hear about. I had studied literature, too. He smiled when I asked about his favorite books, and looked younger when he did.

“Sheldon!” Mike called from down the table. “Did you get high before the reading?”

Sheldon smiled wryly and turned back to me.

“What were you saying?”

I didn’t leave his side all afternoon.

Now, when I see young actresses clinging to Sheldon, or anyone with theatrical status, I’m the first to roll my eyes, to say that being charming won’t make them a better actor, but then I remember that they’re hungry, and that can’t be underestimated. I actually love to see a young woman checking a text message that makes her smile on the street, or listening to a voice mail and lighting at the sound of the news. I always hope that somebody

somewhere loves her, or that she just got a role in a play. I'm grateful for directors like Sheldon who appreciate earnestness and refuse to prey on it.

That girl I used to be is embarrassing to me most of the time, but sometimes I miss her. I was a better listener then, and I loved listening to old men's stories, imagining their childhoods, their suffering and their glory days. That's something I was always good at. Now I try to remember all those stories, remember and write them down.

4

Second City is a must-do tourist stop in Chicago. In the center of Old Town, you'll find lines trailing out the door—it's hard to get a seat on weekend nights. A Second City revue blends semi-improvised and scripted scenes with live music and new material developed from audience suggestions. Steve Carrell started here and Stephen Colbert, Bill Murray, Tina Fey, Fred Willard, Peter Boyle, Jane Lynch, and Amy Poehler. The list goes on and on. Saturday Night Live recruits at Second City, so do Hollywood producers. It's one of Chicago's biggest claims to fame, and Sheldon helped start it all in the 1950's at the University of Chicago.

I got off the train at the 55th Street/Dan Ryan stop, the Red Line in Hyde Park. Hyde Park was home to the University of Chicago, and that's where we were doing Boys' Life because they gave us the Kinahan Theater, solely based on Sheldon's name. (All the North Side theaters had been rented a year in advance.) The actual campus looked exquisitely Ivy League, but the neighboring area was poor and rough.

I yanked off my headphones and made my way to the escalator, quickly moving past a crackhead convulsing on a bench which ironically advertised the local alderman and his progressive platforms. I was on my way to our first dress rehearsal after four weeks of rehearsing at Sheil Park. Nights of Sheldon yelling, "Maggie, that line is supposed to be *funny!*" Nights of him belly laughing and making me feel like I'd won the lottery. The train station reeked of urine. A pretty woman wearing a turban came up next to me and said, "Hey baby, you know where you are?"

"I have a ride," I responded. "Thank you though."

I stepped out into the premature darkness of a winter night, lit a cigarette, and planned exactly how I would burn out the eyeballs of anyone who tried to harass me. “Hey friend,” said a woman with a runny nose. “Can I get a cigarette?” I fished one out, handed it to her, and she stumbled into me with her eyes half-closed. I had spent much of my teens exploring the city through bus and train windows, riding around all night with my girlfriends, and getting off at random stations, the ones that looked most unlike our own. But I had gotten lucky back then and I was wiser now about the tragic effects of my city’s segregation.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Maggie.”

“Maggie May? Like the song by Rod Stewart? I love that song.”

I never asked her name, because Mike screeched up in his Toyota.

“What the fuck?” he said before I’d closed the door. “You told me this neighborhood was beautiful.”

“I told you the *campus* was beautiful.”

Mike and I had grown up in the same city, but he had grown up on the Northwest side and rarely left it until he became an actor. To be fair: I had only been to University of Chicago twice before this, to attend exhibits at their art museum. The thing about a city of neighborhoods: You tend to stay in your own.

“You’re not taking the train anymore,” Mike said. “I’ll pick you up from work from now on. Jesus Christ.”

“I’m safe,” I said. “Just stop.”

In a way, I loved that he was worried about me after several weeks of self-absorption, but then the theater trumped me.

“Who the hell is gonna come down here to see the show?” he asked.

Mike pushed play on his cassette tape labeled “Jack songs” and his devil filled the car. We drove past gated shoe stores, fried catfish stands with bars on the windows. He played the same songs every day on the way to rehearsal, sang like he was in pain. And I sat silently in the passenger’s seat, feeling more distant from him than I ever had, wondering what kind of web he was spinning for himself, and how much of Jack was seeping in. He had grown a handlebar mustache for the role, and it made him look sinister.

The University of Chicago campus, once we reached it, looked like a postcard of Oxford. Kids from all over the world ice-skating on the Midway Plaisance, gray stone and ivy-covered Gothic quads, gargoyles, chapels and a bell-tower. Most of these buildings dated back to the 1893 Columbian World Exposition. Mike circled the theater, looking for a parking space, and I stared out the window, a tourist in my own city, until I saw Lynda walking down the street.

“There’s Lynda,” I said. “Maybe you should pick her up, too.”

“No. I pick you up and that’s it. I’m not a fuckin’ taxi.”

I was grateful for the preferential treatment, but I also felt I wasn’t a “real” actor because I didn’t have to get to the theater on my own like Lynda -- two trains and a bus in the most inclement Chicago weather, which was a long commute after eight hours of tedious data entry. My boyfriend picked me up, my boyfriend drove me home, my boyfriend had cast me in the show. Let me put it simply: I couldn’t rid myself of the feeling that I didn’t deserve any of it, that I wasn’t sacrificing enough to be an artist. Lynda had moved across the country and learned a new city, convinced total strangers to believe in her. While I understand that dating someone in your field can be motivation for some, for me, it was suffocating.

*

We hurried through a university lobby of columns and arched doorways, decorated with black-and-white posters of Mike and Brendan sitting at the bar in Mike's parents' basement. *Boys' Life, Directed by Sheldon Patinkin -- Two Weekends Only!* In the poster, Mike and Brendan were laughing and young, totally untouched by real grief. Our logo, an outstretched hand, fit perfectly in the bottom left-hand corner. *The Gift Theatre Company. Come closer.* Our photographs are so much more artistic now, taken by professionals, but that was the first one, so I relished my name on the cast list, hoping this might be something I would want to show to my grandchildren. "Your grandmother was an actress. She used to do shows in the city." I had always carried around my great-grandmother's obituary. She had been best friends with Jane Addams, a leader in the suffrage movement, the first female judge of elections. I thought about legacy and touched my name on the poster.

The posters were plastered to the lampposts outside and piled high in every bathroom. There we were on every bulletin board on this campus where they invented the bomb. I couldn't wait for my father to see all of this, even though he'd been complaining about the drive and the parking. This policeman who had seen too many rapes and assaults in this neighborhood: he couldn't see the beauty anymore. "I better bring my fuckin' gun," had been his mantra for the past two weeks.

Mike's parents had had the posters and postcards made by a friend who owned a printing press, we had filed to be a non-for-profit organization with the Secretary of State, Brendan had set up an extra phone line in his apartment where people could call and reserve tickets, Lynda bought Trader Joe's wine and cheese for the opening night reception, and I left phone messages for the only critics in town that I knew of. I didn't know to send them

press releases six weeks out, to make reminder call after reminder call. I thought calling once would be enough, then wondered if any of them would show.

When we entered the two-hundred seat black box theater, I inhaled. Mike and I looked at each other and smiled – it smelled like sawdust from the newly constructed flats. Designers and actors scrambled around the theater with blue light gels and power drills in their hands, potential costumes slung over their shoulders. Sheldon sat in the last row.

The sound designer played sound cues from a sound booth ten feet above us. The transition into my scene was an Emerson, Lake and Palmer hit, she told me. “*Welcome back my friends to the show that never ends! We’re so glad you could attend. Come inside, come inside...*” What a transition, I thought: how show biz. I felt lucky. But I needed the luck just then because I was starting to feel nauseous. I worried that no one would come, then I worried that the world would come and we’d fail right in front of them.

*

At ten o’clock, we started a cue-to-cue to get accustomed to sound and light transitions. We had been in the theater since six o’clock, going outside every couple hours to smoke cigarettes and pass the time. Somewhere around midnight, we started yawning and David Cromer showed up. Cromer was a colleague of Sheldon’s at Columbia College, the hot young actor-director in town at the time. Black curly hair, horn-rimmed glasses. I wondered why Sheldon had invited him. Then I remembered Sheldon’s quote for the program: “*I haven’t seen actors this dedicated since Steppenwolf and the Remains were young.*” Maybe he wanted validation.

I chugged water in the wings and waited for my song. “*Welcome back my friends to the show that never ends!*” Tonight I would kiss Brendan for the first time. I sprayed Binaca on my tongue and hoped I wouldn’t forget my lines. And when the theater went dark, I slipped into

the bedroom. When the lights snapped on, there was Brendan, my friend. I had no desire to kiss him. He talked at me, and I had trouble listening. He pawed at me clumsily, then pushed me back onto a bed, onto a mountain of winter coats. I kissed him anyway. He kissed differently than Mike; his breath was sweeter, his lips were softer. I rushed offstage, screaming (in character) that I hated myself. I may have loved the attention of men, but I felt terribly uncomfortable making out with my friends and learning how to kiss someone new. One more thing I never miss about acting.

After my scene, I snuck out into the audience and slunk down in the front row to watch everyone else's scenes for the last time. I escaped into the world of twenty-somethings, the characters we tried to give voices to. Twenty-somethings who had children when they were still children themselves, twenty-somethings who were stuck in ruts, twenty-somethings who yearned to be important. I declared, at the time, that the script was brave because it didn't need dying parents or miscarriages to be tragic. Now that my parents are getting older and my friends have lost babies and everyone is losing their jobs, I realize the callousness of my younger self, but when you're in a show, no matter what age, that show becomes the world.

At the end, I clapped for my ensemble, and we ran the curtain call. A straight line, an ensemble bow, all of us treated equally. "Take a second bow," Sheldon said, "only if the audience wants it."

I asked Mike to take me home before he went to the bar.

"Bruiser, you have to get drunk before Opening Night," he said, empty now of Jack. "It's a very important ritual."

"Some people have to work in the morning," I responded.

I changed back into my own clothes, then headed for the red velvet curtains that separated backstage from the playing area. I wanted to say goodnight to Sheldon but I heard Cromer's voice, and stopped in my tracks.

"Well, Mike's a genius," he said. "Tremendous instincts. And that Brendan is gonna be famous. He's gorgeous *and* he's talented."

He lowered his voice then, and I knew it was about me. I knew he was asking why Sheldon had cast me. Obviously Brendan overpowered me in the scene. Obviously I didn't belong. My father had always told me to surround myself with excellence, that it raises your standards and expectations for yourself, that it only fosters growth. That's why he married my mother, he said, because she was so incredibly bright. That's why he sent me an hour away for high-school, he said, so I'd know how to be a big fish in a big pond. But being surrounded by excellence was hell when I was the one who wasn't there yet. It made me completely paranoid.

I'm often asked to sit in on dress rehearsals now, to stay after and offer suggestions. And when I see young actors, and old actors, fishing for compliments after the run, I don't mind the lines in my face. I try to put a distance between myself and them, as if their insecurity might be contagious.

*

Mike and I drove silently through the South Side at two o'clock in the morning.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

And even though I had promised myself not to tell him, I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

"David Cromer didn't like me."

"Is this a fact or your paranoia?"

“I don’t know.”

“Fuck David Cromer,” Mike said.

I looked out the window and thought of the comfort of my bed, reminded myself not to tell my parents that this had happened. I couldn’t let them know I was pursuing something I wasn’t even good at. I knew that my failures hurt them much more than they could ever hurt me.

“Maggie,” Mike said. “You’re a vessel for that character when you’re not a bundle of neuroses.”

“I kissed Brendan tonight,” I said.

“I know -- I don’t want to hear about it.”

Opening Night came anyway.

*

I jumped up and down in place in my costume, a patchwork dress, in the wings. “I’m going on a hot date,” I told myself and my cast. I was always resilient, and I always rallied, for them. “This is gonna be fun.” I listened to the pre-show music of obscure eighties songs; I tuned in to the audience. Programs rustled and chairs squeaked as people sat down and settled in for the evening. I heard my grandmother clearing her throat, and hoped she wouldn’t say anything embarrassing when I made my entrance. I peeked through a slit in the curtains to see how many people were out there; it sounded like hundreds, but I really couldn’t tell.

“Aren’t you nervous?” I asked Lynda.

“Oh honey, I don’t have family here like you,” she said “It’s easier to do it for strangers.” And I still think she was right about that.

Everyone in the company knew my family and Mike's family. They were the only people who had come to our inaugural fundraiser. They essentially paid for our first show.

I continued to jump up and down in the dressing room. Mike nervously cough-gagged, Brendan ate falafel, Lynda applied her foundation. Beside her, on the make-up counter, was an exploding bouquet from Sheldon.

The stage manager stopped in and said, "Five minutes."

"Thank you, five."

Sheldon poked his head in and said, "Should I tell you who's here?"

"No," Mike said.

"Sheldon, I had a nervous breakdown last night," I said.

"I knew you would. Use it."

"What do you mean?"

"Use it – she's always on the edge of a breakdown."

(It was kind of him to say that, to make me feel that I was growing, like I had tapped into something profound.)

Sheldon disappeared and it was our show now. University of Chicago students had come because they had seen the posters. Competing actors had come in the hopes that we'd fail. Casting directors and agents had come, eager to recruit new talent. My extended family and Mike's had come, in case no one else did. I could not let them down. Fuck David Cromer -- I was a vessel.

The audience volume seemed to rise in intensity. They laughed and unwrapped candy. Someone asked, "Now, who wrote this again?" The pre-show music started to fade and the house lights dimmed. I wanted to kiss Mike hard on the lips, despite the mustache, but my urges felt childish compared to the complete concentration on his face. Brendan and

Mike marched out to the stage, ready to remember the nineteen-seventies. They marched out to the critics, the ones who could make us or break us. I wished I could think like Gore Vidal, who said that Tennessee Williams was cursed because he actually put stock into the critics, the men who were damned to writing for newspapers. But I knew what power the critics had in Chicago. There were shows that went to New York because critics said they should. There were actors who quit the profession after the humiliation of a bad review.

I listened to the first scene, the one I had listened to so many times, but this time, there was a laugh track, an audience who was surprised by the lines that I was immune to now. The audience guffawed and the boys held naturally each time. I listened to Brendan, really listened to him, forced myself to fall for him. As the scene progressed, I grew increasingly more nervous to see him. Use it, I thought. *"So gentlemen,"* Mike said. *"Anyone have a good fuck lately?"* Blackout. *"Welcome back my friends to the show that never ends!"*

By the time we were in the bedroom together, I didn't even know who I was. Some nervous girl who had different tics than I did. Some girl who had slept with Brendan once and now they were going to try it again. Some girl who had a different voice, felt perfectly comfortable in this patchwork dress. Some girl who had never heard these pick-up lines before. When Brendan pushed me down on the bed, I clung to him; he was all I had now in this big room full of strangers. The audience disappeared and I swam around with him in a sea of wool and fleece.

I watched the rest of the performance through a slit in the curtains. The play moved quickly through several scenes. Mike met Lynda while he was at the park with his son. He lied and told her he wasn't married. He showed her a card his son had made and I knew he thought of his little cousin, the baby who made him want to be a father. I knew every choice he had made for the character -- he always told me in bed late at night, and I loved seeing

them come to life. “That’s it, babe,” I thought. “You got it.” And it felt like my victory as much as his.

And then there was the wedding. I scrambled out to set the table. I half-filled the rocks glasses with iced tea, dumped my cigarette butts into the ashtrays. I balled up some cloth napkins and left the stage. When the lights came up, Brendan and Mike were wearing rumpled suits and looking fairly drunk. Their married friend came over to their table to shake their hands. Brendan said, *“I hope you and Lisa will be very happy together.”*

“I don’t see why not,” the groom responded.

“You can always get a divorce,” Mike offered.

Brendan said, *“Come on, he just got **married**.”*

After that, the scene escalated into a frenzy. Brendan left to dance the hokey pokey and Mike was left onstage alone. Don’t leave him, Brendan, I thought. He’s on the edge of something dangerous.

We took our first bows, and then we took a second. The critics never showed because, as it turns out they usually don’t review two-week runs, especially for theater companies they’ve never heard of. Now we know better, but amazingly, we sold out both weekends without their help. Beginner’s luck. I squinted out into the audience and couldn’t find a single empty seat. And then my father stood and put his fingers in his mouth to whistle. Mike and Brendan held their hands up and pumped their fists. They looked out into the audience, laughing and full of themselves, no idea of the obstacles that would come.

After the show, I read Sheldon a prose poem I had written for him in front of the entire cast and crew. (My best and most embarrassing flaw has always been my sentimentality.) I wrote about how young he looked—how he looked like a teenager sometimes still, especially when he spoke of the theater—and I wondered if it was because

he loved what he did, this life he had carved out for himself. I wrote about the way he sat on his knees, and how when he laughed, he looked like that 15-year-old kid who had started at the University of Chicago so many years ago. I wrote about how this feeling he had given us was the strongest thing in my life. Some of our cast members seemed impatient with my cheesiness, but Lynda nodded, her eyes full of tears. “You’re *good*,” Sheldon said. “I mean it. You should do more than write the obituaries.” But I was not listening to what the universe was trying to tell me.

5

William Butler Yeats visited Chicago a handful of times, where he often stayed with Poetry magazine’s editor, Harriet Monroe, in her Gold Coast apartment. Monroe considered his visits “one of my great days, those days which come to most of us as atonement for long periods of drab disappointment or dark despair. I drew a long breath of renewed power, and felt that my little magazine was fulfilling some of our seemingly extravagant hopes.” Yeats’s biographer wrote, “The intelligence and energy of the Chicago literary world pleased him, and only there did he seem to rediscover his pleasure in America.” He saw plays and made public appearances. One night, his wife pulled him away from a late-night carousal at the Auditorium Theatre. It is said that “Yeats stood up with slow dignity, and as his wife steered him toward the door, he thanked the assembled gentlemen with a few lines of poetry, presumably proffered in tipsy jest: ‘And I shall arise and go now, and go to Innisfree . . .’” Yeats went home then with his wife, whom he had married when she was just seventeen years old. How did she know what she wanted at the age of seventeen?

Michael told me about the auditions for the Irish play. And as we sat across from each other in a restaurant, I imagined the audition as he relayed it to me. I imagined the nerve wracking drive to the theater and the music that played in the car.

Michael drives his Toyota Corolla to Skokie, a sprawling suburb just north of Chicago. He refers to his Corolla as a Mercedes Benz because he thinks it’s funny. “Hey man, don’t slam the door of my Benz,” he says. “It’s a very expensive car.” He parks in the visitors’ lot, sits with the windows rolled down, and smokes one last cigarette. He sings a favorite folk song for luck. “*So be easy and free when you’re drinking with me. I’m a man you don’t meet every day...*” He’s auditioning for the new Irish play by Martin McDonagh, A Skull in Connemara. He’s read the play many times, and all of the Dublin and London reviews. He

knows that Mairtin, the role he's auditioning for, has traditionally been played by a man half his size.

Still singing, he pulls his black and white headshot from his messenger bag. His eyes sparkle, even in the photograph. On the back of the headshot, Mike's resume fills the page. Most of his production credits are from college; he's only twenty-two years old. But he's done Irish, he's done comedy, he's been through some prestigious training programs, what the hell? He turns off the radio, turns off all the noise.

Nervous actors crowd the lobby of the theatre; the foyer buzzes with the energy of men Mike has admired since adolescence. He says hello, offers compliments on recent performances. Some speak loudly of their recent accomplishments, others practice their monologues out loud. Mike tries to tune out the competing Irish accents. Northlight is one of the largest Equity houses in Chicago – getting this job could mean good money. Some of the men flirt with the woman at the check-in table, others do vocal warm-ups. Mike gets a drink of water. He tells the woman at the check-in table his name and she asks, "Will you be ready in five minutes?" Of course he will. Once inside, he has maybe three minutes. He's lucky if they let him get all the way through his monologue. He retreats to a corner and warms up his voice. *He-ha-ho. He-ha-ho.*

"Michael Thornton," the woman calls. She's the stage manager and she looks like Meg Ryan. "It's showtime," he says to himself. Some of the actors look nervous for him, but he can't wait to get in there. Northlight is a 400-seat theatre with a thrust stage. A man and a woman sit in the front row, waiting to evaluate him. The theater is cold like a church, so much quieter than the lobby. BJ Jones, the director, is a handsome man with a touch of gray, expensive shoes and eyeglasses. BJ already has Mike's headshot; he's already looked it over.

"So Michael," he says. "You went to Iowa for... two years?"

“That’s correct.”

“Why two? Can I ask you that?”

“Of course,” Mike says. “I dropped out. There was nothing more they could teach me. My girlfriend said she believed in me, so I came back to Chicago.” (I told you he was pretentious.)

“Why don’t you give us your monologue?”

Mike hurries up to the stage. He takes a moment, takes in the theater—the exit signs, the lights, the seats. He *wants* to work in this theater. He smiles; he can’t help it. And then he begins a David Mamet monologue about how he’s always wanted to be a dancer. He’s well over two-hundred pounds but he moves around the stage gracefully when he imagines it. He believes he’s confessing it to BJ. *Don’t you get it? I’m a big guy, I know, but all I’ve ever wanted to do is dance.* He sees himself doing pirouettes in his mind. He hears BJ laughing softly and that just makes him sell it harder. *I’m serious, I’m dead fuckin’ serious. I know it sounds ridiculous, but this is all I’ve ever wanted to do...*

“Dynamite. I love Lakeboat,” BJ says. “Can you do it Irish now?”

Mike calls on his grandfather who emigrated from the west of Ireland, his grandfather who’s died just a few years back. He misses him on Sundays, wears his hat whenever it rains. *Come on, Poppy*, he thinks. He gives the monologue again with an accent that never wavers.

“Here’s a couple of sides,” BJ says. “Si Osbourne’ll be reading with you. You know Si?”

“I’ve seen him in plays,” Mike says.

Si enters from the wings, a serious man in his forties with a blond beard and brown eyes. BJ asks them to read their first scene together -- Mick and Mairtin. Si’s already been

cast as Mick. Mike makes a choice to use his excitement in this scene, to use his admiration for Si. They're playing gravediggers. Si's the resident gravedigger in town and Mairtin, the village idiot, has been commissioned to help him.

"How much do you get the week?" Mike asks.

"I get enough the week and what matter is it to you?"

"No matter at all. Just wondering I was."

"Well don't be wondering."

"Sure, you're the experienced man, anyways," Mike says. *"If it's a hundred or if it's more than a hundred, you deserve it, for you're the experienced man."* He takes a pause, he can't control himself, the curiosity is gnawing at him. *"Is it more than a hundred now, Mick?"*

Si breaks character and bursts out laughing. BJ cracks too. Mike stays in character, a dumb look on his face, waiting to move on.

"Michael, stick around," BJ says. "I wanna talk to you."

BJ offered Mike the role. He had always imagined Mairtin as a frail kind of guy, but Mike changed his vision, he said. As if Mike needed convincing, BJ offered him an Equity card. With this one show, Mike could join the Equity union, the stage actors' union to which only about ten percent of working actors belong. Mike didn't even look at the contract. He signed on the dotted line, called me, said we had to celebrate immediately, and I, of course, dropped everything.

*

Mike chose the back room at Biasetti's, my neighborhood steakhouse, my family's go-to place, for the celebration. We toasted our wine glasses in dim lighting. Our favorite waitress took our orders. I told her Mike got an acting job. She turned up her hearing aid and said, "How much?"

“Mike got an acting job,” I repeated, laughing.

“A movie?” she cried out. “Well, dessert’s on me. Mikey’s gonna be a movie star!”

I decided not to correct her.

Mike talked through the salad, the bruschetta, the angel hair pasta and the tiramisu, and I drank my red wine like water. Equity was serious, Mike said. It meant rehearsing thirty-five hours a week in the theater, daytime rehearsal and dialect coaches, mandatory breaks. “We’ll have health insurance now,” he said. “I’ll get *paid* for acting. Maggie, we can get married.” With that, I leaned across the table and kissed his ridiculously wine-stained lips. We made out in that dingy leather restaurant booth, thinking eight-hundred dollars a week was gold. In that moment, I thought only of getting married and wearing a white dress. I thought of how Mike’s success could only be a good thing for The Gift, for all of us. I didn’t even think about the enormous importance of him having health insurance, health insurance that would prevent him from going bankrupt and more importantly, save his life.

*

Something happened between the time Mike accepted the role and started rehearsal. September 11, 2001. I was driving to the news office when I heard. I was 22 years old and suddenly afraid to be driving on a city street. I was afraid to be alone. The deejays on the radio were crying as their buildings were being evacuated. The girl in the car next to me was singing her heart out and blowing gum bubbles. Clearly, she didn’t know yet. I walked into my office and my editor yelled at me to get to O’Hare right away. “They’re having shooting practice,” he said. “Getting ready to shoot planes outta the sky.” I turned around and walked back to my car like a zombie. The retired old man who wrote the sports column caught me and said, “You look the way I feel.”

O'Hare the day of didn't bother me nearly as much as my assignment a few days later. My editor asked me to interview the family of two local women who had moved to New York the year prior. They were sisters, and one was in finance, the other in theater. The finance sister, of course, was in the World Trade Center that morning and her body would never be found. Her actor sister would live with the guilt for the rest of her life. My editor wanted me to go and interview the parents who still believed their daughter was alive. Her mother and her father who said they didn't feel up for visitors, but they knew they would find her soon. After speaking to them on the telephone, I told my editor I didn't feel comfortable with the assignment. He told me he wasn't asking. I walked out the door that day and never returned.

When I told my father I had quit, he said he understood, but I had to find another job right away, if I was going to continue to live in his house. I had majored in Practical Writing because I knew that people like me didn't pursue careers in the arts. Journalism was the only way I knew to keep on writing. I would take charge of the obituaries and the police blotter if only I could also write the human interest stories about local celebrities. That was the agreement. And now that this route had failed, I started to question myself, my dedication and my passion.

After a few weeks of fruitless job searching, I called a childhood friend and asked if they had anything at the cylinder factory where she worked with her father and her sister. Her father was an engineer and she and her sister ran the Sales department. When the head of Human Resources interviewed me, she asked why I would be a valuable addition to the Sales Support team. I told her my experience as a journalist and my time in the theater had made me pretty comfortable communicating with strangers.

"Theater?" she said. "Oh, I don't trust those theater types."

Turns out: her son was an actor and still living in her basement. I assured her that I did not believe in the whole starving artist mentality, that my parents had instilled in me a good, strong work ethic. A steady paycheck was more important than doing what I loved. I was a grown-up now and knew better. I felt just like an actor, reciting lines. But she bought it, that generous woman. She hired me immediately.

So: I would be the liaison between the guys on the floor and my girlfriends in the office. My girlfriends had a history of calling the floor guys and saying, “I need it done today. No ifs, ands, or buts.” I took a different approach. I walked down to the floor, usually wearing a form-flattering sundress, and reminded myself that they started work at five, woke up at four, it was hot as hell down here and they were probably dying of lung cancer even if they didn’t smoke.

“Jimmy,” I’d say gently. “I don’t mean to rag on you, honey, but they’re up my ass again. What can you do for me, babe?”

Truth be told, when I was at work, I didn’t mind it that much. I liked ordering lunch with my girlfriends and I liked Jimmy and his crew. I loved the geography of the machines and catwalks, the fake wood-paneled walls in the office. The only time I minded was when Mike called me there and told me about *his* day. His mornings in the theater, his afternoons of catered lunches and dialect work, his evenings of pub culture and lively debate. I came in in the morning and heard his drunken messages from the night before. “The boys are all wild about Nelly, the daughter of Officer Kelly...” I told Mike I had fallen in love with all of these characters at the factory, couldn’t wait to write their stories someday. But he didn’t seem interested, and so I started wondering if maybe the daughter of Officer Kelly was meant to work in the factory forever. I started wondering if maybe Mike thought the same thing. And then I just wanted to escape into acting and not think about anything else.

I signed up for a Performing Shakespeare class, rented every Catherine Deneuve film I'd heard of, went to a new play every time there was an industry night. I quit drinking and smoking cigarettes, started reading every book I could find about the actor's craft. I would be proactive, I could get better. Next time I auditioned, I'd get cast in something. I got busy and Mike did too. He got so busy, he didn't call me to say goodnight anymore.

*

Pacing my parents' living room on a Thursday night, I waited for the phone to ring. Maybe we could play Scrabble tonight, I thought -- Mike always took such pleasure in winning. Or maybe we could rent the Bruce Willis or Steven Seagal movie that I usually said no to. Or maybe he'd need a back rub -- he'd been working harder than he ever had and he was always begging for a good massage. Absence makes the heart grow regretful. I put on a record and checked the time. Eight o'clock, and I could've sworn he'd said he'd be done by six. I shaved my legs, and moisturized them until they glistened. I put on a silver demi bra and plucked my eyebrows. I finally gave in and called him, and a bar came alive in the background.

"Hey babe," I said. "Where you at?"

"Chief O'Neill's. What you up to?"

"Why don't I come and meet you? I'm dying for a beer."

"Don't you have to be up early?"

So I hadn't been "fun" for the last few weeks (meaning: irresponsible) but I'd show him I could still be queen of the bar. I was young; I could still drink my share and make it to work by eight with bright eyes. An hour later, I walked into Chief O'Neill's, a fairly authentic Irish bar with a portrait of the Chief on the wall, a glass case displaying his constable's hat. The woodwork was engraved, the upholstery handmade. The

servers were mostly off the boat Irish. Mike sat in a booth next to John Gawlik, his friend from Flanagan's Wake who had been cast as his brother but not offered an Equity contract.

Gawlik had blue-black hair and a toothy smile; he looked just like a young Ted Kennedy. A woman sat across from him; she looked like a young Meg Ryan except she was heavier and had visible lines around her eyes. I knew that the only woman in the cast played Mike's grandmother and was seventy-five years old. I quickly flipped through the Rolodex in my mind. This must be the stage manager, I concluded. I bent over to kiss Mike hello. He lifted his finger to signal that he needed a minute -- he was in the middle of something.

"Magnolia!" Gawlik cried. "How's my girl?" He was visibly shitfaced -- they had been here for a while.

"But do you know the story about Yeats?" Mike asked the woman.

This story again, I thought. I told him this goddamn story. I had written it in a letter from Ireland.

"Well," Mike said, "Playboy of the Western World premiered in what? 1907? Yeah, 1907. At opening night, audience members were enraged. People said it pushed the limits of decency. Really, it just stoked their--" He searched for something poetic. "Their nationalism, I guess. The audience rioted, pretty much instantly. *How dare you present Ireland in that manner? Jaysus, Mary and Joseph! You artists are worse than the English! What kind of rebel man are ya anyway?* They started throwing food, and glass, at the actors." Mike took a drink of his beer for effect. "In the middle of all this commotion, William Butler Yeats (my guy) stood up and spoke, softly. Synge was his protégé after all. The historians say he looked deeply disappointed and he just said 'You have disgraced yourselves once again.' That was all. You have disgraced yourselves once again."

The stage manager smiled and looked thoughtful. Admittedly, Mike told the story better than I did.

“Maggie,” Mike said. “I’m sorry, honey. This is Suzanne Grimes, our stage manager.”

“I’ve heard so much about you,” she said.

Suzanne wore her blonde hair cut in a short, funky style with a streak of her bangs dyed green. She wore tight jeans that had probably fit her once, and an Irish cable-knit sweater. She had a beautiful face, despite the lines. Her eyes looked like dime store jewelry and her voice was deep and sexy. When she reached for a cigarette, Mike leaned across the table to light it.

“I love your green streak,” I said.

“Thanks.” Then she put on a terrible Irish accent. “My husband left me, the man himself, and I had a midlife crisis, wouldn’t ya know? Dyed my hair green, took up the fags and drink again.” She smiled self-deprecatingly, returned to her normal voice and raised her glass. “*Slainte.*”

With this, she broke my heart a little. Her husband, an Equity actor, had been cast in a show on Broadway. Soon after, he ran away with a young actress and never came home again.

“We kinda want to beat the shit out of him,” Mike said.

“How long have you been doing this?” I asked.

“Since I was eighteen.”

“She was Production Manager at Steppenwolf,” Mike said.

“You have to tell me stories,” I said, star-struck and eager for gossip.

“What do you want?” she asked. “I got it all.”

She told stories while we drank pints of Harp. She asked us if we knew what happened during Balm in Gilead, the show that put Steppenwolf on the map. No, we all said, we didn't. Well, according to local legend, Laurie Metcalf was backstage, putting on her make-up, when the box office girl came in, said there was an urgent phone call for her. Laurie went to the phone, listened for a few minutes, hung it up and screamed. She returned to the dressing room and continued putting on her make-up. Jeff Perry, her husband at the time, asked what had happened. "My mother's committed suicide," she said. She started to cry, and then she went on stage. I wondered if I'd be a better actor if I had such personal tragedy, then I wondered if it wouldn't destroy me. (When personal tragedy finally did arrive, I think it almost did.)

Suzanne caressed her pint glass as she searched her memory for more stories that would impress us. Mike seemed to be studying her hands. She excused herself to go to the ladies' room, and Mike followed her with sleepy eyes as she tried hard to walk in a straight line.

"She's terrific, isn't she?" he said.

"Incredible," I agreed. "What a storyteller."

"I think Johnny should hook up with her," he said, jabbing John in the side.

"Go for it," I said to John. "She's hot."

I played along because jealousy was a turn-off, I knew, and I couldn't compete with her. I got up unsteadily to leave, and Mike didn't ask me to stay or to go home with him. Gawlik, whose eyes were glassy by now, said, "Magnolia, you tell me if anyone fucks with you. I always got your back, sweetheart." I left the bar and headed for my car. Mike felt attraction for another woman and I understood why – it was her confidence, her life experience. (And now that I have become a woman with a certain amount of that, I spend

many birthdays wishing to be young again.) I drove home with one eye closed so I might see the road more clearly.

*

A Skull in Connemara opened in March, and Mike asked me to round up a group of friends for the dress rehearsal. Skull was a dark comedy, but a comedy nonetheless, and the actors needed to gauge their laugh lines and pacing. It was time to add the audience, the missing ingredient. BJ knew Mike was the youngest, had friends who couldn't afford tickets that ranged from forty to eighty dollars. He said we could all come for free. I called everyone from *The Gift*. I called Amelia and Julie. Then I called the friends I'd grown up with because I knew they'd be impressed with Mike. I knew it might allow them to forgive me for neglecting them. While they had spent their early twenties bar-hopping in Wrigleyville, I had spent mine seeing plays and taking acting classes, or drinking with other actors.

"Thornton," I said at the box office, relishing his last name in my mouth.

The box office girl led us into the theatre where a cluster of photographers fiddled with their cameras, waiting to take publicity shots for the newspaper. BJ paced the theatre. "Hey gang," he said to us. "Why don't you sit in the third and fourth rows?" I sat next to Brendan while BJ addressed the photographers. "I'll let you know what I want. I'll let you know when the good shot's coming." Then he looked back to us. "You guys are friends of Michael's? You should be proud. He's gonna sell this show. Believe me, I know these things. This kid is very talented. He's gonna make us some *dinero*." Then he called up to the booth. "Suze, how they doin back there? We gonna be ready to go in five?" Suzanne came swishing down the aisle, wearing her tight jeans, a bandana on her head and a practiced look of fatigue.

"Hey Maggie, hi Brendan," she said as she passed.

“How do you know her?” I whispered.

“I’ve been out with her and Mike a few times,” he said.

“Do you like her?”

“Yeah, she’s fun.”

I bit my tongue. Then I heard Mike’s nervous coughing from somewhere secret inside the theater. I tapped my feet and distractedly flipped through my Playbill. Brendan put his hand on my knee and said, “Stop shaking. He’ll be great. It’s *Mike*.” Brendan had a bottle of Jameson waiting under his seat, a congratulatory gift. I had ordered a ridiculously large bouquet to be delivered to his dressing room on Opening Night. The house lights began to dim. Brendan squeezed my hand and I squeezed back, hoping our mutual friend, an anchor, might be enough to keep us together.

The lights snap up on Si and Mike’s grandmother in a cottage, rural Ireland. Every detail of the cottage is perfect. The armchairs, the fire, the hutch, the tea cups, the farm tools, the crucifix. The actors begin. Their voices are so unbelievably powerful. *Pay attention!* They’re Irish folks sitting in the kitchen, Mary sneakily trying to find out if Si really did kill his wife. Just when the room starts to get too uncomfortable, the door flies open and in blows Mike Thornton, wearing a Manchester United jersey and a pair of jeans that don’t fit him. There he is. His intelligent face looks so slack, so dopey, I can hardly believe it’s him. “*How is all?*” he cries out. The audience starts laughing. All he does is enter and say three words, but everyone is hooting. “Now,” BJ whispers to the photographers and the cameras start clicking.

Si tells Mike to close the door. “*I’ll close the door,*” Mike says, then he slips into a perfect imitation of his own mother. “*Or was it a barn with a wide open door you were born in, me mam says. She says, was it a barn with a wide open door you were born in, Mary beag, and I say, ‘You’re*

the get would know, mam.” His grandmother clucks her tongue at him. He commands the stage, and we all lean forward in our seats, delighted by this village idiot. Si and Mary desperately want him to stop talking, but the audience wants more. Si asks Mike to leave, but he always finds a way to re-enter.

Finally, Si says, *“Will you ever feck off home for yourself?”*

“Feck off home, is it? I’ll feck off home, all right. I don’t have to be asked twice.”

“No, fecking five times you had to be asked.”

My heart hurts for this poor kid; he admires Si and just wants to be near to him. He exits with his head held high and says, *“Uh-uh, I don’t have to be asked twice.”* Again, we laugh; their chemistry is perfect. Mike hasn’t made me laugh like this in a while. Maybe the show really is taking up all he’s got – maybe it’s not Suzanne at all.

After the show, I felt intimidated by him. It was the best he’d ever been. He walked straight at me, still wearing his jersey. I thought of college when I would take the bus to see him in plays in Iowa City. He would always write *“For Maggie”* in his bios, and when I saw him after, I’d say, “Hey dude” and slap him five. “Can you say something besides ‘Hey dude?’” he’d ask, laughing. So this time I said, “Mike Thornton, I have never been more proud,” and kissed him. “Thanks for getting all my kids here,” he said. Brendan handed him the bottle of Jameson and said, “You sonofabitch.” He looked at him sadly. “Will you really not be able to act with us anymore?”

“Not until we can pay Equity wages,” Mike said, smiling.

Twenty people stood around, feeling proud of him, wanting to be near him. He hugged everyone too quickly, and I asked if we shouldn’t all go out for a drink. “Suzanne’s having a party,” he said. “You can come if you want to, but that’s it.”

“Can’t you have one drink first?” I asked. “With your theater company, with your friends?”

“No,” he said. “I really can’t.”

“You’re an asshole,” I said.

He looked like Jack from Boys’ Life to me, even though he’d shaved off the sinister mustache.

*

Four-hundred of the most prominent theater critics, artistic directors, and minor celebrity actors filled the theater on opening night. I sat in a balcony with Mike’s parents, and didn’t say a word about the night before. I wore a cocktail dress that I had bought specially for the occasion. A black halter top dress with glittery red stripes slashing through it.

The show sounded like a rock concert that night; the theater echoed with laughter. I watched the audience more than I watched Mike -- critics slapping their knees as Mike lazily dug a trap-door grave, stopped every thirty seconds for a smoke break. I saw their skin crawl when he was left alone with the skulls and frightened of them. I sensed their fear when he began to smash the skulls, remembering a girl who had broken his heart. It must’ve been thrilling up there. I looked back at the booth, but it was too dark to see Suzanne now.

I sat there in the dark and thought about husbands and wives, all those wives of powerful men who tolerate their affairs. All those powerful men who say they honor and respect their wives but go around humiliating them. I sat there in the dark. The audience clapped when John and Mary came out for their bow. They clapped even harder for Si. Mike jogged out last, smiling and sweating as if he’d just run a marathon, and the audience got to

their feet one by one. It looked like fire catching. He took a bow and then clapped for them, all four-hundred of his biggest fans.

Hedy Weiss of the Chicago Sun-Times said this about him: “But it's Thornton, a relative newcomer, who steals the show. A bearlike fellow with a boxy head, he captures Mairtin both inside and out. Here's a human punching bag who thinks he's the champ. You can easily see him dying young, choking on his own ‘sick.’”

Mike and I drove to Pete Miller's Steakhouse for the opening night reception. BJ had rented out half the restaurant, ordered a buffet and an open bar with a sweet table. There were billiards tables in the back room and a piano player up front. Mike and I walked in holding hands but he let go of me when he saw Suzanne wearing knee-high boots and a leopard print skirt. “Wow,” he said. “You look great.”

“I changed,” she explained, smiling.

A thin woman in a business suit with pinched nostrils and sculpted hair rushed over. “Michael Thornton, we need your autograph!”

“Nice to meet you,” he said. “Um, this is my girlfriend.”

She pulled him away and then I was stuck with Suzanne.

“It'll be like this all night,” Suzanne said. “He has to do this. He has to work the Board for BJ. Go get some food, honey, it's delicious.”

I piled up a plate and went to sit with Mike's parents. His father was an older version of him but thinner with silver hair – his mother had a perfect complexion, milk-white skin, and dyed black hair. They looked around the restaurant with wide eyes; they looked the happiest I'd ever seen them. “Hey Little Bit,” Frankie said with his mouth full. “What you drinkin'? It's open bar, you know.”

“Whiskey,” I responded. “What the hell?”

Si came over and joined us. He wasn't getting much attention for this production, but he didn't seem to mind.

"So Maggie," Si said. "Will I see you next week?"

"What's next week?" I asked.

"Didn't Mikey tell you? We're going away for a night, getting out of town. All of us. Johnny, Suzanne, my wife, myself. Lia and I have a house up in Wisconsin. You'll be able to make it, won't you?"

"Absolutely," I said.

Frankie ordered me another whiskey on the rocks, and the thing is, I can't handle whiskey. By the end of the night, I found myself sitting next to BJ's wife, laughing, and saying to her, "Your husband's completely full of shit, isn't he? I mean, isn't he? You're so down to earth and he's so *full of shit!*" Not the smartest move. BJ's wife told him what I'd said, of course, and he called Mike the following day to tell him about it.

I was spinning myself around in a stained old swivel chair in the factory office when Mike called. I was making fun of Jimmy and trying to distract from my opening night hangover.

"You don't take leftovers from a wedding," I said. "You just don't. That's trashy."

"Oh yeah, Miss College. You know how much food gets wasted at weddings?"

The phone rang and I answered. "This is Maggie."

"I'll get outta here," Jimmy said with a wink. "Let you and your boyfriend talk dirty."

But there was no talking dirty that day. No serenades, either.

"I heard what you said to BJ," Mike said.

"..."

“What were you thinking, Maggie? This is a big deal for me. I gotta be a professional with these people. Jesus Christ, I am furious with you.”

And I, you, I thought. Then I looked around the dingy office, listened to the country station’s favorite song about rain, and cried. It was like my boyfriend had become a crocodile. It was like I had become one too.

I imagined the scene between BJ and his wife:

CANDY

That Mike Thornton’s girlfriend was kind of wild, wasn’t she? What was her name again? Maggie?

BJ

Maggie, yeah. Maggie, I think.

CANDY

She had a little too much whiskey, I think. Told me you were full of shit. (Laughs.)

BJ

She said I was full of shit? That *I* was full of shit? Her boyfriend’s fuckin’ the stage manager, Candy. I swear to God, I’d bet money on it. Her boyfriend’s screwin’ Suzanne Grimes.

CANDY

Does she know?

BJ

I don’t think so, but *I* know. (BEAT) Anyway, she’d better learn how to behave herself professionally. You can’t get stinkin’ drunk and expect to be taken seriously.

CANDY

Aw. She’s a kid, you know? And she probably knows. Women can intuit these things.

BJ

Candy?

CANDY

Yeah, babe.

BJ

Do you think I'm full of shit?

6

Sarah Rubl has written a well-known play about the show-mance, which she calls, simply, Stage Kiss. It's a hilarious meditation on art imitating life and life imitating art, but there's also something deeply disturbing as we follow the actors offstage and see how quickly they lose touch with reality.

I took a couple days off from the factory. I waited in the Northlight parking lot for Mike, so we could leave as early as possible to make the drive to Si and Lia's. Mike said he always felt a little lonely when he left the theater on Sundays. The parking lot looked so sad and empty, he said, after playing to a packed house all week. Sunday afternoon was his Friday, the day that signaled a stretch of freedom. I waited in the lot for him, and wondered if I didn't make him sad too after that adrenaline-filled weekend. He kissed my head and slapped my ass. "Ready for a road trip?" I checked to make sure I had all my supplies, then I settled into the passenger's seat and prepared for our journey.

Si and his wife, Lia, were already strapped into their mint green jeep with their two little girls and their dog, waiting for us to follow them. They waved to me through the window. We were to follow them to the North Woods of Wisconsin, to their log cabin, the one Si had built for them with his bare hands.

We followed them for several hours. I ran into a gas station at some point and paid the attendant. I kept my hand on Mike's thigh as he shifted gears, and longed for the days when we would've pulled over somewhere and fooled around before the sky went dark. Instead, when the sky went dark, I played songs for him -- sad folk songs that indicated I was suspicious. *You know I've heard about people like me but never made the connection. They walk one road to set them free and find they've gone the wrong direction.* He didn't seem to catch on. He kept his

eyes focused on the road, on the green jeep in front of us with sleeping children and a dog in the back seat, a car too crowded now for road head.

Around eight o'clock, we pulled onto a dirt road, parked in front of a log cabin house surrounded on all sides by a forest of towering red pines and maples. "Let me listen to the last line again," I said. *We've walked both sides of every street, through all kinds of windy weather, But that was never our defeat, as long as we could walk together.* Mike grew impatient; he had heard the song three times now. *So there's no need for turning back cause all roads lead to where we stand. And I believe we'll walk them all, no matter what we may have planned.* "Come on," Mike said. "I don't want to sit in the car all night." Si got out of the jeep, scooped both girls up in his arms, and carried them inside. Lia let the dog out of the back and followed her husband. Mike and I followed them, and I was envious of the stability of their life, the routine they knew so well, the vows they had exchanged.

Once inside, Si put the girls down in their beds in the basement. Lia turned on the heat, then gave a tour of the cold, dark, spacious house with the log cabin walls. She pointed out where we would sleep, where John would sleep, where Suzanne would sleep, when they got here. She pointed out sterling-silver frames of her wedding day. Lia looked like a bride figurine placed on top of a cake with shoulder-length blonde hair and a simple veil, laughing with squinty eyes directly into the camera, and Si looked serious and secretive, as if he'd just stolen a museum treasure. Lia poured dry pink wine and Si started cooking.

"So Maggie," Lia said. "You saw Faith Healer?"

"It changed my life," I confessed.

Which was true. Mike and I had gone to see it together when we were nothing more than friends. When I had a boyfriend who didn't like plays so I went to the theater with Mike. We saw Faith Healer, an Irish script by Brian Friel, a three-person cast. Si and Lia

played an explosive couple. Mike and I left the theater that night and he said, “I’m changing my major. I’m going to be an actor.” Then he said, “They’re married, you know? Those actors. Maybe we could get married someday.”

“Mike Thornton,” I said. “I wouldn’t marry you for a million dollars.”

“So Maggie,” Si said. “Mike says you’re interested in writing. There’s an excellent writers’ retreat nearby. Have you heard of it?”

“Of course,” I said. “I’m considering applying.” But I only said it to watch Mike’s face fall, which it did. It had been years now since my writing workshops. Everyone said I was good, that I should keep at it, try to publish someday even. But lately I hadn’t made the time. Lately, I had started to doubt myself and all my talents and abilities.

John and Suzanne arrived soon after we did. They had driven up together, even though the romance had never taken off. “Hello?” They poked their heads in the front door, unwound scarves from their necks, dropped their duffel bags on the floor. Si put on a scratchy record and Suzanne produced a bag of edamame, which she immediately started cooking, feeling perfectly comfortable beside Si at the small stove. Suzanne gave a monologue about the health benefits of edamame. She plucked one from the pan and tried to feed it to Mike, which he resisted.

“Eh, I’m a meat and potatoes guy,” he said.

He’s meat and potatoes, I thought. Get your fingers away from his mouth.

“Can I try some?” I asked.

We sat around a scarred wooden table, ate tuna steak with our wine. We drank a lot of wine. Mike and John did impersonations of BJ.

“Michael,” John said, pretending to chew gum. “Mr. Mike! I need a house laugh on that line, buddy!”

Everyone laughed; Lia rocked back and forth with her laughter. She cried, “You guys are so funny! I wish I could be funny.” It was amazing to me that this woman who was gorgeous and loved and talented wanted something else so desperately. “My father was a professor. He wasn’t very funny. I guess that’s why I’m not. But you guys, oh my God, you’re funny.”

“You’re drunk, Lia,” Si said. “Quit flirting. It’s unbecoming.”

“Shut up, Si. I’m too old for them anyway.”

“How old are you?” Suzanne asked. “My age, right?”

“Thirty-eight,” Lia said with a sour mouth.

“Wow,” I said. “You look fabulous.”

“Oh, shut up,” Lia said. “You’re young. What the hell do you know? How old are you anyway? Sixteen?”

“Go to bed, Lia,” Si said.

“Twenty-three,” I said softly.

Mike laughed and said, “Hey Lia, I personally thought you were, like, fifty.”

She rubbed her temples and laughed politely. John poured more wine for everyone and Si crossed the room, got down on his knees to light a fire.

“I’m sorry, Maggie,” Lia said. “My therapist says I have issues with aging. It’s this profession, you know? It’s this fucking profession. Get out of it while you can.”

“And she was just at Steppenwolf,” Si said. “In that porno. Wearing leather pants and kissing men half her age. But you know the problem? She doesn’t have anything else. I have my carpentry, she just has acting. That’s the dangerous part.”

“I have you, Si. I have children. I have a daughter with a heart problem. That’s quite enough, thank you.”

“Who do you see?” Suzanne asked. “Who’s your therapist I mean?”

Lia perked up at this, and I excused myself to go outside. I sat in the porch swing, started a slow rock, and missed my parents suddenly, my neighborhood friends, my ensemble, all the people who loved me. I wished Mike would come out and sit beside me; I wished he had defended me more directly. The trees were so big, I felt smaller than a child. “You’re drunk,” I thought. “There’s no affair. You’re paranoid. Go back inside and be charming.”

I slipped back into the house where Suzanne snapped photos with a fancy camera.

“A photographer too?” I said.

“You know?” she said. “Whenever I feel nervous, I just hide out behind this lens.”

It looked to me like she wanted a lot of pictures of Mike smiling up at her.

Cat Stevens came on the stereo and I said, “I *love* Cat Stevens.”

“What’s your favorite song?” Suzanne asked.

“*Rubylove*,” I responded.

“Oh sweetheart, that’s not him,” Suzanna said.

“Yes it is.”

“Common mistake, but it’s not.”

Cat Stevens sang, “*Oh love, sweet love...*” Si extended his arm to Lia and they began to dance. He wrapped her up in his arms, held her as they swayed drunkenly.

“I love you, sweetheart,” he said. “I’m jealous, I’m an asshole, I’m in love with you.”

“I hate this beard,” she said, tugging at it.

Then she pulled him by his beard and kissed him urgently. Soon after, they went to bed.

Which left me, Mike, John and Suzanne at the table, opening yet another bottle. It was a showdown now. I would stay awake until I knew what was going on. I was twenty-three and knew I could out-drink this woman. Suzanne put on a CD she had brought along. "Remember this song?" she asked Mike.

"I like this one," he responded, after hearing only a few notes.

"This is Eva Cassidy," she said to me and John, but she looked directly at Mike. "She's an amazing talent. When she sang at The Green Mill, they limited the ice cube count so everyone could hear her. God, she died too young." John closed his eyes to listen to the music, but I kept my eyes wide open.

"I'm going for another cigarette," I announced.

"I'll join you," Suzanne said.

This would be the scene, I thought. This would be it. We sat beside each other on the porch swing.

"I love this house," I said. "I love Si and Lia's marriage."

"You'll have one like it," Suzanne said. "If you want it, you can have it."

I shrugged.

"You'll have it too, Suzanne. You'll have it again. I'm sorry about your husband."

"Thank you. I think the world of you, Maggie."

Now we were rocking just right.

"You are such a bright girl," she added. "Such a wonderful girl."

"Thank you."

"You think you and Mike'll get married?"

"I don't know. Things are weird right now."

"Really?"

“Yeah, ever since the show, I don’t know.”

“Sometimes people grow apart. Sometimes it just happens.”

The wind rustled up through the trees and now we were in a soothing, swinging rhythm.

“Well,” I said. “You guys have become friends. I mean, you’re the wise one around here. This is all new to me.”

“You want to know what I think?”

She pretended to hesitate.

“He’s not right for you,” she said. “*You* have so much to offer.”

“Well of course, but he does too.”

“Yeah but...”

She lit another cigarette.

“Being out here makes me want to write,” I said, allowing her some time.

“Mike says you’re fantastic.”

“I’m okay. Haven’t really written anything in awhile.”

“Oh Maggie,” Suzanne said. “I adore you.”

“I adore you as well.”

“This too shall pass,” she said with a sad smile.

This woman could not hold her liquor, I thought. I slid my arms inside my sleeves and underneath my shirt.

“Maggie,” Suzanne said. “Michael and I have been together.”

It punched me in the gut, knocked all the wind out of me. The swing completely stopped rocking. I had suspected it, but had no idea how visceral the confirmation would feel. Don’t say anymore, I thought. Tell me everything, I thought. I felt like I couldn’t

breathe, like I couldn't feel my heart. "He loves me, Maggie. He said so. We've fallen in love I think. I'm so sorry to be the one to tell you, but I think you deserve to know." I flew into the house, forgetting there were children sleeping, a married couple making love, forgetting it was two in the morning. Mike and John sat on the leather couch in front of the fire. I looked at him from a distance.

"I'm leaving you," I said.

I ran up the stairs to the room Lia had pointed out; I was crying now, involuntarily, too loudly. It all sounded very ugly. Suzanne stood underneath the stairs, looking at Mike who looked at me. John kept his eyes on the floor, swished his glass around in his hands.

"Fuck you, Gawlik," I cried. "You're taking me to the train station in the morning."

John, Mike and Suzanne called my name, but I slammed the door on them. Unfortunately, this was not a dramatic performance. I flopped down on the bed, hiccupped tears, choked on my own crying. John, Si and Lia all knew. BJ knew. Everyone in the cast and crew. The word was traveling around Chicago right now. Did Brendan know, did anyone from *The Gift*? Why had they not told me? I stood and paced the room, then started to pack my suitcase.

Goddamn you, Mike Thornton, I thought. Everyone in high-school called you a faggot and I said, "I think he's funny." I wanted nothing to do with your skinny ass but then you wanted to be my boyfriend and you pursued me for years, wrote all those poems about my yellow glow, my aura, how I was created on God's best day. I taught you how to charm people, how to come out of your bedroom and stop being afraid of them. And you learned quickly. *Who do you think you are?* I didn't even know real people followed their dreams. And then you started talking about art and marriage, how we could change things. Our kids could be whatever they wanted. Painters or police officers or baseball players. You promised me a

life I had never dreamt of. I took buses to cornfields to visit you in college, invested in every single one of your friends and family members. I watched football with the men, and listened to the women, learned all about Brecht and Grotowski. I held a towel to your head when you were delirious with fever, watched you all night to make sure you slept. I never told your secrets. To me, your snoring was some sort of lullaby. I made love to you for the first time in Ireland in a thunderstorm; you were reading James Joyce in bed. Yes, she said. *Yes yes yes yes yes.* I said yes to you, cried for you when you didn't get cast, saw all your shittiest shows. (That one where you played a bug?) Please deny it, Mike. Tell me it's not true. Tell me you're not tired of me, you *can't* be tired of me. You're the only one I've ever loved, the only one I've ever told the truth to. I'll mature into a smarter, more powerful woman, and you'll miss it. I'll have incredible children with or without you. I know she's new, I know she's exciting, but I can still make you laugh, I can still make your jaw drop. Who the *fuck* do you think you are? Oh my God, I could not breathe.

"Maggie," Mike said through the bedroom door. "Come and sit with me. Please."

I followed him like a robot. We sat in front of the fireplace and I didn't look at him this time. Suzanne and John had disappeared to their separate beds.

"I kissed her," he said. "I did. One night."

"Tell me," I said. "I've heard her story. I want yours."

"I kissed her. She drove me home. I was too drunk."

"You deliberately got too drunk."

I wanted to imagine every detail because maybe that would make me not love him.

"Maybe so," he admitted and he looked so sorry, his eyes shining with tears, but how can you trust an actor?

"And?" I said.

“I don’t want to again.”

“Not good enough,” I said.

“I prayed to my grandfather,” he whimpered. “I prayed you wouldn’t leave me.”

“Quit with the superstitious Irish bullshit.”

“I should’ve told you.” He broke down.

“Yes, you should’ve.”

“But I needed to do this, to know. I needed to have the affair, the emotional affair, all of it. Now I know better. Now I do. I want to marry *you*,” he said.

And I said nothing.

“She looks ugly when she yawns,” he mumbled, wiping at his eyes and nose.

“I’m still leaving you,” I said.

I said it because I wouldn’t respect myself if I didn’t. I walked upstairs, got into bed and fell asleep, hoping it was all a dream.

But it was not a dream. I woke to my boyfriend lying on the plank flooring beside me like a dog. I woke to the sounds of breakfast being made, bacon sizzling, and voices saying good morning to each other. Voices saying, “God, I drank too much last night.” I woke to the voice of the woman that Mike had been dreaming of for months, this woman who had replaced me in his thoughts, this woman who was old enough to know better. I wished her pain and I wished him pain. I wished they both would suffer.

*

I have friends now who feel attraction to younger men, who dismiss the girlfriends they’ve been with since college, their girlfriends who aren’t as successful or talented, their girlfriends who “just don’t get it.” That’s who Suzanne thought I was, but she was wrong. Mike and I got each other more than anybody else ever did, but maybe she had a point when

she said we weren't right for each other. I think she had a point there. It was the affair that made me realize I couldn't really live on love, which is what I'd been doing up until then. It wasn't amounting to much, I realized, and I'd better think of something else.

I ended up seeing Lia years later in an incredibly moving play, The Big Meal, and she was still stunning. I saw the play with John Gawlik and asked him, "Do you remember that night in the North Woods?"

"How could I forget?" he said. "It was an Edward Albee play. You guys were George and Martha."

I saw Si shortly after. He told me that Lia had left him and I expressed my condolences, told him he was a catch, and certainly he'd find someone new. I still felt like a kid around him, all tied up in tangles and knots. Some things never go away...

7

Many "show-mances" don't make it past a year. But then again, there are those who do stay together. Dennis Zacek, longtime Artistic Director of Victory Gardens, and his wife, Marcelle McVay, longtime Managing Director, have been married for 35 years now. When the Board of Directors started to question his decisions, they wanted her to stay, but she walked out the door on principle. Who knows why some make it and some don't? It's like the song says: Fools give you reasons. Wise men never try.

The Suzanne Incident wasn't over easily, but as you might assume, I didn't leave Mike. There wouldn't be a story if I had.

I planned a surprise birthday party for Mike before I found out. I went ahead with it because I had already put down a deposit on the basement of an old Rogers Park bar and sent out one-hundred invitations. Everyone came, except Suzanne, of course. We all roasted Mike, even made a video montage. During the montage, while we cut little pieces of birthday cake, Mrs. Thornton whispered to me that I was a good girl for forgiving Mike; her husband had done this kind of stupid thing when they were young. And you know? That made me not want to forgive. I knew she still resented her husband for those stupid things.

Brendan and Lynda asked me how I was doing and I said, “I know about Suzanne, you know. I don’t know if we’ll make it or not.” I didn’t want them thinking I was in the dark anymore. “Whatever you need,” Lynda said. “It’s up to you now, honey.” Brendan said, “God, he’s such a mess without you. I took him to look at puppies and even that didn’t make him happy.” Anyway, Mike seemed legitimately surprised, and it was a hell of a party. He had just turned twenty-three years old. His clock was ticking, but we didn’t know.

After the party, he started showing me pictures of apartments he thought were beautiful, dogs we might like as company. He started writing me poetry again and making me mix tapes again. He started sending me flowers at work and home and just because it was Tuesday.

And even after all of that, I walked out of a Greek restaurant in the middle of dinner one night because I couldn’t stand to look at his face. I couldn’t stand watching him take pleasure in food when I couldn’t stop wondering if he had taken her to this restaurant, or if he had had an affair with the waitress, too. He introduced suspicion into the relationship and I hated him for that. We were kids, I know. How can you expect a twenty-three year old not to be curious about life beyond his high-school crush? But when you’re twenty-three yourself, it’s so unbelievably painful.

Mike was cast soon after in a world premiere, Cherry Docs, at Next Theatre, in which he played a neo-Nazi skinhead. He shaved his head bald for the role, researched the neo-Nazi movement, watched documentaries and summoned all his rage, but the director was never satisfied. He called me every night, sounding deflated. “She told me to go further again,” he said. “I have no idea what that means.”

I saw the play on a preview night. Mike found me in the lobby and grabbed me. “I need to know what you think,” he said. “Tell me everything.” I met his director and his

scene partner, and when we got into the car, I tried to explain how I thought he might go further. "Let me tell you a small thing," I said, picking at his sweater as I did whenever I had to make a difficult point. "Do you see how you're smoking a cigarette right now?" He looked at the Camel light between his first two fingers. "You hold it a little effeminately," I said. "Like an actor would," I explained. He nodded and waited for me to get to the point. "Your *character's* in jail," I said. "Maybe for the rest of his life. He kicked someone to death with his steel-toed boot." Mike looked down at his cherry red Doc Martens, ran his hand over his smooth, waxy head. "He smokes a cigarette much differently than Mike Thornton does," I said. "He rips off the filter, you know? He flicks it away when he's done." Mike turned on the radio and said, "It's too early in the run. I knew you shouldn't have come. You just ruined my entire night." It was probably the first time I hadn't praised him, but I was only trying to help.

It just wasn't as good a fit or as polished a script as A Skull in Connemara. I guess we both thought that Skull would've launched his career, launched him into a long stretch of work. That certainly does happen sometimes, but it didn't happen for Mike. He couldn't completely connect with the role, and the critics pointed it out. That's when he started drinking pretty heavily, mostly at his neighborhood bar, Charlotte's.

He started going alone, if he had to. He befriended Charlotte, the short, stout Polish owner, and her model-beautiful waitresses who had recently arrived in Chicago. Charlotte's was a bar known locally for its disco ball and heavy metal jukebox, and the waitresses' short-short skirts. It was a bizarre tavern tucked away in a corner of Chicago where blue-collar families lived and went to church and voted Republican. Mike would go up to the bar for a drink and say, "Asha, you really shouldn't dress like such a schoolmarm." He would say to Charlotte, "Remember when we all lived in Poland together? We were so young then, we

were so foolish.” And they would all laugh. “Mikey, you so crazy!” I met him at Charlotte’s sometimes; I became friendly with Asha and Charlotte too. When I walked in, Mike would brighten and call to me, “Hi Janusch! *Zimme pivo?*”

One morning I called his house and his mother said he’d been sick to his stomach all morning. I was angry and started a fight with him, because I knew why he felt sick, but his mother thought it was food poisoning.

Another morning, he told me a terrible story. He had gone into Charlotte’s, after a show, and a group of neo-Nazis came in and took over the place. Mike watched as they went to the bathroom two at a time. Drugs, he thought. But when he went into the bathroom, he found their propaganda plastered all over the stalls. He ripped the posters down, crumpled them into a wad and carried it to Asha. “Throw this shit away,” Mike said.

“What it is, Mikey?” she asked.

It was a poster that said, “Don’t want AIDS? Don’t fuck niggers.”

And when Mike left the bar at two a.m., the Nazis waited for him in the alley. They knocked him down on the asphalt. “I’m an actor,” he said. “Please not my face.” He rolled over and they kicked and punched him in the back of the head repeatedly. Whenever I imagine this, I remember that he was wearing a leather jacket in those days, and had a swastika temporarily tattooed on the back of his neck for the play. He *looked* just like one of them.

After Cherry Docs, Mike didn’t have anything else lined up, and actors are dangerous beasts when they don’t have anything else. Especially twenty-three year old actors who don’t know that they’ll have to become accustomed to such things. One night, Mike said, “I keep on thinking that Northlight will be the highlight of my career, that I’ll go to some benefit there someday and stand there, an old man on a walker and say, ‘I played Mairtin in A Skull

in Connemara.” He became strangely obsessed with this idea of himself standing on a walker.

Perhaps all this inspired him to make *The Gift* a priority again—he decided to give directing a go since he couldn’t, as an Equity member, act with us anymore. He decided on *Orestes 2.0* by Charles Mee, a playwright that he became infatuated with after we’d seen *Bob Rauschenberg America*. Mike told me that Mee, the playwright, had been struck with polio as a child, was left permanently crippled, and it affected all of his plays. He wrote jagged fragments and used collage techniques, strongly encouraged the casting of disabled actors. After the show, we saw a man hobbling out of the theater on walking sticks and we followed him for a block, wondering if it was the playwright himself, but too afraid to approach him. Mike read his memoir and all of his plays in a week. He interrupted whatever I was doing to read me passages. He would call me at work and say, “Can I read you something real quick?” He read about the kind of theater Mee loved: “A play whose scenes break off suddenly in midsentence, where bits of scenes occur out of place, inexplicable things happen; a play composed of chunks and shards, broken pieces, raw, awkward, clumsy, with events crashing into one another without reason or cause...” He said he loved these shattered worlds because they felt (to him) “exactly like life itself, with all its anguish and ruin and love—not like the well-made plays I saw in high-school productions, or later in professional ones... Well-made plays felt hostile to me as though they would suffocate me.” These less polished plays gave Mee permission to create art from a life of ruins.

When I snuck away to the abandoned floors of the factory to read the memoir myself, I called and read my favorite passage to Mike: “There is love of another person, and there is love of books. These are the two great loves of life. Anyone who has ever felt like an outsider knows this.”

We did Orestes 2.0 in Wicker Park and made the front page of the arts section in the independent newspaper. Kerry Reid's headline read, "Mee's meditations require a fearless presentation and Thornton's assured ensemble delivers." Mike felt profoundly connected to Mee's material, even before he himself was disabled. "A quartet of damaged soldiers and trio of sadistic nurses provide sharply defined choral commentary even when it's overlapping." Lynda and I played the sadistic nurses. We cackled at the lunacy of the inmates. The costume designer dressed us in black knee-high boots, short black babydoll dresses and black nurse's caps. We tormented the patients in the asylum, the men in wheelchairs. I climbed up onto a table and gave a filthy monologue, announcing my addiction to sex, disrupting the intensity of a simultaneous court scene. The monologue was so graphic that I had to ask my father *not* to come to the play. I looked, at the time, more like Beverly Quimby's Ramona or a Little House on the Prairie girl -- certainly not the obvious choice for a sadistic nurse, but Mike knew I could pull it off.

Mike cast a neighborhood guy named Danny Ahlfeld as TapeMouth Man, one of the asylum patients in a wheelchair. I had recommended Danny—he did street politics with my father for years, was a city electrician and said he was an actor, too. His cartoonish Chicago accent distracted from some of Mee's most lyrical language, but he was middle-aged and still as passionate as we were, and there was something wonderful about that.

Mike overspent on Orestes by thousands of dollars. He hired designers he had met at Northlight and paid them what they were worth, which we of course could not afford. Tickets didn't sell the way they had for Boys' Life because it was summer now and everyone wanted to be outside (including us, sometimes). We dreamt of street festivals and outdoor concerts. Lynda and I described to each other exactly where we would position ourselves on the beach, and which books we would bring along, how much better our skin would look

with a little sun. But instead, we performed for audiences of three and four sometimes because our company policy was: The show must go on, as long as one person in the audience wants to see it.

Halfway through the run, there was a fire in the theater. A group of us took the train down to Wicker Park, hoping we wouldn't have to cancel the run. We surveyed the damage, together, and then went to the local dollar store to stock up on cleaning supplies. We swept up all the ashes and soot, blew industrial fans to clear the smoke. We did our best to clean up the mess; we did our best so the show could go on.

I felt sorry for Mike in those days; he had no idea how to balance a budget or run a business. He had to ask his parents to bail him out. Believe it or not, during all the trials and tribulations of Orestes, I started to fall in love with him all over again. Then I did what any dummy-in-love-24-year-old would do just months after an affair: I packed up all my things and moved in with him.

8

There's a Chicago myth that Bill Peterson and Amy Morton lived together when he was rehearsing for a Wisdom Bridge show in which he played a man in prison. They say she couldn't stand it because he'd sleep in the closet to get in touch with his character. Allegedly, he was a Method actor and thought sleeping in the closet every night might help him know solitary confinement. Actors' apartments are strange and haunting places...

Mike's parents approved of our apartment because it was in Jefferson Park, their neighborhood; they knew we would be close. It was the farthest from downtown that I had ever lived (most actor types called it the suburbs) but I knew I could adjust, and the rent was certainly worth it. Amelia and Julie lived together in an apartment a few blocks away, which was good because it was always important to have a life removed from the theater.

My father refused to step foot inside the place, and didn't like my mother and sisters to either, even though Mike had asked him permission to live with me. "I have every

intention of proposing,” Mike said to my father. But Alan pretended to look for something in his wallet and said, “Whatever, Mike. You’re both adults.”

“He said yes,” Mike told me, smiling.

“No he didn’t,” I said.

It’s not that my father is a social conservative. He believes in a woman’s right to have an abortion—“I’m not a girl. How is it my decision?” and that “gay guys and girls” deserve to get married too. But he did not believe in me living with Mike before marriage, not at the age of twenty-four. “You’re not even engaged,” he said. “Don’t be a punchboard.”

Brendan and Connolly carried our boxes up the narrow, winding stairs—all my cardboard boxes full of nothing. Precious Moments figurines, college textbooks, and prom dresses. I brought all of my girlish things to the apartment and they stayed there after I left.

What did the apartment look like? A dream, to me. The second floor of a Chicago bungalow. Hardwood floors and light slanting into the sun room. We bought bookcases and lamps from IKEA. Danny donated an entertainment center far too big for our little television. We scored a white couch from a thrift store, assorted dishes and glassware from married cousins who were upgrading. I framed photographs of us and filled the refrigerator with groceries. I played *Our House* on repeat and made the bed up with the flannel sheets Mike liked. I hung a plaque above our full-sized bed that said, “There’s no other place that I’d lay down my face.”

I quit the factory and took a better-paying job at Redmoon Theater. I’d be working in the Marketing Department but at least I would get to be around artists all the time, I thought. At least I was getting closer. (I was also secretly learning how to do publicity for *The Gift*.) I took a second job at the Art Institute so I could learn about the paintings and sculptures, and make my share of the rent. Mike had a good chunk of money left over from

a commercial, but he also took a job at a corner bar where he watched Jeopardy every day and served rot-gut whiskey to regulars.

On our first night in the apartment, I unpacked my things in the walk-in closet. Mike said, “That’s your Princess Closet. That’s where all your stuff goes. That way, I won’t have to yell at you for making a mess.” I vacuumed the cat hair from the previous tenant, sniffing and sneezing while hanging my dresses and sweaters, lining up my shoes very neatly. Mike peeked in and said, “How we doin’?” Then he frowned at the sight of my bloodshot eyes and said, “I want to kill that cat for making you sick.” We stopped working at midnight. We sat down on our wedding cake couch and drank cokes. We toasted to our relationship and our theater company, the two things we loved the most.

Our current production of The Countess was selling out at Victory Gardens. The major critics came this time because there had been buzz about us. Hedy Weiss trumpeted us as “a young and enterprising company.” She called The Countess “a gem of a play.” The Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Tribune highly recommended us; they showed clips on PBS. Now we had a place on the Chicago map. Now we had momentum. However, Mike had not directed The Countess, and so, even though he was proud, he wanted another chance to prove himself.

He chose County Fair for his second directing attempt—a play about a girl who lived in a small town in Iowa, and felt like she didn’t fit in, especially after the sudden death of her brother. Will, Mike’s first friend from college, had written it, and called it his “most personal play.” Mike always had a soft spot for bullshit like that and he always had a soft spot for Will. He justified it by saying that we needed to encourage new work and new playwrights, which was true enough. I’d known Will since Mike’s college days. We had spent many nights singing show tunes with him in Iowa City. Will was gay and handsome, bright-eyed and

intelligent and a little full of himself. He and Mike had been labeled “the gems” of the University of Iowa’s theater department, and Mike called him Co-Artistic Director, even though he’d never really been around.

Mike still hadn’t gotten cast in anything when he decided to direct County Fair. His agent had sent him out on several auditions. Commercials, plays and television. He was forever getting called back but never landing the job. He cast me as the lead in County Fair while we were living in the apartment; he said it was a love letter to me. And then I said, “Is it a love letter that begins with Sweetheart? I love when you call me sweetheart.”

He would guide me, he promised, as the sixteen-year-old ingénue. And he did, eventually. After many nights of me getting the most notes, after many nights of him saying, “I simply don’t believe you’ve just lost a brother.” And me writing *Fuck You Fuck You Fuck You* in my notebook and showing it to Lynda and her laughing so hard she started coughing. So: it was a patient sort of love letter.

We rented out a concrete warehouse on an industrial corridor near our apartment for rehearsal. Every night for the first month, on my way home from work, I looked forward to the apartment that Mike had made warm, the lights he left on for me. He directed rehearsal six nights a week, walked out of our apartment, jogged down the stairs, jumped into his car and sped away.

Whenever I wasn’t called, he would come home at four or five a.m. He would walk in and out of bars, back up the stairs, through the apartment and quite easily climb into bed with me. Often, in rehearsals, his voice would sound hoarse from dehydration. I would look across the warehouse at him in a blue Aran sweater that made his eyes look like Paul Newman’s. Then he would say to a floundering actress, “Repeat that line for me, will you, dear? Let’s work on that one, okay? Because right now, it’s confusing to my ear.” And

something in me would go weak for him, drop a thousand staircases. The way he crossed his legs, leaned forward, stood up and went to his actors, handled them so gently. The actress would nail her monologue, and Mike would say, “Now we’re cookin’ with gas.” I would forget about the night before.

Let’s be fair: If Mike was drinking too much, I was doing my share too. I usually drank after rehearsal. If I had a breakthrough, I celebrated, and if I missed the mark, I drank away the insecurity. We hit the Irish and Polish hole-in-the-wall bars of the Northwest side—no hipster bars for us. We weren’t those kind of actors. We simply loved being together. Our mutual friends, the audience for our lives, the intellectual combat. A quote in an F. Scott Fitzgerald biography shed some light on those years: “But it was not the parties that made our life then...It was the great affection between everybody. You loved your friends and wanted to see them every day...It was like a great fair.” Sometimes Mike made rules that if anyone mentioned Grotowski or Stanislavsky, auditions or screenplays in progress, he would throw rocks at their heads or make them do a shot of whiskey. But most of the time, we couldn’t help it. When we didn’t talk shop, we told stories about ourselves. Lynda’s nephew had been born and she showed us new pictures every day. Mike said, “Jesus Lynda, I think you’re obsessed.” Connolly told us about his weekend dating: “It went well. She was wearin’ a mini skirt.” And then I told him the 1980’s called and wanted their terminology back.

Alex Main played my mother in the show and became a company member by the end of it. She was exactly what we needed at the time—a killer actress in her forties and a patient den mother who liked her share of wine and kept the dressing room spotless.

Mike directed us every day and night except Sunday. Sundays were reserved for drinking beer and watching football with Rick, his three-hundred pound bald Italian friend, a

factory worker who plays the bass like a bluesman. We first met Rick in high-school when we performed in the musicals and he played in the orchestra pit. Anyway, Mike, Rick and I sat in our living room on a Sunday, smoking cigarettes and watching football.

This was before Rick's father, the butcher, was diagnosed with lung cancer and Rick quit on the spot. Susan Sontag says we all own a double passport: one to the world of the healthy, and one to the world of the sick. But in those days, we hadn't yet seen the world of the sick. Not really. We had seen violence, certainly -- friends getting caught in random crossfire, classmates taking their own lives, uncles getting beaten to death at weddings. But they were not us. That would *never* happen to us. We had seen grandparents slip away, but that was a long way off, or so we thought.

Rick explained to me what a Safety was and I listened. I knew this would drive Mike crazy because he did not like to share Rick on Sundays.

"Mag," Mike whined. "Go to your mom's house. Come on."

"I will," I said. "But not until you let me have the night off rehearsal."

"No."

"There it is!" I cried. "Safety!"

"You are *good*," Rick said.

"Everyone else gets a night off if they request it ahead of time," I said.

"Come on, man, let her have the night off," Rick said.

"I deserve it, Mike. I've been working my ass off."

Mike switched from the football game to his video game and ignored us.

"Rick says I deserve it."

"The End."

"It's my fucking birthday. Can I please not go to rehearsal?"

“No. You’re just not good enough yet.”

And then I took the other video game controller and whipped it across the room.

“Crazy actors,” Rick mumbled, and lit himself one of his last cigarettes.

*

During County Fair, I wore tight band T-shirts and plastic barrettes to give the audience the impression that I was a teenager, but even in my real life, I was still pretty childish, wasn’t I? When I think back on these days, I know we were just children playing house.

*

At rehearsal on my twenty-fifth birthday, Alex confided in me. “Birthdays are hard,” she said. “Thirty was a hard one for me. Ask my husband.”

“Ugh, I’m having a hard enough time with twenty-five.”

“Oh but if you have a hard time now, thirty’ll be a breeze.”

“That’s good because twenty-five feels so inexplicably sad.”

*

Mike and I walked from rehearsal to our apartment later that night. We walked through snow and ice. I had struggled all through the process, not able to forget what he’d said. “*You’re just not good enough yet.*” I was struggling even now. But when he opened the door, everyone jumped up from couches and out of closets and yelled, “Surprise!” Mike hit a button and our song began, our favorite song, our anthem. “*See, you and me have a better time than most can dream of...*” Amelia and Julie were there with their boyfriends. Rick was there and Alex and Lynda, everyone from the cast. This is why I hadn’t gotten the night off. Mike kissed me long and deep in front of everyone. “Happy birthday, Princess.” He pulled me to him and we sang as loudly as we could. *Hey la, hey la, we make the best of what’s around.* All our

friends joined in; we danced on the couches until early the next morning. And then twenty-five got better for a little while. *He said it was a love letter to me.*

We moved from the warehouse to National Pastime Theater in Uptown for tech rehearsals, dress rehearsal, and previews. Mike found a new bar, the Bar on Buena. Checkered floors, an old-fashioned jukebox, young Middle Eastern owners, Mediterranean delicacies. Wooden booths that we all squeezed into together, to rehash what had happened in the show—the paraphrased lines, the missed cues and the moments of brilliance. We relived our favorite moments and the audience responses.

Once we started the run, Mike would go to the Bar on Buena during the show and be whiskey-drunk by the time we were taking our bows. He missed the rush; he felt excluded. Every day, it drove him crazy that he wasn't on stage, doing it himself, this thing he loved and craved. He hated to see us butchering the playwright's best lines, or to see us self-conscious and floundering.

Mike thinks his drinking in those last weeks has something to do with a clock ticking inside him, telling him to live hard for a little while longer. I can't completely dismiss it. Was it happening even then?

Every night, at intermission, before I had to go out and deal with the ghost of my dead brother, I listened to weepy songs that helped me to imagine that Brendan, who played my brother, really was gone forever. Songs about Iowa, that oddly magical and haunted place where Michael and I had fallen in love. *He said it was a love letter to me.*

Paulie, a friend from the School at Steppenwolf, had been following our reviews and decided to move to Chicago during that time. Paulie had olive skin and hazel eyes, a mop of kinky, curly hair. He would walk up to the National Pastime and see County Fair a couple times a week, and I'm grateful he was there. His laughing in the audience always kept us

going, even on nights when the audience was small. He had been born in Queens to a tough New York City Public School teacher, and he wasn't afraid to make noise.

Paul mingled with the audiences and told us things that had touched them: "*I was in 4-H, too! I got out of Alton, Illinois as fast as I could. Got away from Eau Claire, Wisconsin, as fast as I could.*" Small towns in Ohio, Missouri and Indiana: "*I got out as fast as I could.*" They had come to Chicago, the closest big city, and this show allowed them to miss their homes, their parents who did their best and never did want to leave those towns or wanted to and never did. They remembered their brothers and boyfriends dying in farm accidents and were proud of me when my character won the essay contest. It was then they knew I'd make it to college. It was then they knew I might escape like they had. It was Michael who believed I could.

Mary Shen Barnidge, a critic for the Chicago Reader, said the cast of County Fair "resisted the temptation to mock, portraying potential stereotypes with natural compassion and respect." Once we had gotten the review, I felt brave enough to invite my co-workers. The following week, at both my jobs, I enjoyed a certain kind of attention, was no longer just the girl who planned parties for rich folks and wrote newsletters about who gave which donations. (Though those jobs are certainly important.) I had finally graduated from supporting actor to lead.

And how did I do it? Maybe it has to do with that rehearsal on my twenty-fifth birthday. We rehearsed the first scene of the play, a scene between me and Alex, a scene between me and my mother.

"Maggie," Mike said. "Keep it simple. I just want you two to talk to each other." (You have no idea how hard it is to just talk to someone sometimes.) Then he dug into his bag and pulled out a tennis ball, tossed it to me, and I immediately stiffened. I had learned

the ball exercise in college and I understood the purpose, but I was such a clumsy girl that sometimes it was difficult enough for me to catch a ball, let alone catch it *and* worry about acting.

“What’s your first line?” Mike asked.

“I don’t want to go to the fair.”

“And yours, Alex?” he asked.

“We have to,” she said.

“Okay, go,” Mike said.

Alex and I stood a few feet apart and looked at each other. She had wispy, honey-colored hair and a doll’s face, wore a long, baggy sweater, cotton yoga pants and clogs. She smiled at me, patiently. “I don’t want to go to the fair,” I said, and then I quickly tossed the ball. Alex caught it gently, as if it were something fragile.

“Hey Mag,” Mike said. “Try throwing it *on* the line, sweetheart.” He remembered, I thought. He remembered. I looked at him, he winked, and I threw the ball on the line. Alex and I played catch for an hour, said our lines to each other until they sounded natural. *He said it was a love letter to me.*

*

Michael and I sped down the Kennedy Expressway later that night with all the windows rolled down. He sang *Come What May* for me, looked over at me and smiled. He was so wonderfully dorky and earnest when he sang along to musicals. “*I will love you until my dying day...*” The green signs and white lettering whizzed by and Mike said, “Jesus is driving the car home tonight, babe.” I laughed, even though I felt slightly afraid. I mean, there was some sweet pleasure in all of this, right? I was being serenaded. “I’m going to marry Maggie Andersen!” he cried out. Then I held onto his thigh, felt his muscles tighten as he picked up

speed, watched his feet moving on the pedals. I couldn't wait to get to that fast food joint where he would order a hot dog and French fries and I would order nothing, but then eat half his food when we got home. "Mag!" he scolded. "I told you I'd buy you something! I told you to get your own!" I couldn't wait to get home and make love. This was important. *This* was life. But then I suddenly had a terrible feeling of impending doom.

"I think this is the happiest I'll ever be in my life," I said. "I don't think it'll get any better. I sort of just wish I could die right now. In a car wreck or something romantic."

"You're creeping me out, babe," Mike said. "Don't be a monster."

He squeezed my thigh, then kissed my hand. He still looked slightly nervous.

The passport expires soon.

9

In 1906, a backstage fire started at the Iroquois Theatre, during their inaugural Christmas production. The set pieces were made entirely of wood and the spotlight was hot. The principal actor, Eddie Foy, Sr., pleaded with the audience members to please stay calm, to please stay in their seats. The audience listened to the leading man, who had been a star in New York and only just recently returned to Chicago. This Irish-American charmer famous for his famous family vaudeville act. Many of the exits were locked from the outside, so he tried to calm the audience members while they waited for the fire trucks to arrive. Six-hundred women and children stayed frozen in their seats and turned into ash while flames licked the holiday scenery. Poor Eddie Foy barely escaped through a sewer.

Mike told me that County Fair was a love letter to me. And what comes next is my love letter to him, because he can't remember this day. (Not that he would he want to.) I'll tell you what happened. I'll tell you how I remember it.

When I awoke that morning in our queen-sized bed, I didn't appreciate the freckles on your shoulders or the hair sticking straight up on your head. I didn't tell you that I felt grateful for your greasy scent on the sheets. Instead, I bolted out of bed at nine in the morning and ran for the shower, yelling, "Wake up, Thornton! Time for the St. Patrick's Day parade!"

County Fair had ended – no rehearsals, no performances. We had the day to drink

away, an infinite amount of time, and a free weekend was a luxury for us. We were going to breakfast in the neighborhood I grew up in; I would immerse myself in a familiar culture where nobody asked about reviews or auditions. I hadn't seen my old friends in so long; I'd been sealed inside the National Pastime Theater for three months, playing an Iowa farm girl with parents who were splitting up. I hurried to the shower, turned it up steaming hot, and sang Irish folk songs out the tiny window, so the whole block might hear my newfound freedom. "*Oh, aye, the fields of Athenrye...*" I lathered my arms and breasts with sweet gels and oils. You yanked open the shower curtain and smiled approvingly. Now you were awake. But I didn't kiss you or ask you to join me. I splashed water at your face and pulled the curtain closed.

We drove into the center of the city, wearing Kelly green T-shirts and blue jeans, shamrock beads around our necks and big sunglasses on top of our heads. We sang the entire way, and when you sang Irish folk songs, I would've driven anywhere with you. When you sang Irish, I could've driven right off a cliff. "*So be easy and free when you're drinking with me. I'm a man you don't meet every day...*" We drove through barren, industrial corridors until we could see Wrigley Field, historic brick buildings, cobblestone roads, crowds of people in the sun. We hadn't seen a sunny parade day since childhood, when I rode on political floats with my father and you played in a tin whistle band.

We pulled up to Joe Mazzeffi's greystone building where a crowd of people in cable-knit sweaters crowded around the front steps smoking cigarettes and drinking cans of beer. Inside, there were more people and lines for the bathroom. My friend, the chef, kissed me on the cheek and shook your hand. He'd laid out a long table of scrambled eggs and crispy bacon, rice and beans, pecan pancakes. We piled our plates high, went to the keg and filled our plastic cups. I said hello as we weaved through the crowd and made sure everyone

remembered you. “Of course I remember the actor!” is the way most of them responded. They had seen our plays and our names in the papers. I asked about their babies and their wedding dates. In this environment, I was the powerful one, and you were proud of me.

“Are you queen of the St. Patrick’s Day parade?” you asked.

I stuck out my tongue and crossed my eyes. Then you looked at Paulie and Lynda, who had joined us, and said, “God she’s such a monster.”

My sisters and their significant others, my co-ed softball team and ex-boyfriends, my life before you. We toasted to each other and took hits from passed-around bottles of whiskey. And then we floated down Lincoln Avenue to the Brown Line station where we all herded onto the same elevated train car, loud and stinking of booze. I felt sorry for the families on the train, probably on their way to a museum or Chinatown. Those poor passengers who had to endure us. We pulled cans of beer from our backpacks and chugged them one after another, ice cold, rushing down our throats. My electricians and boilermakers happy to have a Saturday off. My doctors and lawyers, happy to return to their working class traditions. Me and my boyfriend, holding hands as we tried to keep our balance on an old train. We were happy, for once, not to be acting.

We stumbled off the train at Clark and Lake, and made our way down to Columbus, a new parade route this year. The river sparkled green, the bagpipers riled the crowd with fight songs, mobs of people dwarfed by the Chicago skyline. You bought me a little Irish flag from a souvenir stand. Then I ran off to the art museum where I worked (and therefore had free access to) so I could use a clean bathroom. When I returned to the madness, you were gone.

Someone told me you were showing around Paulie and Lynda who had wanted to see a Chicago St. Patrick’s Day, so I assumed that you were safe. I spotted my aunt in the

parade, marching with a flask and her husband on her arm. My sisters and I jumped over the wooden horse; some policemen shouted after us. We ran from them and blended into the march, waved at the television cameras, and I smiled my headshot smile. That is the last documented image of me that day, and I was happy. I can't look at the pictures of you because I'm afraid that there's something I missed, something I should've seen earlier.

At the end of the parade route, I went to Cal's, the bar/package liquor store where we always met if we lost each other, but I couldn't find my driver's license. I argued with the bouncer that I was twenty-five years old, goddamnit. Didn't I look it? But I didn't look it, then. You came to my rescue unexpectedly. From behind, you said, "I knew I'd find you here. You gave me your ID to hold, you dummy." We crowded around a window table with the friends that were left, and smoked cigarettes like they wouldn't kill us. Paulie loved "our people," he said. He loved us and our families, Amelia and Julie. We made him feel at home. Then he told stories about his loud Italian family and Lynda told about her uncles and her father, the kings of the V.F.W. Human beings are storytelling animals; we tell stories to understand ourselves. I was getting animated and loud, and a drunken old man paused at our table and slurred that I was the loveliest girl in the bar. You smiled and said, "She sure is."

"How about going back to our neighborhood?" you suggested. Paul and Lynda could always sleep over. It wouldn't be the first time.

With some difficulty, we flagged a cab and took it down to the Irish-American Heritage Center. Time for corned beef and cabbage, a set of traditional music. The band knew your family and played, *When You and I Were Young, Maggie*. I said, "Thornton, you'd better dance with me now." You led me around the floor by the small of my back, dipped me gracefully at the end of the song. There was an older professorial type wearing a suit jacket with patches on the elbows. His prattling about Irish politics made you angry, but I

told you to let him be. “God, my neck hurts,” you said suddenly. But the Heritage Center was buzzing and I couldn’t hear you that well. I fished an aspirin from my purse and handed it to you, who washed it down with beer. “Can you give me a massage?” you asked. So I began to knead the back of your neck while the others went on singing.

“Can we go now?” you asked soon after. “My neck is really killing me.”

I knew you must be in pain if you wanted to leave before closing time -- I should get you home to bed. I called out that we were leaving. Goodbye, Paulie and Lynda called from the dance floor where they stomped around until his hair was in his eyes and her glasses were falling off. Goodnight, they waved like shooting stars who were bright and fast and then gone. We stepped out into the night that had gotten cold and dark, and all we could hear was the singing getting farther and farther away. Oddly enough, just as we started down the stairs, I saw Connolly drive by, and flagged him down. He was on a sobriety kick at the time. Connolly was devoutly Catholic, went to church every Sunday and sometimes just felt terribly guilty about his fondness for Jameson, but he’d been on his way over to say hello.

“Can you take us home?” I asked. “Mike isn’t feeling well -- it’ll be impossible to get a cab.”

You stood with your palms down on the hood of his Cavalier, as if you were under arrest. You took deliberate, deep breaths, shook your head back and forth. Connolly asked if you were going to “blow chunks” and I said I didn’t think so. You eased slowly into the passenger’s seat and said softly to your friend, “Just drive.” I leaned forward in the back seat asking, “Baby, what’s wrong with you?”

When we pulled up in front of our bungalow, you looked afraid. You said, “I can’t go in there.”

“I’ll take you to bed,” I said. “I’ll take care of you. You just drank too much, that’s

all.”

“Mag, I can’t feel my hands.”

With that, Connolly sped away from 5254 North Lieb Street, and you began a long, steady moan. I couldn’t believe these sounds were coming from you, the man of incredible laughter.

John told us that he had had a panic attack once and this is what it felt like. His neck hurt like hell, his arms went numb and he thought he was having a heart attack, but it was really just anxiety. I kneaded the back of your neck again. Now you asked me what was wrong. “I don’t know,” I said. “But we’re going to see a doctor and he’ll be able to tell you exactly.” I still had great faith in doctors.

I looked out the window at the strip of Irish bars along the Kennedy Expressway. Kids billowing in and out, beer bottles in their hands, metallic green beads around their necks, shamrock stickers plastered all over their freckled faces and tweed caps stuck on their sweaty heads. We had been them just an hour ago.

I was still massaging, John was still rambling. He screeched up to the emergency room entrance of Resurrection, a Catholic hospital. “I can’t open the door,” you panicked. “My arms are totally numb.” I scampered out to open the door for you and started toward the sliding glass doors with the weight of you on my arm. The security guard took one look at you, ran for a wheelchair and you collapsed into it. I told him your arms were numb but he had already swept you away. I went inside to fill out the paperwork.

And who are you? His girlfriend. *Insurance?* Yes, Actor’s Equity. His card is in his wallet. *Profession?* Actor. *Symptoms?* Neck pain and numbness in the arms. *Last time he was here?* Not sure. He was at a hospital in Wisconsin last summer for a bug bite that swelled up. *Primary physician?* He doesn’t have one. *DOB?* 03/03/79. He’s twenty-four years old. *Social security*

number? I'm sorry, I don't know it by heart. *Thank you. Please have a seat in the waiting room.* It's just a panic attack, isn't it? *I'm sorry ma'am, I just don't know.*

I called your parents from a pay phone; your father's voice was gravel. Of course, they had been out for the St. Patrick's Day festivities too.

"It might be nothing," I said. "But I thought I should let you know."

I went outside to smoke a cigarette. I smoked one, lit the second with the first and the third with the second. Your parents came reeling toward me. A nurse signaled through the window with annoyance. They were going to let us see you now, she said. Connolly stayed in the waiting room. I sighed relief, pushed through a padded door and headed down a hallway of crucifixes and biblical passages. Okay, Thornton, I thought. From now on, no more drinking, no more cigarettes and we're going on a diet. We'll go to bed early, we'll try yoga and organic everything.

I was the one who saw you first, much paler than before under all that fluorescent light. Restrained to what looked like a dental chair, gulping for air. All of the doctors yelling, "Thornton! Critical!" I had always dreamed of Thornton being my last name. It complemented my first name so nicely. Thornton as in The Quiet Man. I always gave your name when I made reservations, and you always smiled when I said it.

"Thornton! Critical!"

"I can't breathe," you mouthed to me, fear flashing in your eyes.

Your parents rushed in behind me, your father already hiccupping tears. He had retired from the Chicago Police Department the week before and you were his only child. I held your clammy hand and said, "Don't be afraid, baby. It's going to be O.K." Even though I wasn't at all sure of that. The doctors rushed around and didn't seem to have time to explain. "He needs to be intubated!" one of them cried out. Your mother asked what that

meant, but I didn't have the energy to explain it to her.

Intubated meant you had to be put on a ventilator because you weren't capable of breathing for yourself anymore. Intubated meant they would have to empty the contents of your stomach and sedate you before they inserted breathing tubes. Intubated meant we had to leave you alone with the doctors and your dignity. So we did.

"Am I going to die?" you whispered to the doctor.

He was an honest man: he said *I don't think so*.

Back to the waiting room where I sat beside your parents and Connolly, who talked and talked, but sounded like they were under water. I focused on the television, blasting at midnight, talk shows where dreams come true. What *were* our dreams before that night? I wanted to be a famous actress, I guess, though that was a rather abstract dream. My real dream was to stay with you forever. Your dream was to marry me, but only *after* you were respected as an actor, and that respect was quickly materializing. We were stopped in restaurants and theaters sometimes, on the street in certain neighborhoods.

I focused intently on Oprah's made up face until a doctor came for us. A thirty-something man with a shiny bald head, designer eyeglasses and a perfectly manicured goatee. He asked us to follow him. When he saw me, he said, "Family only."

"She *is* family," your mother said – the first time she had ever truly advocated for me.

We, the new family, trailed behind the doctor to a room bleached of color, the sterility of the place making me aware that my coat smelled of an awful blend of cigarettes and floral perfume. I tried to keep a distance from your mother who feels offended by the smell of smoke, but she put her arm around me anyway. Your father stepped around to the other side and I took his hand, big like a bear paw. I was grateful for the life in it, grateful for

his crying. I squeezed his fingers tightly.

The doctor said it like this: “We *believe* that Michael may have Guillain-Barre Syndrome, which could mean temporary paralysis, up to one or two years, maybe. At this point, it’s still a mystery, but it seems like a possibility, and we wanted to keep you informed. If this turns out to be the case, he may have to learn to walk all over again, but it *is* only temporary and he should recover sooner than later, a boy his age. We’ll pray for Guillain-Barre, but we’re going to run a series of tests. We’ve pretty much ruled out heart trouble and we do have him stabilized. Do *you* have any questions?”

I spilled out into the hall then without any of them and saw you lying on a portable bed. A suctioning tube slowly drained the contents of your stomach. Your cousin Joey, the paramedic, rushed by in uniform (I’m still not sure how he found out we were there), gave me a quick kiss and said, “Jesus Maggie, what’d you feed him?” I recalled the corned beef sandwich I had shared with you just hours earlier, dark rye with spicy mustard and cabbage. You were so exposed, anyone could’ve seen you lying there. A homeless man on the other side of the screechy curtain was yelling, “Nurse! Nurse! Can I have my breakfast now?” In a way, I wanted to laugh, and I wanted you to laugh with me, but your eyes were closed now, tears leaking out the sides. The doctor came and touched my shoulder, assured me that you were on morphine and felt no more pain now. There wouldn’t be any laughing today; there wouldn’t be laughing for a long time.

*

I stood in a hallway staring at you as the doctor grilled me about your personal life.

“Is he a drug user?”

“No.”

“A smoker?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Just a few years, since he was twenty.”

“Has he lost a considerable amount of weight recently?”

“Have you looked at him?” I joked.

“Has he lost weight recently?”

“No.”

“Does he play any sports?”

“Not really.”

They asked how much Red Bull you drank, if you took dietary supplements, again if you were a cocaine user, if you had engaged recently in full contact sports. Occasionally, you drank vodka with Red Bull, I said. Once every few months, you pretended to diet, which meant you ate two meals a day instead of three, and drank water instead of pop. I insisted you had never tried cocaine, even though all those assholes on the set of that independent film abused it. The only sport you had ever mastered was golf; your mother was too afraid of full-contact sports, especially after the ice hockey incident in junior high, from which you still have a chin scar. I so enjoyed being a scholar of you that I momentarily forgot the purpose of the questions, the coma they had induced. The doctor asked if there had been any car accidents in the past six months, if anything unusual had happened today.

“We drank a lot,” I conceded guiltily. “He drinks a lot all the time.” And then I couldn’t avoid the shame of the past few months. There were perfect nights in the apartment, but now I could only see myself prancing around the living room, manically singing, *“I have decided to leave you forever, And the daffodils look lovely today...”* I sang as loudly as I could so you’d know I wasn’t kidding. It had probably started long before, but I only noticed

in the confines of the apartment. The Cherry Docs reviews had done some damage:

Chris Jones, Chicago Tribune – “With the help of (director Kate) Buckley’s typically snappy transitions, Gregory and Thornton do their best to make the piece work. They have a few powerful moments of connection, but, in the final analysis, neither performance rings true... (Michael) Thornton’s a good and honest actor, but he feels unrehearsed and unsure of how to get inside his character’s twisted brain.”

Hedy Weiss, Chicago Sun-Times – “(The character) Michael’s 180-degree turnaround is something considerably short of believable, and while (Michael) Thornton easily humanizes the guy, neither he nor the playwright is entirely convincing. Redemption is a far more anguished, complicated and perhaps incomplete process than what is shown here. And in some cases it may be an impossible one.”

That’s when it became worrisome. You started drinking like it was a job. After County Fair rehearsals, the bartenders would have a beer and a shot set up for you; they knew your name and all your troubles. The following day, at rehearsal, your voice would be hoarse but you would still say such incredible things, so I wouldn’t tell, I *couldn’t* tell the others. How after the cast abandoned you, usually around one or two, you started dialing everyone in your phone book, begging them to go to the five o’clock bar with you. Actors you had performed with, your cousin, bartenders you came across in your travels. When you came home in the early morning hours, you ate a greasy paper bag of fried food in the front room, turned up the television too loud, came to bed and lay beside me, whispered that you loved me and kissed me, but not as sexy as you did when you were sober, and then you promptly fell asleep. Usually, as I was dressing for work, the vomiting began.

I was angry the first two times, and determined to leave the third. I banged on the bathroom door and yelled, “You think you’re fucking James Joyce? James *Joyce*? Well you

don't have half his genius!" Later, as I stood in our bedroom doorway in a business suit, you sat on the hardwood floor in gray briefs, looking pathetic.

"He's been drinking a lot," I repeated quietly, feeling still that I was betraying you.

"He's twenty-four," the doctor said. "Doesn't mean a thing. Look how many frat boys are still alive and healthy. Anyway, try to think about injuries, head injuries, things of that nature. Drug use, fist fights, anything you can think of that might be helpful. We, of course, won't tell his parents anything you don't want us to."

The doctor started to walk away, then spun around with an afterthought. "Maggie," he said. "What you and Mr. Connolly did today was very smart, and very brave. You saved Michael's life. If he had gone home tonight, he would've died in his sleep."

The doctor returned to your parents and I stayed where I was, unmoving, as nurses and doctors hurried around me, calling out urgent medical orders. You slept without snoring, slipped silently into morphine dreams, and I had no idea who I was.

Somewhere, your mother asked why there were so many young Chinese girls in bubbles, and the doctor explained that an infectious respiratory disease was attacking the Asian community. More yelling, more criticals. A tan blonde woman sobbed while explaining to a doctor that her mother had the heart attack on the airplane -- they had to prepare for emergency landing.

I went back to the waiting room and pushed two chairs together. I lay my head on one, scrunched my feet up on the other and let my torso sag in between. Connolly patted my head while he read a magazine. I squeezed my eyes closed and thought I heard you laughing. I thought I heard you telling your infamous pumpkinhead joke to the nurses. I thought I heard you say, "Come on, Bruiser, let's go home now. I'm sober now, I can drive." But every time I looked up, I only saw your mother multiplying into more and more of her sisters, who

had come to the waiting room to comfort her. Your father's red-rimmed eyes were lifeless as he embraced them. The Irish song I'd been singing in the shower – *The Fields of Athenry* – it played on in my mind. "*From a lonely prison cell, I heard a young girl calling, 'Michael they have taken you away...'*"

Our flannel sheets, our unmade bed: you would've died beside me. That was the only thing I could hold onto. I didn't know who I was; I didn't know where I ended and you began. But I knew that I was frightened. This was March 15, 2003. *Beware the Ides of March*. I was twenty-five years old and you were twenty-four. At five o'clock in the morning, I called my parents' home. I told them something terrible had happened.

10

So many artists have stayed in the game because they felt loved and supported by their parents. Jessica Thebus, one of Chicago's finest directors, credits her mother, Mary Ann, the actress, for encouraging her and guiding her. Jim Lasko has said that Redmoon Theater wouldn't exist without his parents' financial and moral support. But not all parents can afford to be as understanding and supportive. Not after they've grown up poor and afraid.

If this flashback scene were a play, the characters would be Alan and Laura Andersen, a couple in their fifties – soft-bodied, graying at the temples. She, a college graduate and a Vietnam War protestor and he, a veteran of that same war, drafted at the age of eighteen. Their oldest daughter, Maggie, would be twenty-one, and her boyfriend, Michael, twenty. The setting: Alan and Laura's two-bedroom apartment in Lincoln Square. They have raised three children here. It looks like a mess, they know. It looks lived in, is what they tell people. Fantastic dust bunnies in the corners, hardwood floors scratched to shit, an original Picasso on the wall. The Picasso willed to them by Alan's sister, who is dead now. She "married up" and advised him that he should too. So, he married a smart girl, the girl he loved, whose books are piled everywhere, whose hamper is overflowing. The rooms are small, the walls need paint, the rooms are filled with clutter. If this were a play, the father

would be simmering over Maggie's decision to take an acting job in Texas upon her graduation from college.

Mike, Maggie's boyfriend, tells the father that it's a wonderful opportunity they've been given. There's no live theater to speak of in San Antonio. They'll be performing for high-school kids, some of whom have never seen a play. Usually, the father would tease Mike, call him a slippery leprechaun or shanty Irish, but today he just glares, and Mike leaves the room. He sits in the living room with the mother while she waits for her cue. In this apartment, they'll hear everything.

"How are you gonna live?" the father asks. "Have you ever thought about that?"

"They're putting us up in a house there. They're giving us a stipend."

He exhales loudly, rolls his eyes.

"You have a college degree," the father says. "And you wanna be an actor?"

His wife walked down the aisle at twenty-two – a veil trailing behind her, her mother's wedding gown.

"You don't have a pot to piss in," the father says, and webs of wrinkles appear around his eyes. "Your sisters are gonna pass you up."

"What would you like me to do?" his oldest daughter asks.

He would like her to take a job that pays well, a job with health benefits, one that would give her a sense of security.

"I worked my whole life to make you comfortable," he says. "Vacations, eating out, new gym shoes every year. You'll have none of that. You'll have *nothing*."

"I don't give a shit about any of that," she says.

"You don't *give a shit*?" He pauses to look at her. "For a smart girl, you're pretty stupid."

“And what should I do? Be like you?”

“Not a cop.”

“Work the precincts in the dead of winter?”

He knocks on doors in the neighborhood, asking voters to support his candidate, the machine Democrat, whoever that might be. He does this in the hopes of getting a transfer to a desk job; he’s too old to be on the streets, and a desk job requires a phone call. A desk job requires clout. But a different breed is moving into the neighborhood now. Yuppies, Chicago transplants, academics and artistic types. They slam the door in his face because they don’t understand precinct captains and patronage, and they think they’re better than him, that they’re above it all. They slam the door on him, and his oldest daughter wants to spit on them. This image of doors being slammed in his face can always move her to tears or true anger when she has an emotionally demanding role. She wants to *spit* on them.

“That’s your dream,” she says to her father.

“My dream was to make money, Mag. That’s all.”

He grew up in a family of seven children, an apartment the size of his own. He still eats like a savage, like someone might rob him of his dinner.

“You’re gonna be a bust-out,” he says. Then: “You’ve really disappointed me this time.”

She laughs, so she won’t cry. Tomorrow, she’s going to San Antonio on a grant that Michael wrote. She’s going to perform in an Albee play, a hell of a role – the riverwalk, at-risk high-schools, abandoned warehouses in the industrial district. Kids who have never seen plays will see one and they will applaud wildly and ask bold questions. An NPR correspondent will interview her about absurdist theater and her favorite playwrights. She’s

going to perform six nights a week, stay with a Mexican family and speak a little Spanish.

Hang out in transvestite bars and drink until Monday morning.

“I just wanted more for you, that’s all,” the father says.

“But I’m *happy*,” Maggie says, too pleadingly, too eager for his approval.

And the fact is: He’s not *unhappy*. He loves his wife and his daughters, his furloughs and his salary.

“Happy,” he repeats. “You’re livin’ in LaLa Land.”

The mother enters the room and says, “Al, this is all she’s ever wanted to do. Why do you *insist* on crushing her dreams?”

He considers her question before answering.

“Because she’s so fucking bright, that’s why.”

He storms out of the room, slams a door somewhere, and maybe it’s then that the mother remembers the first time she took her girl to the theater. She never bought her flashy clothes or toys, but theater tickets? Always. Ever since Peter Pan. Maybe the mother wonders what kind of a monster she’s created.

My father’s high opinion of me feels like too much; it always fills me with shame. In my thirties, I did start to want financial stability. But in my twenties? It was a lost cause.

Mike drove us around in his Toyota Corolla that summer, the one his parents bought him after he dropped out of Iowa. He dropped out to come to Chicago and try to make it as a professional actor. We hadn’t yet told that to Al Andersen. We saved that for a rainy day. It was summer and we had rehearsal in Rogers Park, at our director’s apartment. I couldn’t shake the discouragement. Mike allowed the silence, for a minute.

“He’ll come around,” Mike said.

“It’s not like your parents,” I snapped.

And yet, it wasn't so different.

Our fathers were both low-ranking police officers; our mothers had sacrificed to send us to Catholic schools. But Mike was an only child and his parents would've done anything for him.

"Our parents just aren't like us," he said. "They just don't have big dreams."

"See, don't do that," I said. "They *do* have big dreams -- they're just different. They dream of more money and bigger houses. They dream your dreams for you."

"All I'm saying is that if you're an artist, you have to divorce yourself from all that. You can't worry about what *anyone* thinks. Even me."

I envied that his parents bought him this car, the way he could so easily spout his philosophy because he didn't need to worry about money or their approval. I hated the way he drove so assertively through the city, and the way he blew me away in rehearsal, because I was still thinking about my parents, and not about the play at all. He continued to believe I was an artist, even when I didn't deserve it. He visited me at all my dead-end jobs after that, took me out for lunch to break up the monotony of the day, bought me hundreds of grilled cheese sandwiches. We would sit on the same side of the booth and invent stories about all the diner characters and laugh. Most people just suck it up, their soul-crushing day jobs, but Mike spoiled me sometimes as much as his parents spoiled him.

11

One of the main differences between Chicago and New York theaters is that New York relies more heavily on a star system. If producers can get Hollywood celebrities on Broadway, the shows will more likely sell. This is not to say that Chicago doesn't go for star power sometimes, but more often, they cast their own. This idea of ensemble theater is crucial to the Chicago aesthetic. The tradition insists that the emphasis be placed on entire ensembles who work to create a seamless, unified world onstage rather than drawing attention to individual performances.

We had held ensemble auditions for our second season just days before the stroke.

Jon Berry, a reputable young director, had agreed to direct Six Characters in Search of an

Author, one of our dream projects, but only if Mike played the role of the director. Yes, Mike agreed, he would do it. Everyone else would have to report to the Griffin Theatre and audition for the guest director.

Mike announced this news at a “company retreat” at my parents’ summer cabin in Wisconsin, and when he did, I said, “What the fuck?” I articulated what everyone else was thinking, my primary role within the company. I said it with my father’s quick temper and my mother’s narrowed eyes, which made Mike stammer just a little. A scene in the theater was wonderful, but not in the company of friends. All of the ensemble was there that weekend, sitting around a fireplace on stained carpeting and dented sofa sleepers. We woke early in the morning, shared bagels and coffee, and read scripts until two in the morning. We read Absolute Hell and Night and Her Stars, shows we would later produce for reasons of sheer nostalgia, I think. By the end of the weekend, we had smoked a carton of cigarettes, drank cases of beer and we all had the same terrible cold. “The *point* of an ensemble,” I said, “is that we work best with each other, so *we* get dibs before the general public. If Lynda and I have worked together before, we’ll have a shorthand. The trust is already established, before we even begin rehearsals. Have you *read* Steppenwolf’s mission statement?”

“I have,” Mike said. “Actually, I *attended* the School at Steppenwolf. However, our ensemble will look better, more *reputable*, if we bring in new energy. Also, if we’re working outside the company, and showcasing ourselves in other arenas.”

Most of our ensemble members had not yet worked outside The Gift. I myself was lazy about sending out headshots and auditioning outside the company. Mike was attacking me for that, but also because I had questioned his authority. I threw my beer can at the sliding glass window and said, “This is no time for personal insults. I am not just your girlfriend. I’m a member of this company.” The beer spilled in streaks down the window.

But I had made my point, obviously. The next morning, Mike announced that the ensemble would audition one week before the general public. We documented it in our by-laws. Still, our ensemble members audition before the general public. Otherwise, what's the point?

I wanted the role of the daughter in Six Characters in Search of an Author, the troubled girl who battled with her father, wanted a better life for her siblings. The daughter who stood up for herself, confronted her father, made her mother cry so often, it was high-pitched and operatic. I wanted the role more than I had wanted others; I needed to play the pull I felt between Mike's life and my father's, the two at-war halves of myself.

Jon Berry had seen me as the nurse in Orestes 2.0 and said "I'm so glad you haven't been typecast, dear. You were amazing. See, this is the benefit of an ensemble." I had to agree with him. He also came to County Fair at The National Pastime; he waited for me outside the small dressing room. I hadn't even changed out of my overalls when he said, "Maggie, you just get better with every show." I had moved seamlessly from Naughty Nurse to Unlikely Ingénue so I knew he would cast me as the daughter.

But when I showed up at The Griffin, a small storefront theater in Andersonville, a lesbian neighborhood of Swedish shops and microbreweries, I felt the familiar dread. I was up against my ensemble members with whom I had never competed, and every woman worth her salt wanted this role. I knew Mike was inside the theater with Jon, reading as The Director. I had never auditioned for him so formally. I hung over the drinking fountain and drank the lukewarm tap water. I stretched my lower back and tried to remember my last audition, what in the world had calmed me then.

The next thing I knew, I was inside the theater, a black box, with Mike, Jon and Will, the Co-Artistic Director. Mike sat on the set of the show that was currently running. He had

arranged himself in a wing chair, wore a waist-length rust-brown leather jacket and a new pair of jeans. He looked classically handsome and perfectly calm.

“Hello, Maggie,” he said as if he were very happy to see me. But I couldn’t enjoy the kinkiness—couldn’t even pretend I was the new actress he was seeing for the first time, the new actress he wanted to sleep with. I couldn’t relax into the performance because I didn’t understand why Will was allowed in the theater, sitting in the back row with a notepad and a pen. I feared he would tell the truth about me, that I was a fraud with no formal training. That I had performed in almost every show so far and at some point, the subscribers would need a break from Maggie Andersen. At some point, the critics would stop being kind to me. I wondered if Lynda had done a monologue or a cold reading. I wondered how many minutes she had lasted.

“Maggie,” Jon said. “I would love for you to sing to us.”

I hadn’t expected that I’d have to sing, but I thought fast. *I Am Sixteen* from The Sound of Music. I used to perform the gazebo scene with my sister. I used to dream in vignettes from The Sound of Music, wish for Rolf the Nazi to be my secret boyfriend. I insisted on being Liesl and gave my sister notes on how to play Rolf. “Okay,” I said to Jon. “I’m ready.”

I began to sing in an unsteady voice, “*I am sixteen going on seventeen, I know that I’m naïve. Fellows I meet may tell me I’m sweet and willingly I believe...*” I swear I heard Mike laughing, I swear I heard Will laughing. Jon leaned forward, smiling, nodding his head patiently. It was the perfect song for me to sing at that time in my life when I defined myself according to the opinions of men, gay or straight. My knees knocked against each other, my mouth went dry, my teeth stuck to my lips. But I went on singing. “*Totally unprepared am I to face a world of men. Timid and shy and scared am I...*”

“Okay, great!” Jon interrupted. “Let’s read a scene.”

I wondered what Lynda had sung and knew I shouldn’t have chosen the goddamned Sound of Music. She had likely pulled off some female rap artist or a classic country love song. When I took the script from Jon, my hands shook so violently that the words on the page smeared and blurred together.

Mike, in an effort to help me, was especially playful during the reading, but I was stuck on the page, not making any sort of eye contact. He nudged my chin up with his finger, looked me straight in the eyes and said, “*You’re in search of a what?*” He pretended as if he couldn’t hear me, leaned in so close that I could smell his mouthwash. He touched my shoulder like a conscientious director might. But I couldn’t play, I couldn’t shake the terror. He was so natural on stage, and I was trembling. We didn’t even get through the scene before John dismissed me. “Thanks so much, Maggie. We’ll be in touch.” When I left the theater, Mike hung his head so low that I couldn’t see his eyes. I left the theater feeling two feet tall. I walked out to Clark Street where I waited for a bus, where the world outside seemed irrelevant. Happy women holding hands and walking home with Swedish pastries, music blaring from local pick-up joints.

I got on the bus, surfed to the back row and sat down, listened to my headphones as I endured the evening traffic and watched the city go by slowly. Chicago looked gray and dirty, the snow had melted to reveal the curb litter, and I was going home alone. It was part of my turning twenty-five. No one was responsible for me anymore, I realized that year, a little later than most. Not fiscally, not emotionally. Not my father, my mother, or Mike. I had chosen a profession that made me crazy and a man that made me crazier. It wasn’t fair, I thought, that I hadn’t succeeded in this art form that I valued above all others. It was a long bus ride home.

When Mike came home late that night, I was angry to hear that Mary, another company member, had gotten the role. When he walked in, I was sitting on our wedding cake sofa in the dark, drinking a can of Old Style, looking at the telephone and listening to a melancholic song about failure. He flicked on the light.

“Ask if you can audition again,” he said matter-of-factly. “He hasn’t told her yet.”

“Fuck you.”

I stormed into the kitchen to grab another beer, but more for dramatic effect than actually wanting one.

“Why are you yelling at me? What did *I* do?” But he wasn’t really surprised; he was totally prepared for the argument.

He followed me zigzagging around our small apartment as I mother-fucked him, tried desperately to blame him for my humiliation. I was angry because he wasn’t instantly sympathetic. I was angry because I could tell he was embarrassed of me. Ultimately, he was thinking of himself, the role he was excited to play, his theater company’s ambitious second season. But I knew him well enough to know that he also felt I was a reflection on him, that I had disappointed him. Also, anytime I failed, I took it out on him, because I was jealous, foaming at the mouth with it, because I knew that even when he felt insecure about an audition, which he rarely did, it never looked like what I had done tonight. I sat down at the kitchen table, and opened a beer which fizzed and foamed. Then I turned to look at him.

“I looked like an idiot,” I said, and my voice broke.

And then his embarrassment disappeared, his tough love lost its force and Michael Thornton hugged his girlfriend, who was a mess, a bundle of insecurities and nervous energy -- an actress? She still wasn’t sure.

“Bruiser,” he said. “You kinda had a stroke up there tonight.”

He started imitating me, shimmying around the room, shaking out his hands, making his teeth chatter. “What song was that?” he asked incredulously. “Did you learn that at summer camp? Why didn’t you just sing *Happy Birthday*?” I laughed harder, swatted at him. *It was The Sound of Music! Stop it!*

“Yeah, you totally stroked out,” he said.

I laughed.

“Maggie,” he said, sitting down and pulling me onto his lap. “I’ll tell you again. I’m in love with you, but I’m even more in love with the future, the woman you’ll become.” It had never occurred to me that I wouldn’t become that woman beside him.

*

In the waiting room, Frankie woke me and said they had ruled out Guillain-Barre Syndrome. Mike had had a spinal tap, one of the most painful medical procedures, and he hadn’t felt a thing. He couldn’t feel pain or temperature, anything below his neck. The doctors thought it might be a stroke of the spinal cord. They thought he might never walk again.

“What’s a *spinal* stroke?” I asked.

Frankie was crying again.

“It’s noon, baby. You’ve been here all night. I’ll have someone take you home.”

Frankie, who had taken us for pizza and beers every Wednesday while we lived in the apartment, because he knew that we were broke. Frankie, who had one son in the world.

12

While Byrne Piven was dying of lung cancer in a Chicago hospital, his former students came home. (The Cusacks and the Quinns had learned so much from him, they said, at the Piven Theatre Workshop.) They came home from Los Angeles and New York, and re-enacted favorite scenes for him, sang songs and recited poetry. They did this to celebrate and honor him, and to distract him from his pain. Hospitals can be the worst places in the world, which is why the visitors have a responsibility to make them somehow pretty.

The next twenty-four hours are a blur, as they say. I know a few things: I changed my clothes and called Redmoon Theater and the Art Institute and left messages. Previously, I had called in and said I was sick when I wasn't, said I had a root canal when I didn't, but this was not a lie. No one would lie about this. I called our friends who were at work on a Monday, barely able to function after a weekend of binge drinking. I know that Rick left work early to take me back to the hospital. He stood in our living room which was suddenly a sad place because Mike wasn't sitting on the couch playing video games or reading the *New Yorker*.

Mike had always hated our decorative couch pillows, a housewarming gift, and always asked if we could get rid of them, but I insisted that we keep them, because we owned so little. Rick held one up and said, "We should bring this to him. It'll make him laugh." I didn't know how to prepare Rick, who hadn't seen him yet, and I didn't know how to prepare myself. "They say he may have to be in a wheelchair for a while," Rick said. These words meant nothing to me because I still didn't realize the severity of our situation.

"Then I'll marry him in a wheelchair," I said.

We entered Resurrection Hospital, and I said *Michael Thornton*, but this time we were given neon orange ICU visitor's badges instead of front row theater tickets. We rode the elevator up to a family room where Mike's extended family urged his mother to have some pizza or some fruit or some baked goods. The room was filled with food and cops in uniform, cheap paintings, paisley furniture.

"Maggie," one of his aunts said. "Make sure to wash your hands, and we can only go in a few at a time."

Then Uncle Jerry came out of the room and said to his mother, "The priest is here." He came over to kiss me. "Sweetheart," he said in my ear. "This is worse than Vietnam."

Jerry had done two tours in the Marine Corps. They say the war made his curly black hair turn gray and straight.

“We don’t want him to know how bad it is,” Mrs. Thornton said. “We don’t want him to be scared. No crying in there, okay? That’s the only rule.”

I washed my hands in the family room sink and prepared to put on a show for my boyfriend. I wouldn’t disappoint him again -- *this* was an audition I would nail. I walked toward the room feeling tightly pressed between his parents. I saw the frightened eyes of the old, heard the terrible coughs of the dying and the desperate sobbing of those they would leave behind. I walked into Mike’s private room; he opened his eyes and they really did light up for a second. He has such gorgeous eyes. His mother huffed. “Your eyes didn’t light up like that for me.”

I hurried over to the side of the bed, kissed up and down his face.

“Is this hurting him?” I asked the nurse.

“No,” she said. “You’re fine.”

I was fine but he was barely breathing. His face was pale and covered in a film of sweat. The priest came into the room and it turns out he knew Mike’s parents from the old neighborhood. I held Mike’s hands that didn’t move anymore as his parents whispered with the priest.

“Michael, I hope from now on you’ll go to church,” his mother said, trying very hard to maintain her composure.

He nodded his head, then looked at me and rolled his eyes. Or did he? They began to close and open. The priest read over Mike from a worn Bible. He blessed his head with the oil on his thick fingers. Mike finally closed his eyes. “Amen,” I said and crossed myself even though I had a feeling I was done with God. And then I was angry with myself for *not*

believing. Maybe if I believed, his eyes would open again. What if they never looked at me again? The thought panicked me because no one had ever looked at me the way he had. He looked at me in rehearsals when I swore like a sailor because I couldn't remember that one fucking line, goddamnit. He smiled wryly and said, "She's a doll, isn't she?" He looked at me naked and sprawled on the bed after the annual Christmas party and said softly, "You have the most beautiful body I have ever seen." He didn't stop looking for a long time.

*

The phone on the wall in the family room rang and Mrs. Thornton asked me to answer it. "I don't want to talk to anyone," she said.

I picked it up.

"Maggie, what happened?" Sheldon asked.

I slid down to the floor.

"They just read Last Rites," I said.

*

My father had come to pick me up from the apartment on Christmas Day and I had asked him to come inside. I stood in the snow in a silver dress. "Please, Dad," I said. "It's decorated so pretty." I had missed my father's house during those holiday months, claimed our apartment didn't feel like Christmas. I came home from work one Friday and Mike had decorated the door with metallic gold wrapping paper. He bought a Scotch pine and decorated it with ornaments. "You have to see the tree," I said to my father. He looked straight ahead at the blizzard. "Get in the car," he said.

Soon after Last Rites, I told Mike's mother I would stay bedside so she could get some sleep in the family room. The doctor said we had a few more days to wait and see. Frankie made arrangements to go out for a beer which is what we all agreed he needed. I sat

beside Mike and rubbed his hands with lotion as I updated him on things. “Sheldon called,” I said. “He was crying.”

I checked his face for reaction.

“Rick was here. I think he’s gonna marry that girl. But we’ll get married too. Don’t worry.”

Still nothing.

“So, I wonder who else got cast in the Pirandello play. You’d better hurry up and get well. Rehearsals start pretty soon.”

I paused.

“Yeah, I think I’ll just stay here. I don’t want to go back to the apartment without you.”

I couldn’t stop rambling because the silence frightened me as much as all the beeping. It was the longest I’d ever gone without talking to Mike, and I’d been talking to him since I was seventeen. I wasn’t sure if my opinions were worthwhile unless I told them to him first. I asked the nurses what the numbers on the monitors meant and one of them showed me how to suction the saliva from his mouth when he made the awful choking sound. The doctors were still saying spinal infarction – C2 – nothing below the neck. They didn’t know if he’d ever breathe on his own again. But I wanted to know about his mind. There was a time he felt threatened because I had a crush on a guy who studied Physics and the next time we saw the guy, Mike knew a good deal about Quantum Physics. By the end of the conversation, the physicist said, “Damn, I thought you said he was an actor.” He had a photographic memory, an uncanny ability to comprehend anything and quickly. He was a thinker, and a good one, which was why I felt honored that he had chosen me, which is why I defined myself at the time by the way that he perceived me.

The priest returned with Mrs. Thornton.

“A prayer before bedtime,” she said. “The doctor thinks it’s a good idea.”

Behind them, in the hallway, I saw my father.

“Your father’s here to take you home, honey.”

Alan Andersen looked into the hospital room and I don’t know what he saw. His daughter sitting beside her boyfriend on life support, I guess. The boyfriend he hadn’t wanted her to live with, the priest he feared and admired. “Hello, Father,” he said respectfully. He entered the room, gave Rita a hug and a kiss. He felt sorry for her, this woman who was exactly his age, had grown up poor like him. She didn’t deserve this sentence.

“Let’s go home,” my father said.

“I don’t want to,” I said, not moving my eyes from Mike.

I was an adult woman now, living on my own, working two jobs to make ends meet and still acting. I had been happy in the apartment, sometimes; I couldn’t go back to my parents. And yet I didn’t want to be alone. But if Mike didn’t make it through the night...

“Go home, honey,” Mrs. Thornton said. “We’ll see you tomorrow bright and early.”

“You haven’t slept,” my father said.

I bent in half to kiss my boyfriend.

My father came closer and it only made me crazy, to be pulled in between these two men again, to be pulled in such different directions, the two parts of myself that were constantly in conflict. My father pulled me away because I was making a scene now, crying loudly and saying, “It’s not fair.”

“I know, babe,” he said. “Stop now. You’re making Rita upset.”

I looked into the room once more and saw Mike's eyes fly open; he saw me and he did look afraid.

"He's an actor," I said to the nurses on our way out as my father held my arm firmly. "He's one of the best actors I've ever seen."

Why did that matter? Maybe his mother thought it was strange that I said that. Maybe she thought I loved him for strange reasons, or that I didn't really love him, but I loved him for everything. It's just that acting was half of who he was. That's what he would've wanted people to say.

My father and I got lost in the hospital somehow, took a wrong turn, and ended up in a laundry room in the basement. Industrial-sized washing machines churned with stained sheets and pillowcases.

"Think," my father said. "How do we get out?"

"How the hell am I supposed to know?"

"Great. Now we're lost. What the *fuck* is goin' on around here?"

We didn't say much on the way home. I rolled down the window to get some air. We got stuck at several red lights, and my father turned the radio on and off compulsively. But when we arrived at his apartment, his territory, he seemed to relax a little. He led me to my mother. She had made up the couch in the basement with soft pillows and cartoon sheets.

I lay down in my jeans, and my mother covered me with two blankets.

"Right to sleep and not a peep," my father whispered. The comfort of my childhood.

Then he went upstairs to the kitchen with my mother and when he thought I couldn't hear him he said, "It should be me in there. I'm old, I've lived a life already."

"How does he look?" my mother asked.

"He looks like he's gonna die. That's how he fuckin' looks."

But he did not, he would not, die. In those days, when he thought he might, he felt like he was floating. He said he wrote a monologue to me in his mind – a three-day monologue. I have tried to piece it together, but all I can come up with is:

“Dear Maggie, you were right: There’s only love. Please don’t marry Brendan Donaldson—he won’t be good for you. Sweetheart: I love you. I love your birthmark shaped like Africa, and quite honestly, everything about you. If I could tell you only one thing? Stop being so afraid of looking foolish. Go farther sooner. I will admit to you that some days I loved you so much that I wanted to rip your head right off, and some days, I forgot altogether. I’m so sorry that I did. I used to be afraid that the children wouldn’t look Irish enough with you, that they’d look like dark gypsies, like your family. But now I don’t think that anymore. And I can’t stop thinking of making love. And I’m sorry I left my porn out that one time when your mom came over. Remember that time when I smoked that bad pot, that shit laced with PCP? I looked in the mirror and all I could see was Christopher Reeve—I couldn’t even see myself—but you kissed me and reminded me that my parts still moved. You were right: there’s only love.”

I woke up the next morning and took a shower at my parents’ house, wailed under the running water, didn’t care if my mother heard me. I went back to the hospital the next morning and the next and the next. President Bush declared war on Iraq and we watched the images on television. A small man came to remove the feeding and breathing tubes. He warned us that Mike may not be able to speak at first. We didn’t know yet if his mind had been affected. The man rolled Mike away and I thought of all he had taught me. He had introduced me to Jerzy Grotowski and the Coen Brothers, David Foster Wallace, Susan Lori-Parks. We had had long discussions about James Joyce, WEB DuBois, the Kennedys, Christopher Hitchens. We looked up so many words in the dictionary. He made sense of me

when I was inarticulate. And when I got frustrated in rehearsal, he explained sympathetically, “She’s a yeller. She had to fight to be heard growing up.” When Mike was back in the room, the nurse touched his shoulder and said, “Michael, do you know who the president is?” I waited; I held my breath.

“He’s a monster,” Mike whispered, and I knew his mind was still intact. It did not, it would not, die. But the body was more trouble.

13

So many young actors fall in love with the myth of Steppenwolf Theater because of the larger than life stories that circulate about the founders. When Terry Kinney, Jeff Perry and Gary Sinise were angry young men, they supposedly loved their theater so much that they had fist fights on the street about it. They would argue over the value of a script or someone’s take on a role, and it would end with someone getting wrestled to the ground.

In a former life, when Mike and I used to watch movies in his parents’ basement, we returned often to Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men, starring Gary Sinise and John Malkovich. Mike was disciplined and believed that we needed to watch other actors working all the time. We couldn’t watch the movies for entertainment’s sake. (Well, Die Hard was okay.) We had to watch with a critical eye. How did this role differ from the last one? How had they adjusted their physicality to capture the character?

Malkovich’s Lenny was a sweet and lumbering guy who didn’t know his own strength; he had the mind of a child; Sinise was his guardian. Malkovich would get into trouble, and they would have to go (together) on the run. While they camped out under the stars, Malkovich would say to Sinise, “Tell about the rabbits, George.” And Sinise would tell him in a Once Upon a Time voice about the life they would someday share, with a country house, hot meals on the table and a band of pet rabbits, of course. These friends of so many years, these brothers, could tell each other this unlikely fairy tale and convince themselves it was truth. “Tell about the rabbits, George...”

“You’ve got to get him to the Rehab Institute,” Mary, the Intensive Care Unit Nurse, whispered. “I could lose my job for saying that, but it’s true. This floor isn’t for Michael. He’s a kid; he needs *aggressive* therapy. The people upstairs are all geriatrics. The truth? They’re not going to get any better.”

Mary’s brother had been injured in a diving accident when he was nineteen years old, and they had told him he would never walk again, but after a few weeks at the Rehab Institute, he did. “Miracles happen there,” she said, and then she left the room.

Mike looked at me from his bed, where he lay propped up on three pillows. His arms and legs still hadn’t moved. His father called them the dead ducks. “Sounds like RIC’s the place,” Mike said. I nodded in agreement. Mrs. Thornton shook her head and fished in her purse. “Her brother walks on a cane though.”

“Ma!” Mike cried.

“They saved your life here. I just don’t agree that it’s a second-rate hospital. I like a Catholic hospital. I like the priests.”

“I promised I’d go back to church.”

“Okay, honey. Okay. She gave me the brochure. I’ll call and set up a tour.”

“Mag, you go too.”

“Michael Patrick, you have no faith in me.”

“I want a second opinion, that’s all.”

The doctors prescribed aggressive therapy and I didn’t completely understand what that meant, but all of the medical websites and survivor blogs said it was necessary. One blogger wrote, “I had a spinal stroke too. I was thirty-one years old. The cause was ultimately my birth control pills. After my stroke, my cardiologist told me I naturally had ‘thick’ blood and that the pill put me over the edge. With aggressive therapy, I learned to walk again, and

my husband stood by me the whole time. He's my angel baby. I am almost 100% recovered, but sometimes I do wet the bed! The key is to get aggressive therapy right away." Aggressive therapy sounded painful, but I looked forward to a day off of work, and felt privileged to be a part of the decision. I would be a good reporter. I would take notes. I would remember it all.

The following Friday, I waited on the front porch of our bungalow. It was an unseasonably warm day. I sat on the front porch in blue jeans and bare feet. I watched fathers walk by, holding their daughters' hands, seeing their little girls off to school. They were Irish and Polish immigrants, mostly. They wore construction boots and dirty jeans. I thought of my own father and wanted Mike to have his chance. The church bells of St. Constance rang out and I hoped that Mike would get into the Rehab Institute of Chicago. I had read there was a waiting list. Please let him get better, I said to an abstract god. Please let him be a father. I've seen him with his godson, and he's a natural. He drives me to work whenever it's snowing. He says, "Princesses don't take the bus." I know the way he takes care of me, and that's evidence enough.

Mrs. Thornton pulled up to the house promptly at nine-thirty in her silver Concorde. I hurried down the cement stairs and slid into the front seat. She handed me a granola bar and a travel mug of hot tea. I couldn't wait to get downtown and see this miracle hospital. I told Mrs. Thornton that I hoped Mike wouldn't have to stay at the rehab hospital too long because I just wanted him to come home. I hated sleeping in the apartment alone, I told her. But anyway, I hadn't been downtown in some time and the sun was finally out. The skyline made me feel like I was seeing the city for the first time. The traffic on the Kennedy was light. Mrs. Thornton pointed out her favorite churches along the way and asked me what their names were.

“That’s St. Sylvester’s,” I said. “That one’s St. Stan’s. St. Helen’s is over there. That’s St. Nicholas, I think. That’s the Ukrainian Village.”

I loved playing tour guide, especially to Mrs. Thornton. I didn’t know how to make a house sparkle the way she did and I had never cooked Thanksgiving dinner, but I knew the city we lived in in a way that she did not.

“You know,” she said. “I don’t really like downtown. Too many big buildings. You do have beautiful churches though.”

The steeples looked European. They looked as old as hope.

“Do you pray for Michael?” Mrs. Thornton asked.

“Every day I do.”

She looked relieved. She was a good driver, better than Frankie. She guided us through the chaotic streets of downtown and parked at the Chicago Avenue Firehouse. (Frankie knew a guy.) We strode toward the hospital and she said, “Now *this* is a nice area.”

“Yeah,” I answered. “Lake Michigan. This is living. The Water Tower’s a theater now.”

“Did you and Michael come down here a lot?” Mrs. Thornton asked.

“Yeah. We went to the Redhead Piano Bar for our last anniversary. We drank dirty martinis and sat at the piano. The piano man played all our requests. Pretty cool.”

It made me sad, the way she listened so intently about her son’s former life.

“I would just *hate* to live in one of those big buildings,” she said.

We stopped in front of the tall, narrow hospital building; a well-groomed woman in a pastel suit approached us. We must’ve looked confused. The valets scurried about, taking keys and parking handicapped vans. An old man got out of his van and onto his walking canes, struggled up to the hospital doors. If he could make a recovery, Mike could too. Mike

had youth on his side -- that's what the doctors kept on saying.

Mrs. Thornton's highlights were blonde now, her sunglasses stylish. She was thin for fifty-five -- her khakis sagged on her since the stroke. Every day, she told me how many more pounds she had lost and then she stretched her waistband to show me how roomy her pants were. Her flesh hung loose now. I wasn't losing weight and that made me feel guilty. I was still eating three meals a day, and that made me feel like maybe I wasn't suffering enough.

The case worker shook our hands and introduced herself as Anne-Marie.

"Rita Thornton, Michael's mom."

"Maggie Andersen, his girlfriend."

"Maggie's our angel," Mrs. Thornton said.

These were the things I had always wanted her to say. I had heard her referring in this affectionate way about her nieces and nephews, neighbors, other friends of Mike's, his ex-girlfriends even. She had a wooden way of saying things, but I knew that this was genuine.

"Michael's very lucky," Anne-Marie said. I didn't think so, but that was a topic for another day.

Mrs. Thornton continued. "We're trying to convince her to quit her job so she can stay with Michael full-time."

She said that often in those days, and it always made me cringe a little, even though I understood the sentiment. I was overworked and underpaid at my jobs, and one of the few people Mike actually wanted to see.

The case worker showed us to the elevators. The doors took a long time to open and close and inside, they were mirrored. The case worker explained that this was a courtesy for

wheelchair drivers. “Well, we won’t be needing a wheelchair,” Mrs. Thornton said with assurance.

When we arrived on the fourth floor, we were greeted by kelly-green velvet couches and glossy medical journals on Vermont maple coffee tables. I circled the room and studied RIC’s various awards and distinctions -- success story after success story. The newspaper articles were perfectly framed and matted. This is where all the stars from the news had come. I had wondered what had happened to that football player who broke his neck in last year’s playoffs, and the cop who had been shot in the line of duty while trying to protect his local bank. Well, they were here, learning how to walk again! I reported back to Mrs. Thornton about my findings but she said she still didn’t see why this hospital was so much better.

The case worker took us up to the seventh floor where there weren’t currently any vacancies. The seventh floor was the spinal injury floor. The patients, we were told, ranged in age, and suffered from a variety of injuries. There was a teenage girl whose head and eyes rolled around like a drunk’s. She drooled. She breathed noisily through a tube still attached. Her mother pushed her around the floor and played Celine Dion on a small tape recorder. The more mobile patients sat around in a community lounge playing cards. They all looked close to my age. One of the girls was especially pretty, but her legs stayed frighteningly still while she wheeled around in her chair, dealing playing cards to her friends. I worried that Mike would fall in love with her. She was exactly his type—black hair, green eyes, phenomenal breasts. They would fall in love -- I knew it -- and he would feel like I didn’t understand him anymore. They would rehabilitate together, move in together. I resented the girl already. I began to wonder if my boyfriend would be in a wheelchair like her. Would he drool like some of them did? Would his head roll around? Then I realized: He was not going

to be able to walk or dance or drive or give me piggy back rides or ride his bike. For a while, at least. For a little while. The case worker asked if I was OK and I said yes. His legs might be still like a statue. Hold on, I thought. But just a few days ago, he was marching in a parade, climbing on and off of floats, and now, because of one minute when the blood flow was temporarily cut off, this could change him forever? He was going to be one of these kids in a wheelchair. Kids being dealt lousy cards. Kids who got hit by drunk drivers and drove drunk themselves, kids who went skiing in the winter and surfing in the summer. Kids who got shot and stabbed and played football. In that moment, my life split in half. Everything would now be categorized as before or after this day.

Anne-Marie said she would now take us down to the fifth floor, the pediatrics floor, where they did have a couple of vacancies. We took the stairs; it felt like we owed it to the card players. I held onto the banister, saw spots in front of my eyes.

Anne-Marie showed us a corner room with an incredible view -- Navy Pier, Chicago Shakespeare where Mike had auditioned, the Ferris wheel we had ridden, skyscrapers, a stunning view. But it was still a hospital room. When I looked down, I saw Lake Michigan in various shades of blue and green. The waves rolled back and forth, pronounced and capped with white.

“How long will he have to live here?” I asked.

“That all depends,” Anne Marie said. “Could be two weeks. Could be two months. The initial diagnosis is always two weeks. If he shows progress, we’ll extend his stay.”

Oh, he’ll make progress, I thought. He’ll be here for a year if he has to be. You just wait and see. You have no idea who you’re fucking dealing with, Anne-Marie.

Back in the hallway of the fifth floor, I was greeted by children in small wheelchairs. Children were *supposed* to have full heads of hair and fully functioning legs, I thought. This

floor was hell, plain and simple. One little girl hobbled around on bandaged feet and I asked Anne-Marie what happened to her. “Oh that’s Alex,” she said. “She was recently adopted from Russia. Did you hear about that fire on the North Shore? Those were her adopted parents.”

“Are they dead?”

“Well, her father died saving her. Her mother’s around here somewhere. You see, her toes are all burned off.”

Alex: Tangled brown shoulder-length hair with straight across bangs, olive skin, slightly slanted brown eyes. She hobbled around like a good sport on her bandaged stumps.

“Hi Alex,” Anne-Marie said. When Alex said hello back, her voice sounded smoky.

Anne-Marie showed us the lounge where Mike would eat lunch from now on and have occupational therapy with Becky who would teach him how to use his hands again. She would help him dress in the morning, help him to wash and shave. Currently, we were spoon-feeding him, but at RIC, they had special technology that might allow him to feed himself. The mission of RIC was to help him to re-enter society “in his new state.” A pixie looking therapist asked a pre-teen boy with a bandaged head what day it was. “Today is Monday,” she said. “What day is it?” He looked out the window. He traced shapes on the table. He finally said, “I don’t know. I can’t remember.” I recognized Nickelodeon on the flat-screen television. The therapist asked the boy what his name was. Again, he didn’t know. My stomach knotted up. I started seeing spots again, so I focused on the wall where I wouldn’t see any more children.

But on the wall, someone had painted a giant marquee that said, “The Theatre” in cursive writing with little yellow light bulbs surrounding it. I pointed to the marquee and started to cry, and once I started, I couldn’t stop. The case worker ushered us out quickly

and said she would do her best to get Mike a bed. She handed Mrs. Thornton a card and encouraged her to call with any questions. She raced through the rest of her routine, saying that she would have the paperwork faxed and figure out the insurance and other such costs. Actor's Equity had one hell of a bill to pay, in the end.

"I don't want him to have a bed there!" I cried in the elevator. "Not there, Mrs. Thornton! Please!" She must remember this hysterical scene, even now. And this mother, whose only son lay paralyzed in a hospital room across the city, hugged his girlfriend so tightly that she might stifle the animal sounds of pain, so that she might distract herself from her own grief. The elevator operator let us out at Floor One and said quietly, "Have a nice day, gorse." He looked as if he wished he knew more English. He wished he had more words. Mrs. Thornton said, "This is the best place for him, Mag. You know it." And now the roles were reversed.

We drove back to Resurrection in silence, past the gloomy old churches and billboards. I looked into other cars at happy people who may as well have been from the *moon*. When we pulled up in front of the Intensive Care Unit, the sun didn't matter anymore. Mrs. Thornton took my face in her hands and said, "Now you tell him all the good things, Mag." I nodded. "I'll tell him about the view."

"Okay," she said. "Good girl."

I stood in front of Resurrection Hospital, smoking a cigarette, not feeling the least bit guilty. After all, if children were getting brain tumors, why couldn't I jeopardize my health? I threw the butt into the ashtray, took a deep breath of sub-suburban air, and walked into the hospital, past the front desk. The security guards all recognized me now. I didn't even need a visitor's badge anymore. That's how important I was! Didn't even need to sign in and out.

I took the elevator up, lathered my hands with anti-bacterial soap under water so hot my hands turned raw and red. I charged toward Mike's room before I lost my nerve. I had to see him now. I felt strong-willed and knew it might not last. I was going to tell him about the view. I was going to tell him there were pretty girls and it was okay if he ran away with one of them, just as long as he got better. I was going to report back on all of the success stories and tell him how the hospital was right in the middle of things. We could go to Emilio's for tapas, have dinner wherever he wanted. I'd put it all on a credit card. I didn't think to ask at the nurses' station if anyone was with him.

A few feet from his door, I squinted my eyes and looked closer. The door was open just a crack but I saw the backside of a woman -- a thick, sturdy woman in blue scrubs. Sometimes my eyes played tricks on me in the hospital. Sometimes comatose patients looked like they were reaching their arms out to me. I usually tried to avoid looking inside the rooms at all, but this was Mike's room. I was sleep-deprived, but I knew this was his. Had they transferred him? I wondered. And if so, why had they not told me? What was that woman doing standing over him like that? I opened the door a little more and saw that a therapist was trying to help him sit up in bed, and it was requiring all of her strength. His body swayed back and forth, confused and unsteady, his head rolled and then he fell backwards. He had no balance, no spatial sense of himself -- couldn't even sit up on his own. His hospital gown had come undone in all the chaos. His eyes were screwed tightly shut.

"Are you okay?" the therapist asked.

"I feel nauseous," he said. He was pouring sweat from the exertion.

"Just give me a minute," she said. "I'll check your blood pressure now."

He lay awkwardly on the bed, his body twisted, and one of his legs kicked out

wildly. Then it shook so hard that even his face vibrated. His eyes were still closed.

“Spasms,” the therapist said. “Do they keep you up at night? We’ll get you medication for that.”

He had never told me about the spasms, and I couldn’t stop staring. When he finally opened his eyes, they flashed with humiliation. “Mag!” he cried out, and I pulled the door quickly closed.

For the past ten days, I had only seen him in bed. The nurses gave him sponge baths in bed, changed the soiled Chux underneath him, and he asked us to leave when they did. I fed him small bites while he was propped up on pillows, nearly choked him a couple of times with bites that were too big. So this is why we were going to RIC. I finally understood. I went back to the waiting room and prepared my speech. I had to tell him the truth without crying, had to sugar-coat it just a little.

I went in to see him at noon. He looked at me with a defeated expression, then he looked away. I sat down next to him, took his hand and kissed it, held my lips there, and hoped he could feel them. I kissed his sharp nose, his stubbly cheeks, his smooth, unwrinkled forehead. I kissed his earlobes, his chin and his Adam’s apple. Then I said, “I’m gonna tell about the rabbits, George.” He understood the reference. We moved into the Rehabilitation Institute a few days later.

14

There’s a Chicago storytelling series called 2nd Story in which actors learn to shape their own stories and writers learn to perform theirs. They produce these events at local wine bars and high-end restaurants, and the audiences come in droves. Each piece has its own director and accompanying musicians. All the pieces must be non-fiction—everything must be “true.” On their website, the producers of 2nd Story have included this quote: We tell our stories so you’ll tell yours.

I started writing again during Mike’s first few weeks at RIC. I wrote because, in my spinal stroke research endeavors, I found that reading other people’s testimonials helped me

to understand what was happening, if not why; they helped me to be hopeful and gave me permission to feel hopeless. I wrote while Mike worked out or while he slept because everything suddenly felt charged with meaning. I wrote our story so other people like us might not feel so all alone. I didn't write memoir at first though; I wrote fiction. I needed to fictionalize it at the time, to believe it was happening to someone else, and let's face it: sometimes we tell the truth in fiction more than we ever can in memoir. Let's face it: plenty of fiction is purely invented material and just as much is thinly veiled autobiography.

This is one of the stories I wrote, in which I called myself Amelia. I called myself Amelia after my best friend, a girl who had spent plenty of time at RIC with her father. I changed Mike's last name to something equally Irish, and changed my hair color and eye color, too. The rest of it is true. Our first kiss happened just like that. So did the first shower in the hospital. The nurses and PCTs and security guards really were that good. But as long as our last names were different, I told myself, it wasn't really us.

Controlled Falling

Amelia Bertolani cannot feel the cold tonight, even with her coat unbuttoned. She maneuvers clumsily through the Gold Coast with an extra large pizza while well-dressed men and women take each other's arms and take on the night. The women's satin blouses shine under neon signs advertising sushi and tapas. Not one of them looks unhappy. They look so radiant that they may not be human. They look like exotic birds.

The streets are alive on this bitter Saturday night in March. Twenty-somethings and tourists stumble from Gibson's Steak House to Mother Hubbard's to Shenanigan's to the Hange-Uppe. Lines snake down the block for Bar Chicago. Men and women who have just met rush out onto Rush Street and flag cabs. It is time now— it is night. The skyline lights up the city. Spotlight on all of you superstars.

But on a darker street just a few blocks down, there's a hospital, and that's where Amelia's headed with the pizza. The number one rehabilitation hospital in the United States is located on a more hidden-away street called Superior. The patients are all confined, to wheelchairs, walkers, metal crutches. Amelia starts away from the tourist strip, but the soundtrack of Chicago is still audible – Koko Taylor blues, the piano player at the Redhead, the quick hiss of bus exhaust fumes, the robotic conductor on the Brown Line. Every few minutes, a drowsy horse and carriage trot by. They move more slowly now than they did when the sun was still shining.

Amelia rides the elevator to the seventh floor, the spinal cord injury ward. This is where “normal” people are sent after they break their necks skiing or are ejected through the rear window in the midst of an automobile accident. This is where Amelia's boyfriend Michael was sent after suffering a rare spinal infarction, a stroke that no one knows the cause of. No one can say if he'll ever walk again; it could take up to three years or it could never happen at all. At least he's young and strong, they say. The neurologists scratch their chins and say, “Let's hope.” Sometimes they pull Amelia aside and ask, “Do you pray?”

This is where Michael was transported when his twenty-five-year-old legs couldn't walk anymore, when he couldn't move his arms, when he could not speak a word. This is where he was sent. After patients are released from the Intensive Care Unit, this is where they live until they recover “to the best of their abilities.” Sometimes, a miracle happens. The seventh floor is a war-torn city full of hope.

Amelia and Michael spend their Saturday nights trying not to listen to the night because they miss it. They used to live it, own a claim to that strip. They entered a swing dance competition once, when that was hot, and she said, “But I don't know how.” He was a strong partner and she followed his lead. He swung her side to side like a rag doll. He

flipped her over his head and whooshed her back and forth between his legs that danced old-timey and fast.

They have been here for four weeks now, although at times it feels like forty. Michael lies stiffly in a mechanical bed, his head propped neatly on three pillows. He looks healthy lying in the bed; he looks stunning to her. It's terrible, this deceit. He looks like a leading man now after losing twenty pounds. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes are bright. But he lost the weight because he was being fed through a tube and his face is lit up with a fever that came on when he contracted a bladder infection from the catheter. Anyway, he *looks* healthy, and Amelia tries to be grateful.

Grateful is what she's learning to be. He's alive, he can breathe on his own, he can speak. They removed the feeding tube a few days ago and he ate his favorite pizza for the first time tonight. Lou Malnati's: dripping ropes of cheese and buttery mushrooms. He ate one slice instead of three, but the fever is going down, and they're alone now. His parents take Saturdays off.

Michael and Amelia look out the windows at their old friend, Saturday night. The hospital room's windows, ceiling to floor, make them feel like they're surrounded by the darkness of night and the illuminated windows of skyscrapers. "We always wanted to live on the lake," he says. She presses her face against the glass now, looks down, and sees that the lake is frozen still. "Beaches are surreal in the winter," she says. Then she realizes that he can't turn his head. She hurries over and turns the bed. *Now? Is that good? How about now? Do you see? See what I mean? The lake is totally frozen.* Yes, yes, he says, he sees it now.

Amelia buzzes about the room, pinning up Get Well soon cards, inspirational clichés that resonate now, poems from friends and an advertisement for the cherry red Doc Martens that Michael wants to buy when he's better. She straightens the display of stuffed

animals and cookie bouquets. Flowers are not allowed in these rooms where breathing does not come easy. Amelia kisses her boyfriend's head as she passes.

The first time he wanted to kiss her, several years ago, Amelia sucked on a peppermint and looked at the floor. "Why don't you spit that out?" he proposed. "Because I'm nervous," she said. "Because I'm freaking the fuck out. I mean, what if I have halitosis? I think I have a fear of kissing. I really do. I think it dates back to the eighth grade--" "Why don't you spit that out?" he repeated softly and held out his paw of a hand.

Amelia finishes straightening and lies down in the bed beside him, soft and squirmy. She could toss and turn all night, but she always tries to avoid it. She doesn't want to make him any more aware of his body's betrayal, so she never falls asleep fully. She shakes herself awake, massages his sweaty head. She takes pleasure in his snoring now, whispers thank you to whoever is listening, makes silly little lists in the dark. When this nightmare is over, will they go to London to see a play or Montego Bay to smoke reefer? What will they name their perfectly healthy children? Seamus, Jackson, Molly?

When Michael awoke last Sunday morning, he had questions to answer. He pressed the nurse's button, looked at Amelia and said, "Jackson, Molly and Montego Bay. Now get out of here so I can have my diaper changed."

After only a moment of lying down, Amelia scrambles to her feet again. Her rationale: Why be still if you can move? She grabs up the half- empty box of pizza from the table over the bed; she feels the heat of it still. She places Michael's limp hand on the box. "This is warm," she says. The therapists told her that this will help him to remember temperature, which he has temporarily forgotten. "I still can't feel it," he says. "But if you think about it, that sort of makes me a superhero." And then he winks.

Amelia marches out to the hallway. Left, right, left. Left, right, left. Walking is

controlled falling, they say at the hospital. Isn't that amazing? She stands in the doorway of the lounge and displays the pizza like a game show hostess might; the night orderly rushes over. Lou Malnati's. Mmm hmm. He takes it from her and hurries away to tell his friends he scored. You shouldn't work at a hospital like this if you're dieting; there's always four-star food to be found. Amelia returns to her boyfriend and says, "Pretty good, huh?"

"That was the best pizza I've ever had in my life," he confesses.

Amelia crawls back into bed, presses the button on the side of the bed so they can see if anything good is on television. They're not too familiar with Saturday night programming because they usually don't stay home, but it's soothing to have a quiet night, and Saturdays are the only nights she can sleep at the hospital because he doesn't have therapy on Sunday.

During the week, Michael has Play-Doh therapy, where they put the stuff in his hands and encourage him to squeeze it. His fingers are paralyzed -- in the dictionary, paralysis means extreme weakness but in this case, that seems to be an understatement -- so they tire after a few tries, but he keeps on working. They lift and stretch his legs to see if his appendages might remember today -- how to move, if only just an inch. Stretching of this kind requires skill and advanced degrees. The patients here are so tight that their limbs feel like rubber bands about to snap. Their veins are hard but their muscles are soft. Michael's legs used to feel like muscle and bone, and now they feel like jelly.

Stretching feels like burning now to Michael. Stretching induces screaming. Stretching confuses the nerves that have been damaged. Michael is told to go to his special place when he is being pulled at.

Amelia kneels beside him now and asks, "So where do you go, anyway, when they stretch you? Why *don't* you scream like the others?"

"I pretend that I'm the Matrix," he says. "You know, the chosen one."

Last week, in therapy, the Matrix called one of the circulating doctors over.

"So Doc, do you think my arms do this because—"

"Do *what*, Mr. O'Malley?"

"Stick to my body like this. Like a retard."

"Okay."

"Does my body know it's been betrayed? Could it be trying to protect itself?"

The doctor considered for a moment before saying, "You know, Mr. O'Malley, that theory is entirely possible." Then Michael yelled out, "Holy shit! He actually *agrees* with me on something!" The other patients in the exercise room chuckled through their oxygen masks.

The nurses laugh and nudge each other before they come knocking on the door. They come every four hours to turn him. That's so he doesn't get bed sores. "Hello! Good morning! Mr. O'Malley!" They always make noise before intruding on the couple -- they don't want to disturb a romantic moment. Admittedly, the lovers have been caught, not in the act, but kissing and touching, trying like hell to make it hard again. It's the luxury of not having a roommate.

Time to check on Michael. Time to change his diaper, drain his catheter, take his blood pressure and temperature, administer his medication. His medication consists only of baby aspirin to thin his blood because they don't know what else to give him. This is Amelia's cue to leave; this is for his dignity. She learned about dignity on the first day at the hospital.

Shirley, the morning nurse, introduced herself and explained how they were going to use a sliding board to transfer Michael to a spongy rubber bed on wheels. "I will wheel you

into the shower room and bathe you,” she said. “I will make the water the perfect temperature. I will soap you but not get you too slippery. I will use your shampoo and soap from home so that you can smell the way you want. I will not let you fall.” He looked entirely unconvinced. Shirley slipped into the shower room and ran the water which sounded more like a death sentence now than a way to begin a day. Michael whispered to Amelia.

“Tell her I’m not dirty. Please Princess, I can’t, I mean, I *can’t*. If I start to slip, what the hell is *she* gonna do? She’s a midget. She’s one-hundred pounds soaking wet. I’ll fall, I’ll get hurt. Just tell her you’ll give me a sponge bath, okay? Promise. Please, I’m begging you.”

He looked like a marble statue as he lay pale and naked on the portable bed. Shirley returned and promised, “I will not let you fall.” Amelia decided to trust the nurse. And as her lover was being wheeled away from her, he glared at her with furious eyebrows and mouthed, “Go home then. Just fucking get out.” Amelia sat on the edge of his bed, chewed furiously at her fingernails, and spit them out with disgust. She was tempted to go home and never again worry about being late to her dead-end jobs or this terrible, terrible hospital. She fantasized about taking a bubble bath and drinking a glass of champagne.

After the shower, when Michael’s skin smelled like fresh soap and his hair was soft as a baby’s, he looked up at Shirley and said, “This would be the life of Riley if it weren’t for dignity, huh?” Shirley smiled as she taped up his giant lavender diaper and said, “You ain’t never know who gonna give you a glass of water when.” She winked, rubbed his head roughly and exited. The nurse had been equally afraid, Amelia realized, but she just moved on to the room next door. “Ernie! Hey baby! You ready for your bath?”

Ernie, the next door neighbor, is two years old; he stays in the adult ward because the children’s ward is full. He had a very high fever one day and suddenly found himself unable to toddle or talk. Amelia and Michael would love a baby as brave as Ernie, but they’re

afraid now of a baby getting a fever. They're afraid because the doctor says they might not be able to have children at all. Not naturally, at least.

Amelia shakes this thought from her mind, kisses Michael's crow's feet, gets out of the way so the nurses can do their work. She throws on her pea coat, grabs a pack of cigarettes, and walks out into the hallway. She hears Michael flirting with the African nurses. *Grace, you look fuckin' hot tonight. That a new top?* They hoot and holler in response. *Okaaaaaay?* They have no idea who's flirting with them. To them, he's a sick man with a fever who can't feel when he's soiled his diaper. He needs suppositories to make him go, aspirin to thin his badly behaved blood and booties on his size thirteen feet to keep that bad blood circulating.

But to Amelia, he is six foot two. He can ride his bike from downtown Chicago all the way to Highland Park. He can juggle bottles of beer and drink entirely too much of it. He singlehandedly carried the furniture up to their third floor apartment. He runs around on the Second City Mainstage and makes the people laugh all night long. He makes other women fall in love with him every time he does a show.

Amelia counts the red and white tiles that lead to the lounge where Michael eats lunch every day, where he is currently learning how to hold silverware again with the assistance of red spongy apparatus. Sometimes she takes a cab from her office on her lunch break so he won't feel lonely eating his soup. He has always hated eating alone. He's never minded seeing movies or taking road trips by himself; it's the eating that's always gotten him.

Halfway down the hall, Amelia sees Ernie's mom and dad hissing at each other in the lounge where there's a television the size of a film screen, low circular tables and a restaurant-sized refrigerator stocked full of pills and syringes.

Amelia stalls until Ernie's mother storms out, which she knew would happen soon. She waves to the disheveled mother who is already running toward her son's room. Amelia

holds up her cigarette pack so Ernie's father will know to follow her to the sliding glass doors. She pushes the silver square with the blue stencil of a wheelchair on it, and they feel free for a moment in the elevator bank. They lean back on the wall and exhale. They *are*, in a sense, free. They *could* just never come back again, they know.

"I heard your man broke those doors today," Ernie's father says with a smirk.

"He was trying out the electric wheelchair."

"He always been a bad driver?"

"He's always been a troublemaker."

When the elevator dings, they get in as quickly as they can even though minutes will pass before it closes. The elevators are lined with mirrors so wheelchair drivers can navigate in and out with ease. Amelia looks up at her face in the glass ceiling and wonders if she's aged. She checks the top of her auburn head for grays, her hazel eyes for crow's feet. No. Not yet. Her skin is sallow, but it's always been that way. She looks pretty good, considering. Maybe a little thin. Ernie's father sticks an unlit cigarette in his mouth. "Haven't had one all day," he says. "Jennifer really wants me to quit."

"I'm trying too, but it's hard at a time like this."

"You're goddamn right it is."

"How's Ernie today?"

"He's good, he's having his bath now. I read to him; he liked that. I'm trying to convince Jennifer to go home and I'll stay here tonight."

"Yeah."

"She hasn't been home in a week."

"I know."

The elevator doors open and they head outside through the back doors to an area

where smoking is allowed. Ernie's father lights Amelia's cigarette before his own. They listen to Chicago, the night, sweet night. Cabs honking, Djs spinning, the shrieking and squealing of happy girls. They smile at each other as they remember a previous life. He looks at his feet in his worn gray running shoes; she looks at her scuffed-up Mary Janes. Both of them walk from the train station after commuting from their respective jobs. The train lets them out at Chicago Avenue. "This is Chicago!" the conductor announces. Yes it is. They get off and walk past multi-level record and book stores, restaurants owned by clothing designers and malls made of marble. They do this Monday through Friday at rush hour. You've seen them; they look like somnambulists. They look so alone in the crowd.

"I remember when Ernie was born," the father says. "He was ten pounds and I said it was because his soul was so big. My wife thought that was poetic. Are you guys married?"

"No. We were living together though, saving up. For a couch. A red one from IKEA."

"I remember those days too." He smiles like a man who's seen it all.

They breathe their smoke in deeply. They look up in hope of stars. They watch as a gaggle of girls trips by. Amelia listens to the clip-clopping of their heels as they make their way to their getaway vehicle. They giggle and stumble a little and reapply their lipstick. They wear boots, black pants and backless blouses. *I can't believe you gave him your number!* "I am so over him," a Middle Eastern brunette with caramel streaks says. She's the leader; you can sense it. She's voluptuous and speaks with authority. "As of today. That's it. I'm done." Amelia wants to go to the brunette, beg her to give him a second chance, and if he really doesn't deserve one, okay. But just give it one more chance. *Was he unfaithful?* she thinks. *Was he mean? If he was unfaithful, how many times? Maybe it was only once and it was because he didn't know what to do with that first taste of fame. Maybe he really does love you. What if he can't walk tomorrow?*

Amelia studies their boots. Camel-colored leather, black and white snakeskin with square heels, nail polish red and pointy toes. They don't think about walking, they don't will it to happen or pray for miracles. Controlled falling. Maybe if she studies them long enough, she can figure out how to make his feet do it too. Maybe she can figure out the mystery that scientists have been working on for a century: how to repair a spinal cord. The girls get into their car and speed away with poppy music blaring.

Ernie's father says he's going inside now -- Amelia stays where she is. He squeezes her bony shoulder, tells her he'll see her around. "Have a fun Date Night," he says. She hears the waves of Lake Michigan crashing against the rocks where she and Michael had a wine picnic and wrote poetry in chalk. *Michael O'Malley was here. I love Amelia forever.* She hears a fistfight breaking out, a gunshot in the distance. Some kids come to the hospital after being shot in the back or hit in the head too hard. Michael came to the hospital because he felt like a team of football players was standing on the back of his neck.

Time to go -- she has a head rush. She stamps out her cigarette in the community ashtray made of pebbles, and starts back inside. "Hey Super Girl," her favorite night shift security guard greets her. "How's Date Night goin'?"

"It's goin'," she says. "We had Lou Malnati's for dinner."

He hands her a stand-up comedy DVD, says he thinks they'll enjoy it.

"Return it whenever you're done, baby. Take your time. If he's too tired tonight, that's okay."

She finds kindness in the strangest places these days. She finds comfort in the lunchtime cab drivers mostly. She gets into their cabs and when they ask her how her day is, she tells her story all over again. They are always stupefied and they always look slightly pained when she gets to the climax. *O'Malley! Critical!* Some donate cigarettes to her charity,

some buy her coffee at the drive-through doughnut shop, some give her discounted fare, some promise prayer. Cab drivers are wonderful people. And she needs to repeat the story -- needs it to be new and fresh like it feels -- but her family and friends all know it by heart now. And they listen to the dailies. *Well, he held a pen long enough to do half of the crossword puzzle today. No, his toes still haven't moved. But they will. I know they will.*

She gets into the elevator and waits for it to close before she puts her hand over her mouth. She shrinks in the corner of the elevator. *Oh, baby. My sweet baby.* And then she takes a deep breath, swipes at her tears and stands up, because she can. Get up and stand up straight, she tells herself, because you *can*.

She presses the button for the seventh floor, fishes her Cherry Red lipstick from her coat pocket, brushes the tobacco seeds off, and reapplies. Shirley says it's her obligation to keep on looking good for her man. 'That'll keep him goin'. And Shirley's seen some cases. Amelia smooths down her hair, dabs lipstick on her cheeks for color, practices her most winning smile.

The elevator opens. Back through the sliding glass doors. Everyone seems to be sleeping now. Tomorrow is a big day. Sunday is not Monday. On Monday, the floor looks like a hurricane. There are old women walking like sailors with sea legs and little boys wheeling around and grabbing the asses of the nurses, gangbangers yelling that they don't want to do no goddamn exercises. But on Sunday, there are field trips, and family members come from all over the country to push their loved ones out on the town. To the Water Tower Movie Theaters, the American Girl Place, any restaurant they want. Yes, everyone is dreaming now of Sunday. Nurses whisper at their station so as not to disturb the patients.

Amelia looks at the clock on the wall and realizes she's been gone too long. She hurries down the hall to Michael's room where she finds him staring at a blank television

screen with headphones covering his ears. He wears the look of senility now, an equal ratio of vacancy and fear. She's never seen him look this way. He, the one who tells her every night before he falls asleep -- which is earlier than he used to -- that they are Super Couple and they'll get through this. He's Michael O'Malley for Christ's sake. Has she forgotten who he is? The psychiatrist offers him anti-depressants every night and he turns them down with gusto. "No thanks, I don't like pills." He says this on days when she wants to grab them and chug them down with bourbon.

Amelia enters the room, clears her throat loudly. "Oh no no no," she says. Michael lifts his eyes, begrudgingly shakes the headphones off of his ears. "Not today," she continues. "Maybe Monday," she adds. "But not today. Today I am gonna kick your ass in Scrabble. You need to work your fingers." His vacant face comes alive. Spotlight on you, my superstar. The flush returns to his cheeks. "I just realized," he says. "I think I love you more than Lou Malnati's. I could be wrong, but I don't think so."

It is only week four, of the rest of their lives.

*

When I first workshopped Controlled Falling years later, the crabbiest guy in the program said, "But doesn't she ever consider leaving him? Where are those flashes of doubt, the temptations to run away?" My face went flush with embarrassment, and I thanked him for his honest critique. I made the revisions because I appreciated his attention to my work, and I understood his point. But the truth was: I had considered leaving Mike at the apartment, but I never considered leaving during the hospital stay. In both instances, the reasons for staying were the same: I was in love with him. I hoped he would get better.

*

Sometime in April, I took Mike for a walk in his wheelchair, when he was finally able to sit up in it without sliding out. (Honestly. We would buckle him in, and he would slide right out. Sometimes this made us laugh and sometimes it made me seethe with anger.) I buckled him in, and we went for a quick spin around the fifth floor, smiled at all our friends who were impressed that Mike didn't turn white now when we put him in his chair.

We had had several visitors that week, even though quite often, Mike didn't want any at all. Will came and said, "Well, he looks fabulous. Can't wait for Six Characters to begin." When I walked Will to the elevator, I said we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves, and as soon as I said it, I felt guilty, for bursting his bubble, for contradicting what Mike had told him. Amelia and Julie came and said, "Hey, Daniel Day Lewis did My Left Foot." Timmy Hobo, a kid Mike had gone to grade school with, came and Mike yelled at me for letting him up. "Timmy Hobo?" he said. "Oh my *God*. All he talked about was himself and all the people in his family who have had strokes." Paulie came and said, "I just moved to Chicago, you fucker. Come on." One morning, we woke to John Gawlik standing at the foot of the bed with orange juice and coffee—he had dropped by just to say Good Morning. You have never known intimacy until you've lain with someone in their hospital bed, and you have never known generosity until you've seen life from that perspective. Connolly came after he'd lit a few candles at church. Lynda came, but she also sent decorations for our bulletin board. She wrote a poem about the day she heard the news (oh boy) and drew comic strip characters about a wheelchair superhero and his sidekick. Mike's friends who had married early, whose wives had banned them from Friday nights with Mikey, were allowed to visit him in the hospital, and when they did, a heaviness filled the room. My parents and aunts and sisters came. My sister had her fifth-grade class make cards for Mike, which were funny, and sweet. Mike's extended family all took turns—they had always been good at that -- and

the relatives in Ireland sent holy water meant for healing and miracles. The Thorntons and I were there every day. We sprayed the room with Febreeze before the visitors came in, so they couldn't smell the embarrassing things. But everyone said, "He looks so handsome."

And he did look handsome. He did. We were going to get out of the hospital, I knew it. It was spring. Time for a change. We were going to leave the hospital and he was going to walk again. Maybe with just a slight limp. And we were going to walk everywhere from now on. To the grocery store, the library, the movies. Fuck cars. We were going to walk everywhere. Him with a slight limp and me on his arm. We only had to think positively. And then he was going to walk me down an aisle. We were going to stay home on New Year's Eve and watch the ball drop on TV. He was going to thank me for sticking by him through it all. That fling he had with Laura? That was nothing. We were going to get old and fat and gray. And maybe one day we would ask our grown children, our Jackson and Molly, if they knew, if they had any idea, how lucky they were to be here.

Brendan and Mary Ann came to visit. Mike's closest friend and his acting teacher. A new nurse came to cath him during visiting hours, but she didn't want to be rude, so she said she'd come back later. When Brendan and Mary Ann left, I called her back. While I waited for her to finish, I thought of a baby bassinet in our small apartment. *Jackson and Molly: Do you have any idea? How lucky you are to be here? How lucky we are to have you? How lucky you are to have him?* The nurse filled two urinals and the color seemed to drain from Mike's face. He started to sweat profusely. But he was always sweaty in those days, so I said, "Let's go for a walk. Fresh air will do you good." We were going to take a walk someday without this wheelchair, with a dog and a baby stroller.

"It's happening again," he said.

"No," I said. "It can't be. Let's go to Treasure Island and get lunch."

“But it’s happening again, and my legs shake like a retard every time we hit a crack in the sidewalk.”

It was true. This had happened several times last weekend on our short walk to see the second installment of The Matrix. Mike’s legs shook so hard on the way to the movie theater that I was afraid he’d fly out of his chair.

“Who cares?” I said. “Who cares if your legs shake?”

We were going to forget this all someday. This was all going to be a dream. We were going to take up the whole damn sidewalk with our expensive baby stroller and our big old Golden Retriever.

“It’s happening again,” he said.

And he was right. It was.

I pushed him back to his room and called his mother. Paramedics rushed him next door to the emergency room at Northwestern Hospital; everyone stared at us, sympathetically. Everyone remembered the origin of their injuries. And suddenly I had a feeling that Jackson and Molly were never coming.

*

The ICU at Northwestern sparkled. The doctors were the smartest in the city but had terrible bedside manner and the nurses took forever to come. But hey, there was a Starbucks in the building and Frankie loved the cafeteria food. Poor Frankie, poor Rita, poor me. Poor Mikey. He couldn’t move anything below his head, again.

I never left Northwestern after that. I didn’t go to Redmoon anymore; I was staying right there with Mike, because I was convinced of it: He was going to die and abandon me this time. Leave me alone with all the people who didn’t know how to love me.

In the Intensive Care unit of Northwestern, Mike and I watched Always. Or, I watched it sitting in a chair beside Mike's bed while he drifted in and out of consciousness, an oxygen tube under his nose. It's an eighties movie he'd wanted me to see because I'm crazy about John Goodman and I'd seen all his other movies. We watched the terrible scene where Holly Hunter has one last dance with the ghost of her dead husband so she can move on and fall in love with someone else. I sat at the foot of Mike's bed and cried all over myself. I don't want to date anyone else, I said out loud. I don't want to love anyone else. He looked at me sympathetically and then drifted away again.

Mike whispered sweet and scary things to me during the brief moments he was awake (*I love you; Give my books to the actors; You're perfect like a ninja*) but he didn't whisper to be romantic. He whispered because this stroke had stolen his voice, knocked out all his wind. The neurological team speculated on what it was he had. If it was Devick's Syndrome, he could go blind any day. If it was indeed a stroke, they may keep happening. A stroke per week, a stroke per day. Who knows? They consulted with the Mayo Clinic but no one there had any answers either. Frankie and Mrs. Thornton started investigating their family's history of stroke. I think they were tempted to blame each other.

On the seventh night after the second stroke, I slept lightly on a cot across the room. I would've slept closer, but the nurses needed a path to get to him. They came in at various times throughout the night to take his vitals, to sponge him down. He was so sweaty then; he never stopped sweating. I had nightmares about amputees and skeletons, burn victims and burglars, flesh wounds and pencils ripping through paper. One night, I woke to a tapping, and didn't immediately know if it was a nightmare or rain on the window, but I heard this incessant tapping. I looked up, and it was Mike, looking at me with big, alert eyes, tapping the Pulsox clipped to his finger on the railing, the side of his bed. The metal chip

that measured his heartbeat, his mortality. I scrambled off the cot. I screamed, “Are you...? You’re moving your fucking finger!” A smile split his face. “Come on back,” I thought. “Come on back to me now.” But instead I said to him, “You look like E.T., Phone Home,” and we broke out laughing in the middle of the night.

I called Jon Berry, the director of Six Characters in Search of an Author. “Mike won’t be doing the show,” I said. “I think you’d better find a replacement.” He seemed surprised. A couple months prior, my hands shook uncontrollably in front of this director, and now we spoke easily. I wasn’t scared of things like that anymore.

15

When Michael moved back to RIC, his new roommate was Tommy, a retired city worker from the South Side, a black man in his seventies, hands the size of boxing gloves. Tommy’s grandsons lived with him because their mother had died of an overdose. They came every Sunday to see him, closed the curtain that divided us, and sometimes complained when Granddaddy wouldn’t get his lazy butt out the bed and play with them. He laughed until they left, and then he lay in bed and sighed a lot until Mike asked him what was wrong. Shirley, the showering nurse, always seemed to come right in the middle of things. She was the same age as Tommy--had even grown up in the same neighborhood.

“Hey Mr....Mr...Mr. Man!” Shirley yelled, because she could never remember his name. “You ready for your shower?”

“No, I am not ready for no shower,” Tommy said. “I am conversing with my friend.”

“Suit yourself, Mr. Man,” Shirley said. “You old crabcake” (underneath her breath).

As soon as Shirley left the room, Tommy would say to Mike, “That woman is so *arrogant!*”

Tommy and Mike spent several nights lying in their beds, looking out the windows, unable to get up out of bed and go to each other, knowing the other was crying, but never saying a word. In the afternoons, after long therapy sessions, Frankie, Mike's father, would bring Tommy chocolates and Tommy would eat them by the handful, until Shirley informed us he was diabetic ("Oh, no no no. Mr. Man has the 'betes.") and then Tommy resented her even more.

It's not that I don't realize how many had it (and have it) worse than we did, but everyone's pain is valid, and we saw lots of it. Teenagers being airlifted to the hospital, their parents and loved ones quitting jobs and using their savings to set up shop in Chicago. Two brothers in an accident: One suffers permanent brain damage and one does not. Children orphaned and parents orphaned, spirits vanishing.

Meanwhile, in Gift news, Six Characters in Search of An Author had bombed at the Raven Theater. The headline on the front page of the Pioneer Press read, "Pirandello Would Turn Over in His Grave." Mike and I had gone to the press opening; it was his first time out of the hospital, his first field trip, as he called it. His parents drove us, and we sat in the front row, the wheelchair-accessible row, which means we sat on the stage. During the show, Mike looked at me several times and whispered, "I think it's happening again. I can't breathe." Enter panic attacks. And what was my role? I whispered that it wasn't happening again. Focus on the show. Get out of your head now, I said. Take deep breaths. It sounded like acting advice. An acting exercise: Pretend like you haven't had two strokes. And what if it was happening again? Then *I* would be responsible? I did a lot of sweating myself in those days. I sweated through my shirt that night as I pushed his wheelchair through the narrow doors and tried to navigate nonchalantly through the lobby where everyone whispered as we passed.

“It’s Mike Thornton, you remember. The one from Northlight.”

“But he’s so young! What happened to him?”

“A stroke. Can you believe it?”

(As if the stroke had made him deaf.)

“Mag!” Mike gritted his teeth. “You just knocked me into the concession stand!”

“Fasten your seatbelt,” is what I whispered back.

Always a clumsy girl, always a terrible driver. Wheelchair attendant was not a good fit for me. And the irony? That was Mike’s first job. He pushed the elderly and the disabled through O’Hare Airport as a teenage boy. He and his friends bet money on who could pop the best wheelie, who could get from one end of the concourse to the other in seven minutes or less. He wrote short stories about all the crabby old ladies he’d like to dump out of their chairs, all the hypochondriacs he encountered, the men screaming at him in Polish to slow down, fahk-face! as he and his friends raced madly through the food court.

Six Characters was certainly not our best work. Admittedly, I can’t remember the show that well. I do remember it was the first night I had to cath Mike, and since I believed his blood pressure/full bladder had been the cause of the second stroke, I was terrified not to do it. We stole away into the wheelchair accessible stall of the men’s bathroom after the show, after everyone had left except the house manager, and then it was my turn to perform. Jazz hands: Bob Fosse: Show time! I tried to conjure the lesson the nurses had given me. I tried to imagine their hands, recall their words of caution and encouragement.

Unzip the jeans. No underwear now, no diaper yet. Insert tube into the tip of the penis, feed it through, slowly, patiently. The sexual organ. The one I had spent five years learning, so this felt like betrayal, but I wanted to be good at something.

“Are you scared?” Mike asked.

“Not at all,” I said.

Are you scared? The same thing he asked me in the moment before we first made love, in the small garden house in Dublin. His mother’s wealthy cousin gave it to us for the ten days we spent in Ireland. I stripped off my clothes and lay beneath him, trembling in the drafty house, trembling with the fear that he might not love me forever. Are you scared, he asked, and I whispered, “No, I’m ready.” I never asked him if he was scared in the bathroom stall because I already knew the answer. My hands stayed perfectly still. And as I said already, I sweated right through my shirt.

We went out with the cast after, sat around a big table in the beer garden of Weed’s, always one of our favorite places. Mike sat sullenly as our actor friends complained about roles they hadn’t been cast in, scripts they would’ve died to work on, everyone non-verbally agreeing that “normalcy” would be best. Brendan had been cast as an understudy in The Violet Hour at Steppenwolf and even had a few guaranteed performances. Connolly told Mike that their agent had been asking after him. Connolly said that he had felt embarrassed the week before, because just before hanging up with the agent, he accidentally said I love you. Which made us all laugh really hard. Except Mike. He looked at me and rolled his eyes, and said, “Why is this important?” He took two hours to drink his Miller Lite, and I remembered those days when I had had to drag him out of bars. I wanted those days back now. Drink faster, I thought. Go faster. Get better faster, please. I feel my spirit vanishing, I feel myself changing shape. Sergio, the big Puerto Rican owner of Weed’s, pulled me aside after I paid our bill, as I watched out the door for Mike’s parents.

“It’s okay if you wish he would die sometimes,” Sergio said. “He feels that way too.”

Mike’s parents came at midnight, yawning. We were yawning too. And then we did our dance. Frankie pulls up the car a couple feet from the curb. I push the wheelchair

between the curb and the car door. I flick the armrest up, click the footrests out from under his gym shoes, place them gently on the ground. Frankie wedges a smooth slab of wood underneath Mike, and pulls him at a slight angle while Mrs. Thornton and I push, delicately, cautiously. “Swivel your hips, Mike,” I say. “The way that Tara taught you.” I direct him now, the way he’s always directed me, in the bedroom, in the theater. With tenderness, and toughness. He’s in the passenger’s seat now, safe. His father buckles his seatbelt for him; his mother pulls the slide board from underneath him. Mike looks around to make sure no one has seen our private dance. I rip the cushion seat off the wheelchair, toss it in the trunk while Mrs. Thornton folds up the chair, does the same. Frankie asks Mike how the play was. Mrs. Thornton and I sit beside each other in the back seat and watch Chicago go by (Alexander’s, where Mike and I ate fluffy omelettes on Sundays, Mary Ann’s house where we went for monologue coaching, The Griffin where I blew my audition. All the places we went to on our own. All the things we hadn’t noticed.) Frankie heads back to the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, making sure he drives the speed limit.

I first met Frankie and Mrs. Thornton five years prior, when I was only twenty years old. Mike invited me to join them at Basta Pasta in Edison Park. I was nervous, got my hair cut for the occasion, even bought a new sweater. I walked in and Mike said, “Wow wow wow. New haircut?” I blushed.

His father ordered a beer, so I followed suit. His mother had a glass of White Zinfandel. I ordered ravioli which I thought might not be messy, wouldn’t require too much cutting and fussing. His father said, “You’re just a little thing. I’ll call you Little Bit.” His father said, “Call me Frankie” and I did. His mother, Rita, preferred Mrs. Thornton, so that’s what I called her. Mike gloated about me. “Maggie’s in the honors college,” he said. “Maggie

got a scholarship. Maggie knows everything about Hemingway.” His parents didn’t know much about Hemingway, but they seemed happy for Mike anyway.

His father was the oldest cop on the TAC team, had just chased down a burglar on foot the week before. He was handsome and gruff, danced with me at weddings and said, “I’m better than Michael, ain’t I?” His mother was freckled and pretty, the daughter of Irish immigrants, had met Frankie when she was five years old in a tin whistle band. She cleaned out her cabinets and her refrigerator every week. “I remember you from the high-school plays,” she said. “I hated that one character you played. I remember you back then. You always seemed a little flighty.” I told Mike to go and dance with her at a wedding once, and after a few glasses of White Zinfandel, she said, “I don’t need *Maggie Andersen* to decide when my son dances with me.”

Anyway, we had a pleasant dinner that night. We sat in the smoking section long after we had finished; conversation came easily. Mrs. Thornton and Mike ganged up on Frankie, as they often did. They told me that they made big purchases (a swimming pool, a computer, a garage) whenever he went to Florida to golf with his buddies. They laughed very hard about this, and Frankie rolled his eyes. I listened, head on fire, as Mrs. Thornton told me the story of her son Michael, my new boyfriend. She had waited so long for him, she said, and when he finally did arrive, she decided not to have any more. Just to love him and spoil him rotten. He was so much smarter than her and Frankie, she said. (“I don’t know where he gets it.”) Everybody said he was handsome like Frankie, but he reminded her of all the good things about her father. He read a lot and studied a lot, she said. She and Frankie had never gone to college, but they always knew he would. The two of them would have to go to the mall soon, she said, and buy him anything he needed for the upcoming semester.

Mrs. Thornton winked at her son, and Frankie mumbled something, took another slug of beer. Then Mrs. Thornton looked at me and said, “Michael is the apple of our eye.”

*

Frankie dropped us off at the front doors of RIC. I took Mike up in the elevator. Tommy was sleeping, but Shirley was awake, drinking coffee, waiting to undress Mike and put him into bed.

“How was the jazz show, Michael?” she asked.

Mike looked at me and winked.

“Best jazz show I ever saw,” he said.

*

We slept the sleep of hard workers that night, the luxury of deep slumber. And in the morning, I awoke to a sensation of warmth and wetness. Mike had pissed the bed. *On his own*. He was healing. The world was full of possibility and hope. We couldn’t wait to tell the doctors. We high-fived each other, over and over, and the sun shot in bursts through the windows.

*

Mike called every actor and congratulated them personally on the opening of Six Characters. (I held the phone to his ear while he did this.) But he knew he had to get back to his company and get the train back on its tracks. He started reading plays again. His mother would bring a stack, his father would bring a stack, I would bring a stack. Every day, he had lists compiled for us. He read at least one per day. After his eight-hour day of therapy and a light dinner, his mother pulled out his bedside table, set up a clipboard on wheels and banded the script to it. Turning the pages was good occupational therapy, Becky said, but when he got frustrated, we would assist.

Weeks flew by and Mike hadn't found a single thing he liked. The problem was: After living in a children's hospital ward, nothing seemed tragic or important enough; the content all seemed trivial, the language plain and flat.

Our second field trip was to see The Violet Hour at Steppenwolf on a night when Brendan understudied. The day had been a rough one—Mike had eaten pizza for lunch and choked on some red pepper, and didn't have the lung strength to cough it up. We sat in the communal lunch room and his parents and I smacked him on the back and the chest. "It's okay," we said. "It's okay." Everyone looked at us sideways, waiting for their cue to call the nurse. Tears came streaming out of Mike's eyes, and I don't think it was the red pepper. Caitlin, a little girl with cerebral palsy, whose parents seldom came to visit, said, "It's okay, Mike. It happens to me too."

"We don't have to go tonight," I said. "Brendan doesn't know we bought tickets."

"We're going," Mike said. "The End."

And when Brendan came out after curtain call, after a dream of his coming true, he saw his old buddy sitting outside, waiting for him, who shared the same dream, who looked like a shadow of his former self. And they both started weeping, just at the sight of each other. God, do I love men.

Paulie called and said he had seen a play called Language of Angels in San Francisco and there was one copy in the city, at the DePaul University Library downtown. That meant the responsibility fell to me; downtown was my jurisdiction. I snuck out of the Art Institute where I worked under Christa Thurman, the curator of textiles who was brilliant and German and screamed and yelled at me every day I saw her. She never let me take a day off of work, even during Mike's hospital stay, because her own husband had been admitted to

the hospital at the age of thirty-six for emphysema. I forgave her her lack of flexibility because her husband had died, and he had been the love of her life.

Every time I entered or exited the museum, I tried to memorize a new painting or sculpture to tell Mike about. *Time Transfixed* was his favorite these days. The locomotive train shooting out of a fireplace. We also had a soft spot for the Cornell boxes, Van Gogh and Gauguin, their work side by side. Today I would tell him that the Chagall windows made me believe in God. The glass was the blue of his eyes. My favorite pane is called Literature -- the darker, muddier one. "Which one is your favorite, babe?"

I walked down Jackson to the library, past fast food chains and corporate bakeries. I entered the library and felt an overwhelming feeling of sadness, as I always did, for all the books I would never have time to read. Up to the top floor so I could look down on the Loop's lunch scene. Spring had come abruptly and the black women wore floppy sun hats now, Hispanic women strutted in sandals with cork heels. The businessmen loosened their ties and stood on the bridge, contemplating the river.

I picked up Language of Angels at the reserve desk; it had been printed in a theater journal a few years ago and only ever produced in San Francisco. The title sounded hokey to me, but I had promised Mike and Paul that I would take a look, at least at the first few pages. I found a table near a floor-to-ceiling window. A heavy oak table where I could spread out my things. My purse, my backpack, my paper bag lunch. I took in the cabs honking below and salsa music from the Daley Center, the Farmer's Market and Picasso-inspired sculptures. In a way, I wanted to spend my break just looking out the window, but then I opened up the script.

In the pre-show, there is whispering. The stage direction reads: Darkness. A cave. A velvet darkness, dense and complete.

David Mamet first gave American Buffalo to a friend of his, an actress, over breakfast at a Chicago diner. She said, "Do I have to read it now?" He nodded, yes. When she was finished, he asked what she thought. "It's an American classic," she said. And he said, simply, "God bless you."

The play centered around a group of kids in Appalachia, a group of kids who liked to drink beer and get high, until one night, they heard their friend, a young girl, screaming, and then: She disappeared. Decades later, they are all still haunted. *A candle is lit. CELIE sings in the shadows. An ancient voice. A young girl's voice. A voice that would break your heart.*) For an instant, I'm aware that I'm in a library with other human beings, that I am not in a cave in North Carolina surrounded by ghosts. And then I read on and forget. Not only do I forget I'm in a library, I forget about the hospital where I spend most of my life.

After Tommy was released, we got a new roommate, Mr. Lightfoot, a double amputee who weighed four-hundred pounds. That was honestly his name. He left the television on all night, grumbled and swore at us when we tried to be friendly. He pelted candy at us when we laughed too loudly, then Mike would say, "Mag, I told you to be quiet!" and I would punch him in his good arm repeatedly.

The physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, doctors and nurses, other patients and their families: the population of our new life. No more actors and stage managers and designers. Mike started all over again, back to square one. Tara, his physical therapist, stretched his legs until he cried, shocked them with electrodes in the hopes that they might move. Becky, his occupational therapist, cast his arms in the hope that that would straighten them out. These women had incredible patience and Mike had visible crushes on them because of it. His speech therapist sat with him for several hours while he ran out of breath delivering monologues that he once used to impress directors and young girls. He recited a sonnet at the Newberry Library once, for a monologue competition, which

he won, and he dedicated it to me. *"My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun..."* I didn't mind the crushes. He loved that my eyes were nothing like the sun, and I loved these women as much as he did. They could do all the things for him I couldn't.

I devoured Language of Angels. I scrounged around in my purse for change, borrowed some from the librarian and photocopied every page. I came back almost an hour late from lunch. Mrs. Thurman yelled at me in her thick German accent about my faltering work ethic. But I was far away in a cave in North Carolina where a fifteen year old girl, who had an inner light, had been killed, and her disappearance haunted the lives of everyone she touched for decades after it happened.

*

I took a cab to RIC after work, didn't have the patience for all the stops on the train, the transfer to the Red Line. I am still paying for that, for all the little things that kept my sanity. In my thirties, I am still paying off credit cards because of the way I lived beyond my means back then. If I was depressed, a manicure or a massage. If Mike was depressed, an extravagant dinner or a day off of work. I jumped into the elevator, jogged down the hall to his room, and outside it, I saw the day nurse carrying a urinal full of blood. My heart went plunging through me.

"Is that Mike's?" I asked.

She nodded. Another urinary tract infection from the last days of the catheter, another astronomically high fever. I wanted to tell Dr. Kuiken, the prosthetics specialist, to cut off his shitty legs and give him new ones. Then he could walk around and get his blood circulating and just go to the bathroom on his own. Even though none of that made sense. No therapy until he was better, the nurse said. No appetite to speak of. I walked in and looked at him. He was propped up in his bed listening to Tom Waits on his headphones.

Tom Waits singing *There's A Place For Us*. Talk about suicide music. Missing therapy for a few days meant no progress, and no progress meant going home. He was constantly anxious, constantly competing for a bed. I pulled out the bedside table, banded the photocopied script to the clipboard.

“Read this,” I said.

“Why are you angry with me?” he asked.

“I’m just frustrated,” I said, and I felt hollow when I said it.

Mike’s fever broke the next day, and he announced auditions for Language of Angels, Midwest Premiere, at the Rehab Institute of Chicago.

*

While actors were preparing their monologues and audition sides, we had other things to take care of. First, we had to conquer the toilet. Mike was terrified of his new assignment, afraid of falling off. A near-death experience stirs up incredible anxiety. There were kids on the floor who had been on feeding tubes so long, they were afraid to put anything in their mouths. I told Mike I would sit with him if that would make him feel better, so we sat together in his private bathroom and talked about the language of angels and *The Matrix*. (By the way, I used to turn up my nose at movies like this, but there’s no better way to escape grief and horror than a good old big budget Hollywood film.) Sometimes we played board games. I would sit on the floor and he would tell me which battleships to play, where to move his chess pieces or his trivia pie and then one day, he wasn’t afraid anymore.

*

I can’t imagine what actors thought when they saw the audition notice in *PerformInk*: auditions to be held at the Rehab Institute of Chicago. Did they think it was a

drug and alcohol rehab? I can't imagine what they must've felt, entering that towering hellhole. All of the sick and lonely people. As they say in Apocalypse Now, the horror. But crowds of them came, lined up outside the presentation room on the fifteenth floor which was usually reserved for seminars on spinal cord research. Now it was a place for a different kind of imagination, a place to audition for Mike Thornton, who had been respected in the theater community before this, and now he had become legendary, for better or for worse.

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In the days leading up to auditions, Mike's therapists and his mother told him he'd better have a part for me. His mother sat at the foot of his bed, rubbing lotion into his feet. "After all she's done for you," she said, as if I wasn't there. But he wouldn't compromise artistically, even under these circumstances. "I honestly don't see a part for her," he responded. "But of course you're welcome to audition and prove me wrong," is what he said to me.

"Oh, don't worry, motherfucker, I will." (I mouthed it so his mother couldn't see.)

He laughed. And I really didn't mind that he wouldn't compromise, that I knew he wouldn't cast me if I bombed. My mother minded, and his mother minded, but I didn't want to worry about feeling like a charity case, like I'd been given something I didn't deserve.

I went to the hospital after work, on the first day of auditions. At the entrance, I said hello to my friends, outpatients waiting in wheelchairs for their rides, inpatients smoking cigarettes with their twisted hands. Corey, who was exactly my age (drunk driving) showed me that he could cross his legs now, which was cause for hugging and outward celebration, but also, secret envy that Mike couldn't do that yet.

I crossed the lobby to the elevator bank and made sure to look up at the banner, my favorite, the stenciled tree and the quote that calmed me back then. From the Book of Job:

However, there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again. And its new shoots will not fail. I took the elevator up to the conference room. Actors lined the hallway. Beautiful girls with perfect bodies and perfect skin, who were insecure anyway. Men with messenger bags and their pant legs rolled up because they had ridden their bikes downtown. Some were my company members, some were actors I recognized, but most I had never seen before. I pulled the sides from my backpack. I would audition for Danielle and Allison, the dead girl's best friends.

This audition was different than the others. The stakes were higher because Mike couldn't act now, or maybe ever again. He had made incredible progress. (Incredible progress becomes redefined in these days.) He was almost ready to try a sit-to-stand, but he was still wearing a binder around his belly for breath support, and his one arm still had not moved. He couldn't push himself in a wheelchair or laugh out loud or sneeze. So I had to do well, not just for myself, but for him. My ego was no longer a factor. There were code blues and children dying all around us.

When I walked into the room, Mike sat in the back, buckled into his wheelchair. He may have looked like a tragedy to those who didn't know him, but to me he looked powerful. A pencil tucked behind his ear, a baseball cap with the Chicago flag on it. No matter that I could see his diaper bulging through the midsection of his athletic pants, no matter that his arms looked weak and thin now when they poked out of a T-shirt. No matter that his one arm stuck to his side and wouldn't let go. He had a vision for this production. He had already put in a phone call to Victory Gardens and they had agreed to give us their studio space for six weeks. He looked alive again.

"How was work?" he asked, with such tenderness I wanted to crawl into his lap.

"Sucked," I said.

He smiled.

“Try the Allison monologue for me,” Mike said. “I just don’t think you’re old enough for Danielle.”

In the play, Allison never got older than mid-twenties while Danielle outlived everyone, only to shoot speed in a trailer park.

I positioned myself cross-legged on a chair as if I were sitting in the passenger’s seat of a big old truck, telling my story to a stranger who might whisk me out of town. Mary Ann Thebus, our acting teacher, had said that only crazy people can really imagine another character listening when they give a monologue. But I swear, that day, I saw a truck driver listening to me. And I mustered up all my charm for him. Why? So he would drive me away from RIC forever? No. On that day, I enjoyed very much the role of Mike’s girlfriend, the one who had stuck around. Corey’s girlfriend had left, everyone’s girlfriends had left, and I was staying right here.

I gave my monologue to the truck driver, told him all about how my boyfriend, and how I had to go, get out of town. I had memorized the monologue, worked harder than I ever had on an audition. It gave me an escape from myself and my life, the reason we all go into theater in the first place. So that we might not vanish, so that we might have a place to hide. The Appalachian accent came naturally, and my throat caught when I said, *“Did I tell you that I loved him? Because I did. Yeah, I did.”*

“Great,” Mike said. He uncapped his pen with his teeth, pressed a pen awkwardly into his palm, made a note in his pad. “Now start it drunk, Mag, high as a kite. You just met this guy at a roadhouse bar. He thinks he stands a chance. Trust me on this one. Okay? Again.”

I took a minute, switched to soft focus, switched right into drunk. I started the monologue laughing, pretending like I didn't give a shit about said boyfriend, so that when I admitted I loved him, it surprised even me. It shattered my defenses.

"You took that note," Mike said, impressed. He thought for a minute. "I'll have Lynda come in and read with you."

Lynda read for Danielle and I read for Allison. In the play, we waited tables together, got drunk after work in the parking lot. She got drunk in a different way though, not in a giddy way like me. She had a well of sadness. And that was me and Lynda at the bar any night of the week. She had grown up tough. She had darkness that I did not.

Lynda and I looked at each other and smiled, ready for a hot date. We started the scene and the conference room turned into a parking lot littered with bottles. Lynda turned her water into Jack Daniels, and I tried to impress her, my friend; I tried to make her laugh. And I did. I sang Joni Mitchell to her, off-key, until she joined in with me. We told stories about our dead friend, Celie, to strangers, to each other. There are few things I love more than being on stage with Lynda Newton. She's so good that you can't help but rise to the occasion. She raises the bar every time.

Mike cast Lynda as Danielle and me as Allison. Danielle was the meatier role, but I simply didn't understand it then. The reason? I still had incredible hope in those days, hope that Mike would make a full recovery and soon, that he would win an Academy Award and thank me for sticking by him, that we'd have houses on both coasts. I really did believe this. I think believing this was a way to be happy. And it kept me from making big wishes for myself, wishes that might take me somewhere else.

I listened outside the room while Lynda read a scene with a string of male actors, one better than the next, but her last line always killed me. I wished I could deliver it like she did, like she had been put on this earth to say it.

The stranger asks Danielle, *"How long you been sad, girl?"*

Danielle says, *"Feels like a lifetime."*

I didn't know that feeling then. I was still wrestling with sadness, even putting it on sometimes, and Lynda had learned to wear hers like skin.

Mike and I lay in bed after the auditions. He got sore from sitting too long in the wheelchair, so we'd lay in bed a lot. He said, "I really didn't think I'd be able to cast you." He smoothed my hair with his good hand. "You excited to go to VG?"

Victory Gardens had won a Regional Tony, was the birthplace of so many of my favorite plays. It meant the major critics would come. It meant high, Lincoln Park visibility, full houses every night. Yes, I was excited. I trusted Mike to direct us, and I wanted people to see this play. For a moment, everything felt exactly as it should, everything felt normal. I slipped my hand under the covers and tried for normal. I watched Mike's eyelids flutter, listened to him say my name. I mounted him, as quietly as I could, so as not to wake Mr. Lightfoot, who was snoring over the television. Mike and I knew just how to be quiet; we had had years of practice with college roommates and the years in his parents' basement. But we gave up, at a certain point, because we didn't want to ruin a good day. Or maybe it was me who couldn't stand it any longer. Couldn't stand feeling like my twenty-five-year old, curvy body was not enough to bring his back to life.

"Call the newspapers," Mike said, refusing to wallow. "Tell them the story."

In just a few weeks, we would start rehearsals in a garage on the Northwest Side and the process would be documented. In just a few weeks, Mike would move back into his

parents' home because he had hit a "plateau" and our apartment would be emptied of any trace of us. But the newspaper writers didn't write about that, so I decided I would.

17

I love to think of all the actor apartments and neighborhoods in Chicago. The geography of Chicago theater. Of course, there's the big house in Lincoln Park where everyone knows George Wendt lives. The apartment in Wrigleyville where Conan O'Brien used to live with Jeff Garlin. But what about those transient hotels in Uptown where freshly minted college grads live until they know better? What about all the affordable flats in Andersonville and Lincoln Square that you can rent from immigrant families who bought back in the 80's? How many staged readings have happened in those apartments in Jefferson Park? How many monologues have been practiced in front of those mirrors?

"Tara made me furious today," Mike said. "She said we have to get rid of the apartment." I sat across from him in his bed, where we ate dinner at his portable dining tray. His anger surprised me because Tara was clearly his favorite therapist. He was always looking down her shirt during their sessions. "Did I tell you she has a PhD?" he asked. "And she's only 29!" She had a lisp which he found endearing, and he always worked hardest for her. But she had asked him that day to try the electric wheelchair because the manual wasn't working out—his arms were too weak to push the thing. "And when are we going to discuss the living situation?" Tara asked. The only off-limits topics with Mike: The possibility of an electric wheelchair, and the possibility of *not* going back to our apartment. We had only had three months there, after all, and we wanted more time; we *needed* more time. We were just getting used to each other.

But when a woman says I'm going to have to leave a place, a woman I know is smarter than me, especially about things like this, all the memories I might have lost come tumbling back. An apartment filled with sadness and anger, with joy and laughter and sunlight, an apartment doomed somehow.

Before we moved in

A single woman lived in the apartment before us, a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She sat in the sun room and practiced day and night, a marmalade cat curled at her feet. My cousin, the landlord, said she was happy the woman was moving out. She couldn't stand all the practicing. But she loved me and Mike and our (somewhat quieter) bohemian lifestyle even if she could never reconcile herself to living one. We visited the apartment on Lieb Street, the second floor of a Chicago bungalow. The first image: a handcrafted cello and a music stand in the sun room, bathing in natural light. Mike and I wanted the apartment immediately; we wanted a symphony and a full orchestra accompaniment. And I think I'd say we got one.

When We Lived There

We tried to make it ours. I hung a bulletin board above the stereo that Mike smashed one night to make a point to his friend that material possessions were not important. On the board, we pinned up favorite poems and jokes and photos. The two of us on the Golden Gate Bridge, on Sheatrim Hill in Monaghan, the two of us wearing Santa Claus hats on Christmas and plastic Viking helmets in a beer pub. Mike oiled the hardwood floors once a week to keep them glossy. We decorated our enclosed back porch with Christmas lights and assorted chairs and cafe tables. That, we decided, would be the party room.

We sat in the party room after Amelia and Julie had seen County Fair. They had problems with the script and some of the performances. They praised Mike's directing, of course, asked when he'd be acting next, and as usual, I wondered if I'd been awful because they didn't say much about my performance at all. I watched Mike as he started to slur and tried to sit up straight while making a pretty persuasive argument in favor of athletes being allowed into the NBA without a college degree. "I think I have to leave him," I said to Amelia. "He's getting really bad." Amelia loved me, but had always considered me a little too

dramatic, so she decided not to take me seriously. Or maybe she couldn't take me seriously because her father was dying of ALS and she didn't believe anyone should be abandoned in times of trouble. She laughed at Mike's impersonation of a famous basketball player, but the laughing started to sound like funhouse hysteria, to me. Julie started to understand. She looked at me and said, "Why don't you sleep at our place tonight? Maybe that'll send the message." So I packed up a few things and started for the door. "Where are you going?" Mike asked. "Don't leave, Mag. I'll be lonely without you."

A few nights later, I went out to dinner with my girlfriends, to reconnect with them, to prove to myself (and Mike) that I had a life outside him. When I left, he sat playing video games with Connolly, looking dejected. "Why don't you ever dress like that for me?" he asked.

"Because you never take me anywhere but Charlotte's."

Mike got laid off from his bartending gig just before Christmas. The owners couldn't afford to keep it going, so now he had no job and no intention of getting a new one. His parents felt sorry for him and secretly started paying his half of the rent, and when I found out, I went ballistic. I was rehearsing and working two day jobs, transferring money from my savings account.

The Thorntons gave us a gift card to Jewel as a Christmas gift because we had never realized how expensive groceries were. Imagine a couple of twenty-four-year-olds pushing a shopping cart together. Me scrambling to find the sale items, and Mike saying, "This is depressing, Bruise. We can't even afford pizza. I thought Equity was supposed to make our lives better." But when I scrambled him eggs or put casseroles in the oven, he ate them like a good sport and told me how sensational they were.

The highs: Two kids in their kitchen on an especially sunny Saturday afternoon. They decide that they need to learn how to really cook. They mix up a homemade pasta sauce with zebra stripe tomatoes and giant mushrooms, yellow peppers and fresh garlic. They play Bob Dylan (circa 1975) and he twirls her around in the kitchen. “My gypsy bride,” he says. And this is much better than booze.

The lows: The same boy sits on the couch, on the telephone. “I can’t go out,” he says. “I’m grounded for a few days. Mag thinks I’m an alcoholic. I don’t know. Maybe I am.” And she can’t stand telling him what to do. Why doesn’t he just know better?

Amelia and Julie’s boyfriends were saving for engagement rings and starter houses, and I started to feel worlds apart from them, but I always felt in love.

*

What about Valentine’s Day when we actually didn’t go to Charlotte’s? Mike called Redmoon and said he’d be picking me up from work. “Leave early,” he said. “You deserve it. No bus. It’s Valentine’s Day.” And at three o’clock in the afternoon, I looked out the window just as he came tripping out of his car, holding up a bouquet of roses, while all the girls at Redmoon looked out the window, and I could feel them envying me. I remember when everyone wanted to be us, and now suddenly I did too.

Mike picked me up from the show later that night and we went home and shared a good bottle of red wine and made ourselves our first cheese platter and made love, sweetly. Maybe we were finally ready to be grown-ups together, but we never got the chance.

*

When He Was Gone and I Was There Alone? No: When He Was Gone

Quiet. The eeriest kind of quiet.

And then the apartment was no longer home; it became a place to change my clothes. Our real home had become the hospital where everyone was like us.

*

Amelia and Julie stayed after I scared the others off. After a bottle of red wine, I was suffering an irreversible attack of the darkness where I couldn't keep the hospital images from my mind. The inpatients of the hospital joined me at the kitchen table, as they often did. They surrounded me in their walkers and wheelchairs as I swam in Australian wine and loneliness. I divulged graphic details of the hospital visits to prove to my friends that I was entitled to this self-pity, and Amelia and Julie never disputed this. It had been two months since the stroke at this point, and that's when tragedy seems to lose its novelty for those who aren't directly involved. But even two months in, Amelia and Julie sat at my kitchen table and looked at my face. No one looked at my face in those days.

We sat at the table for hours, and I reminded them that Mike and I had eaten at this table so many times together. We had eaten cantaloupe and eggs for breakfast, Ramen noodles when we felt lazy. We had eaten birthday cake and Christmas pies. Julie opened her pack of cigarettes to me after I smoked all of mine; she filled my empty wine glass.

"My sister gave these glasses to us as a housewarming present," I slurred.

These women went through the first bout of crazy with me in high-school and they were going through Round Two only ten years later. I did hate to put them through it again. I played my favorite Van Morrison song.

"We made love to this once," I confided.

They tried to convince me to come to their place because they didn't like me in the apartment alone. I told her I couldn't because Mike's parents were picking me up in the

morning, as they always did. I didn't have a car of my own, and I had to be at the hospital when he woke up.

"Why?" Julie asked.

"Because he looks sad otherwise and it makes me want to kill myself."

She pulled tortilla chips from the pantry, a jar of salsa from the fridge, knowing this would entice me to eat. She said she was going grocery shopping tomorrow -- could she pick anything up for me? No, I said. I'm fine.

"Do they have good food there?" she asked. "At the hospital?"

"I always eat half of Mike's."

"Then why the hell are you so skinny?"

The phone rang and I grabbed it. I hoped it was Mike -- I hoped it wasn't Mike -- I hoped it wasn't bad news in the middle of the night.

"Hello," I said.

"Hey sexy."

"Mikey."

"Your tits look amazing tonight."

"You sound weird."

"Who's Mikey?" he asked.

"Cut it out. You're scaring me now."

"I'm gonna lick those tits like no one's ever licked 'em. And then I'm gonna cut them off."

"Who *is* this?"

"You know who it is, naughty girl."

Amelia wrangled the cordless phone from my hands. *Stop, she said, just stop it. Just hang up the phone now, Mag. It's a prank call, it's a pervert.* But I didn't want to let it go. I wanted to trace this call -- find this man and claw his eyes out -- squeeze my hands around his throat -- make him cry and apologize -- for this nasty trick he's played on me. My throat was raw from screaming, and I wouldn't let Amelia take the phone. I swatted her away, screamed into the phone that I would find him, I would kill him, he has picked the wrong girl this time. "I love it when you're angry," he said. Then I handed the phone to my friend and she hung it up. The refrigerator hum grew loud and angry.

We sat at the table and looked around the room. My very first kitchen. The refrigerator door was adorned with classic movie magnets. A Streetcar Named Desire, The African Queen, An Affair to Remember. A photo of Mike and his father wearing matching tweed caps, an electric bill that I had yet to pay. Poetry magnets that spelled out some nonsensical message. A wine rack beside the refrigerator, bottles meant to be saved for celebrations. I wanted to call Mike, but the room phones didn't ring after 10:00 p.m. Patients couldn't be disturbed.

"Do you want me to call the nurse's station?" Julie asked. "Say it's an emergency?"

"No," I said. "He needs to sleep."

I dumped the remainder of my wine into the sink.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "It was a very bad person. Okay?"

And I needed to be spoken to like that, like a baby. I needed an explanation.

After my friends had left and I had locked the doors and windows, I went to my bedroom closet and looked at Mike's shirts and jeans, waiting so patiently for him. I got into

bed and before turning off the light, ran my hand over his wallet on the nightstand. “He’ll be back,” I told myself, screwing my eyes shut. He’s just out late again. He’ll be back soon.

*

Mike hadn’t spoken to Tara in several days, so I went to see her in her office, just down the hall from our room. She was filling out paperwork, looking like she was at her wit’s end. It must’ve been a tough position, especially for a girl her age.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know you’re just trying to do what’s best.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Please help me. He listens to you, Maggie. Please convince him to at least try the electric wheelchair. It’ll make things so much easier. It doesn’t mean you guys can’t live together. Maybe you can just find a different place, a place without stairs, you know?”

“I’ll talk to him,” I said.

She left the power chair in his room one day, and when he returned from therapy, and saw it sitting there, he started throwing things as best he could.

“Goddamnit!” he yelled. “Is no one fucking listening to me?”

He felt it was the easy way out—he was afraid it would make him lazy—he knew it was an admission of defeat.

Mike’s parents drove me home that night and said, “Maggie, pay off your credit cards. Don’t pay rent anymore. You’re hardly ever there.”

In retrospect, it seems like everyone knew before we did.

*

And just as we had accepted our new home, they kicked us out of there too.

*

Tara asked if I could leave work a little early, so I did. Mike and I sat in a conference room with a team of the best doctors, nurses and therapists in the country, and also, his parents. Outside, the city of Chicago was golden with late afternoon sunlight, the most beautiful city in the world to us, especially from this height. Dr. Kuiken explained very clinically that they were going to discharge Michael. Tara said a power wheelchair was her recommendation because his left arm just wasn't showing signs of improvement. Dr. Kuiken said, "We believe in Michael. Absolutely. We'll still see him for outpatient therapy a few times a week, but he can sleep in his own bed now. He can *sleep*. He can direct plays and be out in the world again." They were kicking us out of our home. And Chicago would never be as beautiful again.

Mike lived at RIC for four months, and then he was released. I didn't make a scene that day because the doctors and therapists sugar-coated it all so beautifully. They said they would try to get Michael into a cutting-edge neurological study. They gave us a booklet that would help us with the transition back into the world and the improving of our sex life. The booklet said that making love was about warmth and tenderness, and not just genitals. Then it got more helpful. I remember Kuiken saying, "You can still have a wonderful life together. It'll just be *different*." And that sounded to me like he was withholding information, like he knew this was the end of progress. I hated the sound of *different*.

But my boyfriend and I, we were dreamers. We told each other stories every night of all the things we would do when he got better. We would walk several hundred miles; we would walk all the way to Mexico. One day, poof! is how I thought it would happen. It happened to that teenage girl who broke her neck on the trampoline and the geriatric man who broke his neck on a surfboard. (He happened to be the father of my boss at Redmoon who treated me tenderly after Mike was admitted, more tenderly when his own father was

admitted, and then he started to avoid me when his 80-year-old father just got up and started walking one day.) Even Tommy was scooting around on a walker now. What we failed to acknowledge is that these miracles happened before the four-month mark.

I pushed Mike back to his room while his parents went out to pick up “a special dinner.” It felt like coming home from a funeral in the middle of the day. I helped him slide into bed and then crawled in beside him. We didn’t turn on the television or listen to his headphones together, just looked up at the ceiling. After a while, he said, as if he’d been rehearsing it: “Well, I guess I’m not makin’ it back up those stairs.” (Like a light in his soul had been kicked out.) “You’d better get rid of the apartment, Bruise. I know you can’t afford it on your own.” He sat there, stone-faced crying.

I thought of the new couple who would move into the apartment after us and I hated them already. Maybe the new girl would wait eagerly for her boyfriend’s footsteps late at night. Maybe they would put a rug under the bed so the landlords couldn’t hear their squeaking bed, their lovemaking and laughing. Maybe the girl would be afraid when her boyfriend came home drunk that he would wake the landlords. But I was the passenger in the car outside that apartment when he said, “I can’t go in there.” I needed to hear his footsteps, bounding up the stairs. I needed him to yell and throw things like he had done last week. It looked like the light had been kicked out somewhere inside him. And that’s what made me cry. He said he had never heard such desperate sadness in me, like a tea kettle at boiling point.

18

There were so many Chicago theaters that started as labors of love and eventually went under. Richard Christiansen devotes a chapter of his memoir to those who did: Remains, St. Nicholas, Wisdom Bridge, Body Politic. I think the saddest part is not the empty seats or the silence, but the people who loved that place, the image of them having to stand in the doorway and say goodbye forever.

When I walked into my apartment for the last time, there was an eerie feeling that someone had been there. Our television was there, and our piggy bank, but something was missing, *something* was different. I went to the closet and opened it, and all of Mike's clothes were gone. Every tie and sweater, his checkered shirts on their hangers, all variations of jeans and winter hats. I looked at the nightstand and his wallet wasn't there. His wallet on the nightstand had always made me believe that he'd come back, be able to stuff it in his pocket in the morning, walk out the front door and jog down the stairs, make use of his driver's license and his CTA pass, and spend his cash wildly, as he always had. I called my mother and burst out crying.

It wasn't that Mrs. Thornton had taken his clothes back to her house, to wash them and find space for them. I simply couldn't believe that she had asked him for a key to our apartment, and not me. I couldn't believe that she had come in while I was at work, not even warning me that my apartment would be half-empty when I got home from the hospital that night. My apartment was the last of my privacy, the place where I could go to change my clothes and take a few deep breaths between the hospital visits where I had to be a cheerleader and the check-ins at my parents' apartment where I felt like a charity case. My apartment was the solace sandwiched between days in an office and nights and weekends in the hospital gym. And now that that last island of privacy had been invaded, Mike's mother became my scapegoat.

Back at the hospital, I ranted and raved.

"She took the extra sheets! She took your *wallet!*"

"She's trying to be helpful. She's trying to get the house ready and save you some work."

“Then why didn’t she ask ME? Tell her to stay out of our apartment. Tell her to give me back the key.”

“I won’t do that.”

“Why not? Stick up for me!”

I hadn’t asked him to say a word when she had done other strange things, when she had complained that whenever the nurses checked for bed sores, he asked me to stay and his mother to leave. I was the one who was trained to cath him, to digitally remove if necessary, to administer suppositories. (“Ass Gun Annie” was Mike’s affectionate nickname for me in this daily situation. “Hey Ass Gun Annie, I’m ready.”) His mother would say, “Michael, why won’t you let me *look*?” She was the kind of woman who wasn’t fazed, really, by vomit or wounds or blood; she probably would’ve been a wonderful nurse. I didn’t say anything when she rubbed holy oil from Ireland on Michael’s legs at night and insisted that I do the same. Some nights, I was very serious about the holy oil. Some nights, a shitty smile spread across my face and Michael noticed and winked at me. But this time, I had to say something.

“Stick up for me!” I cried.

What was he supposed to do? Mike honestly asked me that. She was his primary caretaker, he said. I think he knew, even then, that she was the one who *had to* stay, not me.

*

I never went back to the apartment after that day. My father and Mike’s mother moved us out, put all our things into the Thorntons’ garage. (It is not lost on me that Mrs. Thornton and my father are very much the same kind of person, nobody ever being good enough for their children.) I still don’t know where my Van Morrison CDs are, or the lingerie Mike bought for me.

A new couple moved in, my cousin said.

“They’re really fun,” she said. “They’re young, engaged, just about your age.”

Sometimes I have to think very hard to remember the address.

“I don’t give a shit if they kick me out,” Mike said. “We’re putting on a play.”

Now it was time to re-define home.

*

The week before Mike was scheduled to return, we scheduled a “home visit,” which means Frankie, Rita and I drove to their house in Jefferson Park and waited for Mike to come with Tara and Becky in a van, a specialized van with a ramp and all the necessary accommodations.

Jefferson Park was the neighborhood I wanted to live in as a child. I begged my parents to move there, to the suburbs, as I called it. I wanted to be away from the crazy hospitals and black iron fences, discount grocery stores and gas stations on every corner. I wanted to live there, and Mike wanted to live where I had grown up. Jefferson Park is like a patch of small-town Wisconsin or Michigan sewn into the patchwork of Chicago. There’s a Blue Line stop there, but somehow, it maintains its air of provinciality. The time machine diners and taverns, the specialty Polish delis, the law offices in small frame houses, optometrists in barns. This is not usually where Chicago transplants live; it’s a neighborhood for natives, mostly city workers, mostly white. Families, modest houses, big backyards. Warmer than it is by the lake, and everything is cheaper.

I walked into the Thorntons’ ranch house, and it knocked the wind out of me. I hadn’t been there in so long, and everything was just as I remembered. A small kitchen with a mustard-yellow refrigerator, a magnet from a relative’s trip to Hawaii. “Ritalika’s Kitchen.” A fridge stocked with deli meats and cheeses, cases of soda and beer. In the living room, a scrunched velour couch, embroidered with orange and green flowers. A hutch filled with

Belleek China. The high-school poem Mike had written for his dying grandfather framed and hanging on the wall. And otherwise, photos of the sprawling Irish family. The children at milestone stages, the women at varying weights, the men at dizzying levels of drunkenness. Mike as a nervous baby, Mike as a chubby boy with a crewcut, Mike as a skinny, pimple-faced teenager. There was even one of me, tan and glowing with my arms around my boyfriend's neck. That was his uncle's retirement party where Mike and I laughed through the long-winded speeches and Mike's uncle wept on the ride home because he still loved the woman he had divorced in the eighties. That was the night I overheard Mike's mother commenting on the length of my dress.

And now here we were, and I felt so sorry for her. She put on her half-glasses, showed me the medical bills they didn't have to pay thank God, the application she'd filled out for the handicapped parking placard. She confided that Emma, the old Italian woman across the street, had been nosier than ever lately. We peeked out the front window, only to see Emma doing the same, waiting with bated breath for Michael to arrive. The child she had watched grow up, the child she had yelled at to get off of her lawn. Mrs. Thornton and I laughed, and Emma closed her curtains. "I cleaned out the guest bedroom for him," Mrs. Thornton said. "I hope the wheelchair fits through the door. And Mag, you stay here as often as you like."

We would live next door to his parents' bedroom, the room we would listen to at night. His mother would say the Rosary over and over until Frankie said, "Rita, what the hell are you doin'?" Go to sleep now, honey." Sometimes we heard his mother crying, sometimes we heard his father crying. And always, Mike said to me, "Turn on some music or something. I can't stand it anymore."

The van pulled up in the side drive and Frankie helped Tara and Becky lift the wheelchair over the cement step, through the side door. I held the door open as widely as I could, and made myself as small as possible. Mike looked uncomfortable in his chair and growled under his breath.

Mrs. Thornton hurried to put out a lunch spread. A taco salad she had whipped up, cheesy potatoes, cucumber sandwiches, all of Mike's favorites. Frankie said, "I'll fire up the grill. Burger, hot dog, burger?" It hurt my feelings when Becky and Tara confessed that they were vegetarians because Frankie wasn't prepared for that. Tara and Becky left Mike in the kitchen with me and began a tour of the house with Mrs. Thornton. They measured doorways, drew quick and efficient diagrams of the bathroom. The house had always been cozy, but with the addition of a wheelchair and the subtraction of the basement, it became somewhat claustrophobic. Frankie went outside to smoke and Mike said, "I'd love a cigarette right now."

"Good to be back?" I asked.

"No. I want our apartment."

"Me too."

I took a can of iced tea from the fridge and opened it for him because he didn't have the fine motor skills to do it himself.

Our apartment had been moved into the Thorntons' garage. The space that had once been reserved for drinking and parties was now crowded with our kitchen table and chairs, our tubs of books, our favorite paintings. Our parents did all the packing and moving for us, because obviously, Mike could not and they were worried I might snap. Mike had mentioned to his mother that I was upset, and she said she felt terrible.

The Thorntons' garage had once been a place to change into your swimsuit, a place to hide from the rain on a summer day, a place to retire when the night got too windy. There used to be a big hi-fi stereo, a fridge stocked only with booze. The garage had been Frankie's territory, made me think of Mike's first day at the School at Steppenwolf. His parents had taken us to Noodles to celebrate, the restaurant down the block where blue-haired old ladies drank old-fashioned cocktails with their husbands and lounge lizards sang Frank Sinatra. The menu advertised "angle hair pasta" and "fettachini alfrado," five dollars for a big wooden bowl. Mike's parents drove home from Noodles, but Mike and I walked, and I scolded him all the way. "You yawned all through dinner," I said. "They're excited for you. They want to hear about your day."

We walked past the parking lot of the 7-11 where Polish teenagers sat on top of their Mustangs and drank big cans of beer. We walked past the postwar bungalows and sprinklers in the dark; we walked in perfect sync. Mike looked up at the sky and found a few stars. He pointed them out to me as he reached into his pocket for a cigarette; his parents didn't know he smoked.

"Stars," he said in his contemplative voice.

"That's weird," I responded. "We usually don't see them around here."

An airplane flew noisily over our heads as we took in barbecue smells, said *Hi, how are ya?* in soft voices to young families sitting on their cement porches, eating popsicles. We were in a different part of Chicago now, closer to the airport, but only a thirty-minute drive from the theater district that Mike was now a part of.

"Is anyone as good as you?" I asked. "At Steppenwolf, I mean."

"There's an older guy who's excellent," Mike said. "He's in his fifties, from New York. And then there's weird kid. He's gonna be the next John Malkovich I think. Brendan

Donaldson is his name. He's a Tennessee guy. We all had to do our monologues today and he did one about being in love with his cousin. Devastating."

Mike looked beautiful when he was sleepy; his eyes got brighter, not duller. He had gotten fat, but never tried to suck in his stomach. He stuck it out proudly which just made me want to bend over and kiss it. I wanted to hang from his words like his parents did, but I knew I couldn't do that. My job was to rein him in. "I'm proud of you," I said. "But don't be an asshole to your parents."

I thought of how he might look at school, coming in early with swirls of uncombed hair, his breath with a hint of sleep still. I knew they started the day by running around the space in circles to warm up. I thought of how I had fallen in love with him in a theater.

"Are the girls in the program pretty?" I asked.

"Some," he said. "But none have a big nose or titties like you."

It seemed that as Mike grew stronger and walked taller, my strength got lost, my tongue got tied, my thoughts got sad and worried. But I was the one he loved, the one his father loved. Nothing bad would happen to us. I would meet all of his new friends and colleagues and win them over.

Mike and I cut down an alley where the garages were lit and bushes and trees grew out and over the fences. We walked halfway down the alley to the Thorntons' backyard which was bigger than their ranch house. The chlorinated blue of the bucket-shaped swimming pool shimmered in the dark. We rounded the pool and came to the open garage where Frankie sat in a patio chair beside a stereo speaker. His collection of one-hundred hats hung from the ceiling rafters. Chicago Police Department hats with checkered bands, baseball caps from various teams, a mesh hat that read, "Women love me/Fish fear me."

Ceramic watermelons and bottles of rum lined the shelves. Brightly colored hula hoops and bright white roller skates hung from the hooks on the wall.

Frankie had changed into a pair of swimming trunks and a softball tee shirt; he had slapped a fisherman's hat onto his head. Mrs. Thornton had gone inside to watch her soap operas while Frankie held a can of Miller Lite in a beer cozy, looked to be conducting a symphony of his own. The music of Peter, Paul and Mary drifted from the speakers. I couldn't believe that this man who was feared by men half his age sat with his eyes half-closed singing a lullaby. "I used to sing this to you when you were a baby, Mikey," he said. Mike looked sad at first, but then he smiled.

"Let's have a nightcap," Mike said. He clapped his hands together. "It's a gorgeous night, what the hell? Mag, can I interest you in a nightcap?"

Frankie's eyes shot open. He rushed to the garage refrigerator, pulled out two bottles of Heineken. "Only the fancy ones for my babies," he said. "I love you guys. You know that." He loved us because we were friends, in a way that he and his wife were not. We pulled out a couple of patio chairs, watched Frankie slur his way through the rest of *Lemon Tree*. In the static between songs, I squeezed his hand and said, "That was a good one, Frankie."

At midnight, Mrs. Thornton peeked her head out the side door and said, "Frankie, turn the music down. We have neighbors, you know." He turned the music down until her head disappeared and then he turned it back up. The neighbors liked him too much to complain.

Mike and I went inside after the nightcap, but Frankie stayed in the garage. We slipped in the side door, started down the stairs of berber carpet. Mike grabbed under my skirt, pulled at the straps of my bra as I walked down the stairs ahead of him in the dark. We

made our way blindly through the laundry room, into his bedroom that smelled of freshly clean sheets and man's deodorant. We fell onto his bed -- forget the covers, leave the lights. We peeled off our own clothes, quickly now. He was on top of me, smelling like citronella candles. "Promise you won't ever let me sing in the garage by myself," he said. His face looked like the baby picture, the one where he looked nervous. I made love to that nervous baby who felt such pressure to succeed. I covered his back with my hands. I made love because of all the men I'd said no to, grateful I'd said yes to him. Oh baby, that feels good. We made love to a mix of soap operas and garage song lullabies, in a bed that was getting too small for us. "I promise you," I said.

*

Now we both know that sometimes it's a good thing to have someone who doesn't sit in the garage with you, someone who tells you when to go to bed. But we didn't know back then. Soon enough, I would move in with my disabled boyfriend and his parents at the age of twenty-five. My boyfriend's father who started spending more time in the garage, sitting on our hand-me-down furniture and singing. And Mike didn't want to sit with him anymore because he said his father's sadness made him feel like he was the elephant in the room.

*

Tara and Becky returned with Mrs. Thornton, who was an incredible improviser. We would transfer Mike to his grandmother's old wheelchair to get him into the bathroom for a shower. We would station a portable commode in his bedroom for instances when he couldn't make it, and dump the bucket when he was done. Frankie's buddies would be over the next day to help him build a ramp up to the front door. The disability checks would start arriving any day now. Mike was assigned to David and Katie, the outpatient therapists.

Everything would be done by the time Mike moved home next week, his mother promised. Mike looked at me and said, “This is temporary. Remember that. I am not disabled.”

.....

I heard Mike admit his disability for the first time seven years after the stroke. I had always wanted him to admit it, to be truthful, to cut through the delusion that was slowly destroying us. He had just auditioned for a play called Ruby Sunrise, a play to be produced at The Gift and directed by our friend, John Gawlik. He auditioned to play a 1950’s television writer.

“I think it’s a wonderful role for you,” I said. “You have got to stop playing these tortured soul roles and play your confidence and sexuality.”

“But I don’t know if it’s appropriate for a disabled actor,” he said.

I wondered if his wheelchair would be distracting, how it could be justified.

“You want me to cut the cake?” I asked.

It was Mike’s thirtieth birthday and he sat in an Irish pub, slowly drinking a cider, surrounded by sycophants and friends, and me, who would always remind him of painful things.

*

I wonder if it was when Mike moved back home that people started feeling permission to give me life coach advice. I went to my primary doctor for a pap smear and told him I wasn’t going to take the birth control pill anymore because my boyfriend couldn’t do much right now and if I did get pregnant, I’d be happy about it.

“A spinal stroke?” the doctor said. “How crippled up is he then?”

I never went back to that particular doctor because I was disgusted with his bedside manner. My family dentist said to me, “Maggie, you have to leave him. You’re not meant to

be a caretaker. You have your own dreams, don't you? Marriage is a business, an equal opportunity partnership. This is not a good way to begin." I rinsed and spit, took my new toothbrush and went home, feeling like a hurricane was brewing inside me.

My father had been silent about my relationship up until then. My parents took me and my sisters to a Billy Joel concert that summer, trying anything to make me happy. My father picked us all up and things were relatively normal on the way to the United Center, except we didn't laugh and ball-bust as much as usual. My mother played her Billy Joel albums all the way, the cheesy soundtrack of our childhood. My father turned the music down only to have her turn it back up again. Occasionally, I would catch him looking at me in the rearview mirror. I could feel him feeling sorry for me. His pity was tangible, especially now that my sisters, who were several years younger, had embarked on lucrative careers and gotten engaged, just as he'd predicted.

Being out in public where no one was in a wheelchair felt like outer space, but I loved singing in the dark with my sisters who always knew which songs affected me. They felt sorry that they had gotten engaged first, and I knew it without them saying a word. Soon after that night, my father would start to sound more and more like the doctor and the dentist.

*

Mike and I, the couple who had once been excessive and lazy, were quite productive now. We woke up with the birds on the weekends while our friends slept off nasty hangovers. Mike spent a few hours in the bathroom every morning. He used the time to map out Language of Angels rehearsals, make outlines for design meetings. How should he light Paul? What costume might I wear? What kind of waitress was she? Would Victory Gardens

allow spray paint on the walls to give the effect of the cave? And what about the song the girls sang in the script? He listened to every version.

I got ready in the basement where we used to sleep -- memorized my lines down there, broke my scenes up into beats, called the newspapers and pitched our story. I left our breakfast dishes in the sink for his parents to wash, left our dirty clothes on the floor in his bedroom. His mother and father cleaned up after us, which I now feel sorry about, but I was too self-absorbed then to think about it. We were still often late to rehearsal, because it took Mike so long to be done in the bathroom and dress, even with our help.

We held rehearsals at a company member's home, partially to save money. Danny Ahlfeld, our actor slash electrician, lived closest to the Thorntons, and had an empty garage. Most of the actors lived in the inner city, but they took trains and buses to make it easier on Mike. We opened the garage door for ventilation, and rehearsed all summer long. Mike worked with a different small group every night. He did table work with us, showing us maps of North Carolina, photographs of caves, grilling us about our relationships with each other, to make sure we were all telling the same story. Paulie's ugly little Boston Terrier sat in the garage and breathed noisily while we rehearsed. Gawlik ran around, shooting at us with his prop gun, and Carrie Layne (who played the ghost girl) just sang all the fucking time, in a voice that would break your heart. During rehearsal and after, we all took turns, pushing Mike out to the car, packing up his briefcase, opening his water and snacks.

*

At the six-month mark, Mike stood up. It went like this. David, his outpatient physical therapist, tied a gait belt around his waist, then he rocked back and forth as he counted. "One, Two, Three!" He had been trying this for several weeks, and usually, the rocking would lead to Mike moving an inch off of his chair, maybe two. But one day, the

rocking worked and he made it all the way up. When he got to his feet, his legs spasmed and shook, then calmed down for an instant and he stood, six foot two. I had forgotten how tall he was.

“Baby,” I said.

He looked down at me and smiled, then fell back into his chair with a thud.

At the six-month mark, we were well into rehearsal for Language of Angels. Mark Brown, a columnist from the *Sun-Times*, showed up at the garage one sticky summer night, and we all felt like our lives were beginning. This is how he described it: “A summer breeze had cut the temperature inside the garage from stifling to merely stuffy. A box fan hummed on a floor partially covered with thin gray carpet. A window air conditioner had been installed but abandoned as useless...A lawn mower and leaf blower were shoved to the side with the paint cans and used tires. They weren’t props.” We hoped that everyone in Chicago might read the feature-length article and come to see our show. Mark Brown’s article was entitled “A Greater Appreciation of Life, Less Fear of Death.” He ran a photograph of Michael in his wheelchair, smiling and wearing Converse All-Stars. He made the big announcement: “At therapy the other day, Thornton stood for a minute and a half.” In a way, that sounds prettier, doesn’t it?, and in a way, more vulgar. One sentence can’t convey the beauty of that moment, or the horror of how far we had to go.

*

At the six-month mark, Mike and I would sit with his parents in the kitchen for breakfast and in the middle of it, while we were doing crossword puzzles or reading the newspaper or our scripts, he’d scream, “Get the urinal!” One day, I raced for the blue plastic container, and got it to him just as he was fiddling with the waistband of his athletic pants. But with the unpredictability of his hands, he didn’t quite make it and piss started shooting

all over the kitchen like a crazy fountain. We all laughed at the slapstick comedy of it, and I was so proud of us for learning to laugh together this way, but then Mike started to cry. That terrible moment where hysterical laughter turns into crying.

Mark Brown's article begins with a quote from Mike: "The last thing I want about my story coming out is the triumph of the human spirit." Mike also was quoted as saying, "I know it sounds ridiculous but I really wouldn't exchange the experience for anything." Mike put on a show for the newspaper reporters and his actors. But I got the real Mike Thornton, and that was something I had previously been proud of. Now it was beginning to make me angry. *Wouldn't exchange it for anything?* Mark Brown did his research, interviewed Chicago directors about Mike's talent and promise. Sheldon was quoted as saying, "He has charisma on stage. You want to watch what he's doing." BJ said Mike was a born performer, and he was confident in Mike's eventual return to the stage. Mark Brown reported that "(The directors) base some of their faith on Thornton's support group, which includes his chums, his parents, and his girlfriend, Maggie." BJ said it was "so Chicago," the way "they take care of their own." We puzzled over that quote at the time. What else was there to do, but take care of your own? His mother said he didn't laugh when I wasn't there. What else was there to do?

19

Dennis Zacek grew up in a South Side Polish neighborhood, and he had always dreamt of living in the biggest, prettiest house there. By the time it became available, he was actually able to buy it. He bought the dream house, and many actors and designers have told legendary stories about parties in that basement. Many stayed there when they didn't have a home. He called them "artists in residence." He bought the dream house with the money he had earned living the dream, as Artistic Director of Victory Gardens.

We spent the hottest weeks in August in the studio theater at Victory Gardens, such a change from the garage, such a change from Jefferson Park. We were blocks from the lake now, had air conditioning that worked, a box office staff, a state-of-the-art sound booth and

a gregarious house manager. Outside, the Lincoln Park trixies paraded from bar to bar, looking for a doctor or a banker to save them. Inside, Mike sat in his chair and we spread out in the theater for notes while Connolly, the one who had driven Mike to the emergency room, spray painted the walls with our character names. “Billy loves Allison. Seth loves Celie. Remember me forever and ever.” The sound designer sat in the booth, fiddling with the sound cues, voices echoing in caves. “*Seth, where are you?*” The lighting designer sat on the floor with a headlamp and a lantern, trying both with different bulbs.

Mike was in a shitty mood.

“Paul,” he said. “You **sore** it?” (Letting him know that his New York accent did not belong in this show about Appalachia.)

“Mary, you went up on your lines. Again.” (In a totally monotone voice, reading from his notebook.)

“Yikes,” I said, trying to be funny. “Somebody ate a bitch burger today.”

“Maggie, this isn’t Theater Camp. We’re gonna have the most visibility we’ve ever had and you’re acting like it’s Theater Camp. Your monologue is not there yet, by the way.”

But then it was Opening Night and we weren’t fooling around anymore.

We all went to our day jobs, as usual, with gnawing feelings in our stomachs, looked at our scripts for the first time in weeks because we were now in panic mode. We arrived at the theater earlier than we had to, tried to eat and couldn’t. We looked at our dressing room bulletin board. The lyrics of Dolly Parton country songs, our favorite acting advice.

Someone most certainly said something motivational, though I’ve no idea what that might have been. Then we retired to our corners of the small dressing room we all shared, and listened to the audience. Patrons and critics, artistic directors and agents, in-town family and friends. Then we tried to forget they were there as we listened to the sounds of the pre-

show. The cave that we all imagined we had been in together more than a decade ago. The sounds of our own scared voices in the dark.

Paulie, looking like a shell-shocked man, stood eerily still in a cave inside Victory Gardens Theater, wearing a down vest and a miner's helmet clamped down over his curls. His head lamp was the only light in the theater at first, the walls were graffiti-d with scribblings of lost love. Billy Loves Allison, Seth Loves Celie, Remember Me Forever and Ever... The space was inundated with sound cues -- echoes of laughter, young girls calling out to their boyfriends, hurried footsteps, squeals of delight. A small girl's silhouette appeared in a shadow and she began to sing, in a weak, unsteady voice, unsure of herself. "What'll I do when you are far away and I am feeling blue?" It sounded like one of the girls in the cave could not find her boyfriend. She called out to him, timidly at first, but soon screaming. The shadow continued to sing. "What'll I do with just a photograph to tell my troubles to? What'll I do?" The voices cut out abruptly, the shadow ran away, and the play began. Paulie turned on his light, searched every face in the audience. Then he said softly, almost inaudibly, "This is how it went, this is what I remember..." Paulie had always been good at the angry young man roles, but now he knew how to whisper.

Lynda and Brendan, my best friend and my boyfriend in the play, had a knock-down, drag-out fight about the way he treated me, and I left the scene, got the hell away from these drunken hillbillies. I listened to Lynda and Brendan scream at each other until Lynda came storming offstage and punched her hand into a brick wall. Then I went on for my truck driver monologue. I sat in a bucket seat, looked out into a sea of blackness and started laughing, nervously, in the company of strangers. I began to tell the story of my boyfriend. I came offstage, feeling a little stunned. Lynda and Gawlik had their scene at the end, where he comes to her, trying to figure out if she knows he was the one who killed her friend, all

those years ago, and now he's the sheriff of our town. It's a menacing scene—they are *really good*--Gawlik leaves the trailer, Lynda puts on a pot of tea, and Celie's ghost appears in the doorway to join her. The ghost had been standing just outside the trailer, standing guard, protecting her friend. The audience audibly, collectively gasped, and the play was over.

And at the end, when we took our bows, it was difficult to think that there was anything better than this. We went to Sterch's for the opening night party, drank to keep the good feeling going. My mother said it was the most vulnerable she had ever seen me, and I thought that could be either really good or really bad.

The next few mornings, I woke up before Mike, snuck to 7-11 and picked up a newspaper, and quickly scanned it for our review, so that if I got a negative mention, I could feel sorry for myself before he woke up. But the day it was printed, a full-page review with a color photo, that wasn't necessary. We had been highly recommended by Hedy Weiss, a premier critic in Chicago, who had been known to attack, even theaters and playwrights she loved. She called Lynda a powerhouse, said the last scene between Lynda and Gawlik "crackled with Pinteresque danger," said Paul's performance was "fiercely lyrical and finely controlled."

"Language of Angels has been vividly directed by Michael Patrick Thornton, who no doubt drew on his own recent brush with mortality this past winter...Whatever the source of his inspiration, he has elicited first-rate performances from his actors, including Maggie Andersen as Allison, Danielle's naïve, fast-talking youthful pal, and Brendan Donaldson as the melancholy Billy." I woke up my boyfriend and kissed him, thanked him for making one of my childhood dreams come true, to act in that theater, to be good at it, to have audience members waiting for us in the lobby, visibly changed and telling us their own sad stories. If only I could make his dreams come true. A critic said, "The past lives. It can haunt us. It can

keep guilt alive...The past can speak to us in strange, if strangely recognizable tongues that deserve to be heard.” It would take me a long time to understand that what happened to Mike came to define our ensemble, the way we lived and worked, and that’s why we loved Language of Angels.

We opened in August of 2003 and ran for six weeks. I did a monologue five nights a week about the guilt I felt over running away from my boyfriend, even though it was ultimately the best thing for me. Some nights, I thought only of communicating my grief over Mike. Some nights, I convinced myself that Brendan really was my violent, despicable boyfriend. Anyway, I lived on the reviews and the audiences for months, felt like I was doing something worthwhile with my life.

August of 2003: The Chicago Cubs were in the playoffs. Mike bought me a paper-thin Cubs T-shirt and requested that I wear it whenever we watched games, or every day if I wanted. Whenever I wasn’t at the theater, I watched the games on TV with Mike. We watched our home team win and lose, win and lose again. We cheered and booed from the living room, felt the air go out of us when they made careless errors. I had one more year left in me. One more year of acting, one more year of make-believe.

20

High-school is often an awkward time for actor types, but it’s also just as often the first exposure to theater, the place where they finally feel a sense of belonging. Bill Murray still visits his Chicago alma mater and helps with their fundraising campaigns. Loyola Academy was the place where he started his acting career, he says. “The theater program saved my life.”

Imagine a high-school gymnasium, the sort of state-of-the art gym built for a college prep school known for its academics *and* sports teams. This is where Mike went to high-school, although he never had much use for the gym. His most distinct memory is a pep rally he emceed in his sophomore year. He spent several nights reading joke books and tips on how to write a roast; he wrote and re-wrote a script to take him through the hour-long pep

rally, intended to celebrate the sports team's victories. This was the high-school his father and uncles had attended. They played baseball and basketball there; this was his way (at fifteen) of paying some tribute to them, trying to fit into their tradition. He got up on the stage, full of confidence. He stepped up to the microphone, introduced himself, tried out his first joke (*A shamrock walks into a bar...*) and a few football players in the front started the chant with smirks on their faces. "Lo-ser. Lo-ser." The chant spread like wildfire, a sea of adolescent boys soon screaming and stomping their feet until a blush rose up Mike's neck, and the dean and teachers decided to pull him off the stage, try a different approach. This particular story makes me want to find those boys, who are men now, and punch them in their faces.

Ten years later, Mike stood on a stage in that same gymnasium on a walker. A benefit, raising money for him and his parents. One-thousand and some people filled the space. Our extended families, every friend we had ever known, our parents' friends, alumni of the high-school, local actors and directors, neighborhood folks who had read about Mike in the newspaper. I had written the plea letter, per Mrs. Thornton's request, tried to conjure images that would spark interest and evoke compassion. "Michael had been saving for a couch, a red one from IKEA." His mother and aunts edited out my best lines, I thought, before we sent the invitation. I didn't complain, but I had started to care about the quality of my writing again, which was strange.

Halfway through the fundraiser, Mike stood shakily at a podium and read a speech that he had written, thanking everyone for coming, commending everyone on their generosity. Murmurs went through the crowd. "He's so handsome, isn't he?" And this was not charity. He really had become even more handsome, one of those men who gets better with age. His five o'clock shadow was sexy, his dimples just icing on the cake. When he

spoke, everyone listened, and I was reminded of how he should always be on a stage, though that would prove more challenging now.

In the fundraiser speech, Mike thanked Rita and Frank, his parents, for being “in the trenches” with him. He thanked my parents, Laura and Alan, for raising a daughter who was his best friend, the love of his life, some sort of angel. He said we’d been dating for five years now and he couldn’t wait to spend the rest of his life with me. I heard later that everyone thought he was going to propose to me that night. But I just stood in the audience and bit my fingernails down, swallowing over and over. My father came up behind me, found me in the crowd, and turned me around. The joke in my family is that my father only hugs us on Christmas, so this was unusual, and sad.

Mike’s mother and aunts catered the benefit with homemade pasta and beef sandwiches in aluminum trays and crispy salads in big plastic bowls. His fathers, uncles and cousins tended bar at long collapsible tables. Pretty actresses worked the room, wearing low-cut blouses and short skirts, hawking raffle tickets, talking up the silent auction. Many of the partygoers had to sit in the balcony because the gym was so incredibly crowded. I suppose Chicago does take care of its own. I suppose Chicago is a bit like A.J. Liebling called it, a big city façade with the soul of a hick town.

My father, on the night of the fundraiser, pumped Mike’s hand, said, “Hell of a speech, Mike. Your mother outdid herself.” My father, a short, physically fit man, handsome in an Irish way, worked the room too, reminisced with cops he had once worked with, flirted with Mike’s aunts who loved the attention, made our friends laugh with his crazy army stories. That was the last time Mike and my father really spoke to each other.

The fundraiser was a success, raised over \$100,000. Mike said the money would eventually help us to start a life together, put a down payment on a house, but I thought it

should be earmarked for the cost of continuing doctor's visits, outpatient therapy, work-out equipment for the house. A supplement to the meager disability checks and Frankie's pension from the police department.

*

Mike called me some sort of angel in the speech. But *was* I an angel? God no.

*

One day, all the Redmoon bosses left early and a co-worker told me she was skipping out to meet some friends at a Wrigleyville beer garden, tried to entice me to come along. "You look so feckin' pale," she said in her best Irish accent. "A pint would do ya good." It was an unseasonably warm September day – the Cubs were on a winning streak – I had made all my press calls for the week, written the media releases. "Why should the devil get all the good tunes?" I didn't call Mike and tell him, and I didn't have a cell phone at the time, so he couldn't reach me if he tried. Certainly, I'd have a couple beers and then go to his house, be home in time for dinner, as I always was, now that Language of Angels had ended. I had a bed at my parents' house and a bed at his parents' house, but almost every night, I stayed at the Thorntons'.

Kathleen and I walked to Sheffield's, and when we arrived, there were ten men from Philadelphia waiting for us. They sat around a picnic table with several pitchers of beer. They wore polos and cargo shorts, were on vacation, away from their wives and girlfriends and jobs, had wads of money to spend. Kathleen introduced me as Maggie, "a Chicago girl." It was intoxicating to be around men who didn't know my circumstances, didn't know me at all. I was a blank slate, anyone's girl. I had a beer and it was like heaven; it was one of those days where everyone looks beautiful. I had a few more, then decided to play tour guide, took the men on a Wrigleyville pub crawl. In one bar, I asked for the manager, Joe DeRosa, a

friend of mine from high-school. He wasn't working that evening, but the bartender called him, told him I was there, and then he picked up our tab. The men were impressed; the men were drunk. They started doing impersonations of my accent. "Ay bartender, tell Joey Dee to hook me up. It's me, Maaagie. Don't you know who I am?" But that only encouraged me to impersonate *their* accents, call them sissies, and jinx their team. I kept up with them. They offered me their extra ticket to the game, and I took it.

A night game at Wrigley is a romantic thing to a girl who grew up two miles away. It's childhood and possibility, the first time you get to stay out late, feel the magic of the night. At the park, the Philly guys bought me and Kathleen anything we wanted. Hot dogs, pretzels, peanuts. At some point, I did call Mike from someone's cell phone and tell him I was at the game, but I'd leave early, before the seventh inning stretch, I promised, take a cab over. I wouldn't make it for dinner, but maybe I would make it in time for dessert. I pretended not to notice the disappointment in his voice. Fuck him, I thought. I stay with him every night. I *deserve* this, I'm *sad*. I had an uncanny ability to justify anything to myself.

I had nicknames for all the Philly guys. Ray Liotta, Five-Foot-Two, Tubby the Tuba. Their faces are all fuzzy to me now, but what is not so fuzzy is that I went down to the concourse to smoke a cigarette with one of the few single ones, one of the good-looking ones. I rambled about the first game my father had taken me to, how some drunk in the bleachers had spilled a beer on my head and my dad went bullshit crazy. I had felt utterly humiliated.

"I always loved to keep score," I said. "Still do."

"Who was your favorite player back then?" he asked, genuinely wanting to know the answer.

"Ryne Sandberg," I said.

“Rhino,” he smiled.

“I hear he coaches the minor leagues now. The Peoria team I think.”

“I want to kiss you,” the man said, looking helpless.

I tucked my chin and laughed, nervously, got rid of my cigarette. We went back to our seats, and on the way, I avoided looking at the handicapped section, where Mike and I had sat just a few weeks before. Old-timer Cubs fans in wheelchairs, five-year-olds with cancerous brain tumors, women and men whose legs had been blown off in landmines. Sometimes, not looking is a way to keep from becoming totally jaded.

I took a cab to Mike’s house, long after the game was over, still dreaming of kissing the man I didn’t know, still empowered by my accidental sexuality. But also, my stomach churned with anxiety. “Sober up,” I thought. “Get ready for an argument.” The cab driver pulled up in front of the ranch house and said, “A ramp? Somebody is in a wheelchair? Your grandma?” (with a particular emphasis on the d).

I ran up the ramp, so much easier when I wasn’t pushing, and flew in the front door, which was propped open because of the weather. Mike waited beside the door with his back to me. I decided to take the affectionately drunk attack.

“I’m sorry, baby,” I said, playing up my drunkenness, hugging him around his neck. “I had fun though. I wish you could’ve come and met us.” (This was the era when he refused to take the free disability cabs, or a ride from anyone other than his parents.)

“I’m glad you’re safe,” he said without looking at me.

“I brought you a program,” I said. “Did you watch?”

“I’m furious with you,” he said.

He watched the television and ignored me.

A clean house after a wasted day of drinking is so sobering, inflicts such guilt and pain.

Frankie came in from the kitchen.

“How you doin’, Little Bit? Good game?”

“I think I’m ready to go to bed,” Mike called to his mother, instead of asking me.

I sat there on the couch, smelling of sun and hot dogs and beer. Mrs. Thornton came in and started pushing Mike toward his room, always a challenge on carpet.

“Michael,” she said, just loud enough so I could hear. “Don’t be unreasonable. She’s twenty-five years old; she’s done a lot for you. She deserves a night out once in awhile.”

I sat there alone on the couch.

Frankie explained in a whisper. “He’s been waiting by the door for you since six.”
(The time I usually got home.)

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry. I guess I lost track of time.”

I lost track of time. How old was I? What were my goals and my dreams? Who had I wanted to be by the age of twenty-five?

I went to bed and we lay far apart from each other. Mike’s happiness depended too much on me now, which is what he had once resented me for. I thought of the statistics I had read about caretakers and their compromised life spans. I knew I had made Mike feel sad and embarrassed in front of his parents, the way he had felt at that pep rally in high-school. When the silence became unbearable, I whispered, “Sometimes I just want to kill myself.” When the affectionate drunk didn’t work, I took the dark and crazy approach. But just like an acting teacher once said, it was all inside, just waiting for me to open the appropriate window.

*

The next year was nearly normal. Mike made the announcement that he would be devoting his focus to therapy for a while, so the season would be put on hold. When he made this announcement, a couple of our company members quit. To me, it felt like a betrayal, but Mike said it was okay. He invited Paulie and Gawlik into the company, said they were better for us anyway.

We hung in the Thorntons' back yard on the Fourth of July. Most of the actors had things they wanted to do in the city, but Paulie came over and swam around in the pool in his cut-off jean shorts. My mom and aunts and sisters stopped by, as did Mike's new physical therapist. Connolly came after a Cubs game and brought Mike a little souvenir bat. Mike tried to swing it for a photo op, but had a bit of trouble, and that's when I sensed his grief taking over. Frankie grilled for us and told stories about how all the cousins and uncles loved when I came over and swam in my bikini.

"We all hoped she would pop out of it," Frankie confessed.

Paulie and Connolly laughed, but Mike still had the blues.

When he asked me to come inside and help him change at some point, I said, "Hey, it's a beautiful night. Remember *Nightswimming*? Remember when we used to listen to it on repeat and swim in the pool at night when we were first falling in love? We were so young then. We were so foolish." That made him smile a little. "And how much longer do you think Paul's gonna wear those jean shorts? He's gotta get out of the seventies." He laughed really hard at that. Later, I sat in his lap when it was time for fireworks (always the best and the biggest ones in cop neighborhoods) and kissed him while the night sky exploded just above our heads. (Soon enough, Mike would get comfortable enough with Paulie and Connolly that he would just wheel into the garage and hide behind something or close the

door and use the urinal. They were good friends; they were safe. They played the role of girlfriend when I was gone and they did an excellent job.)

I went to many weddings alone because Mike had become sort of agoraphobic, but I reported back to him on all the gossip and what everyone was wearing. I didn't tell him how at one, everyone kept on telling me we would get married too someday, that we could win one of those contests and get our whole wedding paid for, that we were supposed to be have been first, that it was a tragedy what had happened. "I heard he was drugged at the Heritage Center," someone said. "No no, it was food poisoning from Taco Bell." They were all crying and carrying on, and I comforted them, but then I got so sad realizing it was my story they were telling. I left before the cake was cut. Julie and Amelia put me in a cab and told the driver they'd cut off his balls if I didn't make it home. I started to nod off in the back seat. The driver asked me where he should take me, and I remember saying, "I don't know" and feeling so disoriented. Should I go to Mike's house? Should I go to my parents? "What do you mean you don't know?" he asked. "Where do you live?"

Fall came and the wind tore the leaves off the trees. Mike was doing the Lokomat study a few times a week with his new therapists, which he and I simply called The Robot. I would come and watch once a week, and David would play our songs. He would buckle Mike into a harness and then "an electromechanical gait orthosis" would help him to walk on a treadmill. I would stand there and watch him joke with the therapists and the neurologists, throw around all the fancy scientific terms he had learned in his deliberately pretentious voice. "Mag, this is an electromechanical gait orthosis. Basically, it's trying to help me remember how to walk." We would listen to *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*: "*They asked me how I knew my true love was true...*" Once Mike got going, David would whisper, "Go ahead." That was my favorite part. I'd get up on the treadmill, facing Mike, and he would, with a

little effort, get his arms around my waist. “This is how we’ll dance at our wedding,” he said, smiling. “My God, are you a midget.”

We dressed up for Halloween as Mantecore, the rare Siberian tiger, and Siegfried, his trainer. It was Mike’s idea. In real life, the poor trainer had had a stroke after being attacked by the tiger, but Mike didn’t want to be the trainer. He wanted to be the tiger. He had to find some kind of wicked humor in his situation, and I said I would do anything to help. I went to Joann’s Fabrics and bought sequins for my jumpsuit, fur for Mike’s coat. My mother helped me make the costume in a night, and Mike and I laughed hysterically as he smeared fake blood on my neck with his good hand, painted his own face white with black stripes. We hung a tail from the back of his wheelchair.

Christmas Eve came and I went to my family party alone because Mike said he just couldn’t do it. There were very few places he liked to go. He liked to hang out with his therapists and actors, people who made him feel powerful. His therapists had seen his progress, and in acting circles, he was still king. I felt lonely as my aunt played *The Twelve Days of Christmas* on the piano and my sisters and their fiancés drank egg nog and sang. It was the first time in several years that Mike hadn’t been there with me. I wondered when he would come again. Everyone asked after him. “How’s our Mikey?” My cousin who gave him haircuts in his home, my mother who had always loved him as one of her own. I went to the Thorntons’ house after dinner. Mike and I weren’t able to make it down to the basement where the real party happened, so we stayed in the kitchen upstairs, had dessert while everyone downstairs made lots of noise. Mike gave me black leather pants, a pair of heeled boots, a lacy top, things I never would’ve bought myself, but I did like trying them on, and it was good for both of us, that I feel as sexy as possible. Costumes, always costumes. I gave him a painting I had commissioned of the Language of Angels cast, and him sitting in the

center of us all. It's hanging in the dressing room at The Gift now. (Not because it's inspirational—more so because it turned out not to be a very good painting.)

On New Year's Eve, Mike and I hosted a party because we had missed quite a few that year (see: stairs) and wanted to ring in the New Year with our friends, and not with his parents. (To be fair, Frankie and Rita were perfectly relieved and happy to have a night out themselves.) We bid on a handicapped-accessible hotel suite on Michigan Avenue, which simply means an accessible bathroom. I knew because we had rented accessible hotel rooms near the airport plenty of times. Mike rented those in response to my complaints about living with his parents. "How much longer?" I would ask and the next weekend, we'd have a hotel room.

Mrs. Thornton and I went downtown early with the commode, the walker and a case of champagne. Mike and I checked in later that afternoon and delighted in the room. Pocket doors separating the bedroom from the sitting room. In the sitting room, wing chairs, a sofa, puddle curtains on the windows, a view of the Magnificent Mile and white lights in the trees.

Later that evening, in the middle of a card game, Mike looked at me and whispered, "I can't breathe." This was relatively normal. This usually happened when we stayed in a hotel room. I think he was afraid, in those early days, of being too far away from home, from his parents, too far outside his comfort zone. Also, the last time we stayed in a hotel had been especially awkward. I had brought along the white lingerie he'd bought for me. Just a simple white slip dress with fur trim. He lay back, I unzipped his pants and ran off to change. I was adding a pair of silver heels this time. He watched soft porn on television, just like the binder told us. When I returned, he looked at me like he was really going to enjoy this. He turned off the television, pulled me close to him and after some kissing, looked at me with that same panicked face. I ran for the Chux, squeezed them underneath him, and

cleaned him up in my white nightie. I couldn't even weep—my guts were wrenched with sobbing.

When our friends asked how our sex life was, or even if they didn't, Mike would say, "Amazing. Mag totally got it up the other day. I came for the first time." And I would nod and smile, complicit in the lie, and say, "I'm a special snowflake." Paulie would high-five me: "Atta girl." Then he'd ask: "So, what position? I need details." Lynda would say, "I wish I could have sex with Magger too. Actually, I wish I could have sex, period." (Their romance had never taken off.)

We excused ourselves from the New Year's party and I helped Mike into the bedroom, closed the pocket doors. Amelia turned up the music, which was thoughtful. Mike and I whispered to each other. His stomach was upset, he said. He was nervous. I helped him onto the commode and then let him have his privacy. I awkwardly entertained our guests in the other room until he called for me to help him clean up, empty the bucket, get his pants up and zipped.

This is the kind of thing that many couples have to go through, I know, but usually it's after years of marriage, after the children and grandchildren, after their hair turning gray and vacations, after longer lives. I just had to grow up a little faster, and didn't feel entirely prepared.

When Mike returned to the party, an hour and a half later, he made a joke of it all. "Well that was awkward," he said loudly. "But I feel much better now. Who wants to play some dice?"

Sometime that evening, Amelia asked me to be her maid of honor. She and Eddie were getting married and Mike and I were such an inspiration. She couldn't think of anyone better to be her "best lady."

We watched the Super Bowl at Charlotte's, and Danny and I started arguing Chicago politics. There was a close election coming up. It got heated quickly, and I pushed some sort of button. He stormed out of the bar, thinking I was doubting his loyalty to our local committeeman. Then he walked back in and threw a bunch of quarters at my face. It was an annoying incident, to me, but to Mike, it was infuriating. He called Danny that night and said, "How dare you attack my girlfriend like that when I am physically unable to defend her and punch you in the face?"

Sometime in the spring, Mike took his first steps. We credited it to the Lokomat. With the assistance of electrodes that David taped to his legs, he was able to take a strong step with his right foot and then drag the left one behind. He took the electrodes and practiced at home, practiced for me and his parents who cheered him on. "I'm like the Little Engine That Could," he said.

Carpet, as I've said, was difficult, so we tied plastic bags onto his feet to make the left foot slide more easily. The sidewalk also proved to be a challenge because of the inconvenience of cracks, but Mike kept on trying anyway. He usually got tired after a few steps, but that was good enough for all of us. He usually got scared if the wind kicked up, but like David, his therapist, said, "He *will* fall." Mrs. Thornton didn't like the sound of that.

"Not on my watch," she said.

"Mother," David said with a gentle smile. "He will fall."

He'd be reading or watching movies and I'd get annoyed that he wasn't doing more. This was the year devoted to therapy, after all. But he got so sore after a two-hour workout, he said. He would sleep ten hours or more after a good session. Even David said that every other day was probably best. His body needed time to recuperate. For Mike, an hour of trying to crawl around on the mat in the living room was like running a marathon.

I always encouraged him to try again while his parents were more cautious and worried. Whenever they went out to run errands, we conducted our own therapy sessions. I studied all the physical therapy diagrams in the book and stretched his arm up and out to the side while he lay in bed and grinded his teeth. I couldn't do this when his mother was home because she'd appear in the doorway like she had ESP or something and say, "Stop now, Mag. I think you're hurting him." One day, we decided to tie the plastic bag on his foot and try a few steps, even though he'd walked the day before. I suggested it and he went along with it, albeit a little reluctantly. Look what he could do when he rehearsed a role long enough—I knew he'd get the hang of this. No problem. So: he rocked and stood. Mission accomplished. Then he took a step with his good leg and dragged the weaker one behind it. "Again," I said. (And probably promised a sexual favor, too.) He did it again, beautifully. "One more time," I said. "You can do it. I love you." He started into the step and then his good leg started shaking.

"Get the wheelchair," he said.

"Don't be afraid," I said.

"Goddamnit, get the wheelchair."

And just like that, he was down, lying twisted on the floor, red-faced and angry, at first, but then he must've seen my face go white. *Not on my watch*. "Okay," he said calmly. "Bruiser. Listen to me. Bruiser? Calm down now. Listen to me." He directed me on exactly how to help him into a sitting position, and eventually, I had him propped him against the mat which took up the entire area of the living room and stood about a foot off the floor. When he slumped over a little, I'd straighten him back up. We sat there and waited for what seemed like an eternity, scared kids waiting to get busted for the wild party they had thrown while their parents were out of town. When Mrs. Thornton did come home, she walked into

the living room, saw her son sitting on the floor looking quite compromised, and literally screamed. I stopped trying so hard after that. I didn't trust myself anymore, and I don't think Mike trusted me either.

Not long after, the doctors at the Rehab Institute of Chicago called "the family" in for a meeting. Mike, myself, Frankie and Mrs. Thornton. Again, we sat in a conference room on one of the higher floors, but this time Kuiken announced that they would be discontinuing outpatient therapy altogether. David explained that Mike had hit a plateau and the recovery might very well continue, just in smaller increments and much more slowly. He was encouraged to continue whatever he had been working on at home. He had surpassed the one-year mark, which indicated the end of progress in most case studies.

I looked across the table at David and Katie, these friends of ours who took us to the riverboat casino to celebrate his first steps (we were all feeling pretty lucky that day), these friends of ours who came to the brewery last month when Mike turned twenty-five and I threw a big old party, as always. We all shared music and gave David dating advice. They both looked sheepish and Mike looked at the floor. "I don't care what you say," Mrs. Thornton said. "I pray to God and to my father and mother, and I know my son will make a full recovery." Frankie seemed bewildered. "But he just took his first steps. Doesn't that mean anything?" Mike shook his head and clenched his jaw. And then I made it worse. "How can we work on him at home?" I cried out. "What are *we* supposed to do? I don't have a PhD in physical therapy. I don't know what to do, I don't know how you do what you do. Katie, David, *please*." Nobody said a word. "Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me? Don't you have any books we can read?" The room buzzed with silence. "Help us!" I cried, then I stormed out of the room. Poor David and Katie. They had done everything they could.

I went downstairs, took a few minutes to pull myself together with all the rest of the desperate families, and when I met Mike and his parents at the valet, I forced a laugh and said, “God, I’m sorry. I have such a bad temper. I really have to work on that.” Mike’s parents looked defeated and direction-less, and he just looked angry. “I’m so sorry. Let’s rent a funny movie or something. I mean, fuck them, right? They don’t know who you are. They don’t know what you’re capable of. You can pay for more therapy if you have to.”

DAVID

Happy hour?

KATIE

Totally.

DAVID

Martinis?

KATIE

How ‘bout ten?

DAVID

Maybe we should’ve been accountants.

KATIE

(Silence.) This is why we’re not supposed to get involved with patients.

And then we returned to the theater where we always got better results.

*

I continued to write whenever I could. On trains and buses, in the morning, at night, when Mike was sleeping and when I should’ve been. About a year after the first stroke, I started surfing the internet at work, trying to find cheap ways to go to all the places I had

always wanted to go. Berlin, Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong, St. Petersburg, Prague. This kind of daydreaming staved off the depression.

Redmoon was slowly driving me crazy because I was sick of working so hard as a publicist for all these playwrights and not doing anything with my own writing. I was writing mostly confessional poetry, which wasn't very good, but it did make me feel better sometimes. I knew I needed concentrated time if I wanted to get better, so I decided to apply to the Prague Summer Program, a creative writing program in the Czech Republic that offered scholarships based on portfolios and letters of recommendation. I hadn't been in school in years, so I didn't have professors I could ask for letters. I revised my poems, picked the strongest ten, ordered them and re-ordered them obsessively. I wrote notes every day about my intentions for wanting to study in Prague.

My maternal great grandmother, Johanna, was born and raised in Prague. She came to the States at the age of sixteen with her husband and her baby. They settled, eventually, in Chicago. Her husband and first child died of diphtheria soon after they arrived. Men from the health office came to their house and burned all of Johanna's belongings. She wandered the streets, homeless, for some time. I made my grandmother tell her mother-in-law's story to me, over and over again; I stared at the cracked black and white photographs, this dark-skinned woman who I knew was much stronger than me. She remarried and had more children. She met a baker, had two sons with him, and bought new things: she *lived*. That was a story I needed to hear, and I wanted to see her birthplace. Also, Kafka and Kundera happened to be two of my favorite writers. The Unbearable Lightness of Being and The Metamorphosis. So, I already had an appreciation for Czech literature.

The program itself: They had Pulitzer Prize winners teaching poetry and fiction workshops. I found their books at the public library, read them one by one, found myself

imploding with excitement, imagining myself far away. Seeing the Jewish cemetery, learning some Czech, studying history and literature, meeting Czech and Bulgarian students. I wanted to get away, I wanted a break, I wanted to be alone. And I had never wanted to be alone. After growing up in an apartment crammed with five people, I didn't even know how, but suddenly I knew I needed it.

Mike and I lay in bed and I told him about the program. His small bedroom was our privacy now. Our home was the house of a semi-retired couple in their fifties, not a couple in their twenties, but we filled the bedroom with our things and locked the door. We had a small television, a couple of our favorite prints, a bamboo plant, a bookcase. I showed Mike the brochures I had sent for, told him how the former president of the Czech Republic was a celebrated playwright, told him about the Black Light Theater and its underground origins. I asked him to write the recommendation. He was an artistic director, after all. His name signified prestige, if only in Chicago; it looked good on paper.

“Will you write it?” I asked.

“Of course,” he responded.

“And what if I get in?”

“It's only six weeks,” he said. “Anyway, do you really think I expect you to change my diapers your whole life?”

I still don't know exactly what I thought, or exactly what he expected. In our minds, it was all still a fantasy. Prague Castle looked like a fairy tale to me, one that made me believe in happy endings. Mike typed a beautiful letter for me with one finger. Then he asked, slightly embarrassed, “Honey? Where is Prague?”

“In the Czech Republic,” I said.

“Okay. Thanks for not laughing at me.”

*

I was accepted into the program with a scholarship. I would leave for Prague on the third of July, stay in a Czech dormitory in a working class neighborhood, just a few train stops from Charles University where my classes would be held. I would take a six week leave of absence from my publicist job and have a place when I returned.

*

Sometime in the spring, I started hearing songs differently. I'd find myself turning up the car radio without even realizing it. I used to be so judgmental of friends who didn't visit enough, friends who didn't visit at all. But suddenly, I was listening to Led Zeppelin lyrics and understanding them more than I ever had.

*I said baby, you know I'm gonna leave you.
I'll leave you when the summertime,
leave you when the summer comes a-rollin'
leave you when the summer comes along.
Baby baby, I don't wanna leave you...*

(And Van Morrison's *T.B. Sheets*)

*And the sunlight shining through the crack in the window pane
numbs my brain.
Ha, so open up the window and let me breathe.
I'm looking down to the street below. Lord, I cried for you.
Ha ha, I cried for you. Oh, Lord.*

Once the songs had ended, I told myself that Prague would be a much-needed break and I would return, refreshed and ready to tackle anything.

21

Most actors leave Chicago eventually, usually for New York or L.A. Chicago is merely a stepping stone for most. That's not to say that actors don't miss it when they leave. Mike Shannon came back to Chicago no sooner than he'd been nominated for an Academy Award. He went straight back to Red Orchid, his fifty-seat storefront theater, and did a one-man show entitled Mistakes Were Made. He said he missed Chicago so much; he said he missed the theater, but sometimes you gotta go away.

Before I went away, I did one last show. Back when we still rented from an old speakeasy in Uptown called National Pastime. The same place we had done County Fair, the last show before Mike got sick, the last show before our world turned upside down.

Will had written the script. It probably wasn't quite ready for production, probably needed a couple more drafts. I told Mike I thought so and he said, "Mag, take off your writer hat if you want to do the show. Put it back on when you go to Prague next month. But for now, you're an actor. Nothing else. Get out of your head. I need your heart." I was feeling more like a writer than an actor lately, and Mike was feeling generous toward Will. He'll always be especially generous, I think; he'll always be a risk-taker. He always has been, and that has nothing to do with spinal strokes and near-death revelations.

A Young Man in Pieces was about a boy, of course. The play was about twenty-somethings because there really are very few plays written for and about twenty-somethings. I'm sure there's good reason for that, but it did make our season planning more challenging back then, when few of us looked old enough to have our own children or aging parents. None of us looked old enough to have "real problems," though I'd argue we all had our share. In any case, the central character is a trust fund boy who finds himself alone in an empty condo in a big city. His parents find themselves in a loveless marriage, and his ex-girlfriend finds herself in a loony bin. His brother seems to have lost his soul, and his fiancée turns to the young man for comfort. And then there was me. I played the role of his trust fund cousin, his trust fund best friend, the only one in the world he trusted. She, Molly, had a job, a corporate one, even though she didn't need it, and she was forever trying to rebel against her conservative family. She predictably hated her father, self-medicated with lots of marijuana, loved sleeping with random, assorted men, and her cousin was the only person in the world she truly loved. She was nothing like me, and that's how I came to love her.

On a weekday afternoon in 2004, I sat in a street-level beauty salon on Montrose Avenue, a storefront smaller than my bedroom, a salon where Mexican boys get their hair braided and *telenovelas* play all day and the haircuts cost seven dollars. I asked Mimi to cut my hair into chunky layers and dye it fluorescent pink. She feared we were encountering a language barrier and started pulling out magazines to confirm the nature of my request. Mimi knows me -- I'd had the same bob cut since I was a teenager -- and so she didn't believe that I was asking her to strip my hair of its natural color. However, I was convinced this would help me to understand Molly in a physical way, which is the thing I'm still struggling with in tech week. Molly, despite all of her efforts not to, still moved with the elegance of money, the grace I was born without. I'd been manicuring my fingernails so my hands might handle things more eloquently, and the costume designer had scored me a pair of designer jeans, killer high heels. (Things I had never worn before this production, and guess what? Designer jeans really do take off five pounds.) These things would help me with the sexy, I thought, but I still needed to try on the rebellion, needed to feel how far *she* would go in an attempt to be someone else. So there I was, trying to convince Mimi to transform me into a character. Three hours later, I looked into the mirror, hated what I saw, and then got on the Montrose bus. I headed to the National Pastime for the first day of tech, the first day of lights and costumes.

I depended on Mike in those days, even for fashion advice. He volunteered, when we first started dating, that I could afford to wear brighter colors because of my sallow complexion. He also suggested I wear sexier clothes to show off my curves, because I might not be this lucky forever. He bought me a negligee for my confidence and our mutual pleasure. He noticed when I lost or gained weight, but only commented on the losses. Metrosexual? Not exactly. But image-conscious. Which is what I wanted and needed, then,

before I could see those things for myself. I hadn't asked him about the dye job though, even though he was my director. I had wanted to do something without his permission. It was that part of being twenty-six, that part of the experiment, the transformation. I needed to see how much I could do without his validation, especially before I went to live abroad for the summer. I know this sounds crazy, but it's like Patti Smith says in her memoir about Robert Mapplethorpe: *We had bonded so thoroughly.*

I got off the bus half a block from the theater. The National Pastime was located on Broadway. (Nothing like New York's.) A row of storefronts that have matching awnings now. African hair braiding shops, Pakistani-owned convenience stores that sell drug paraphernalia along with milk and cigarettes, Cambodian-owned boutiques that sell wigs and kimonos and fancy bobby pins. A pizzeria and a liquor store and a little Thai joint with fifty flavors of bubble tea.

I got off the bus and saw Michael first, sitting in his wheelchair, holding court, surrounded by his actors and designers. Making them laugh, calming their nerves. Everyone shoveling take-out into their mouths or smoking cigarettes instead of eating. When they saw me, Paulie said, "Holy shit, Maggie!" Someone said I looked crazy, someone said I looked like a teenager, someone said I looked kinda hot. Then Mike said, "I don't even recognize you." Something in his face looked afraid and maybe even resentful. *I don't even recognize you.* Everyone grew awkward and silent as they did in those days when every detail of our relationship seemed to take on extra weight.

And what if I had known? That this would be the last play we would work on together, the last time I would be such a neurotic pain in his ass, the last time I would cry when I got the most notes after rehearsal? Would I have ripped off his baseball cap and

kissed him in front of that shitty storefront until people started to stare? Would I have whispered *Thank You* and kissed him until a crowd gathered? I like to think so.

But instead, someone opened the door and I pushed him inside, and we got to work. Mike took his seat out in the audience, looked at the set with the designer. “I *like* the big open space,” he said. “Maybe we need just one painting on the wall?” Then Karen Meyer, the hearing-impaired journalist from WLS, came in with a television camera crew to interview Mike. He stood awkwardly in his walker and waxed eloquent about his craft as a director. Everyone we knew tuned into that five-minute clip on the evening news. “I can’t believe I had to have a stroke to get on TV,” Mike joked.

We, the actors, hung our costumes on the dressing room rack, tacked up a sheet with light and sound cues for each scene. The creepy guy who worked in the National Pastime office smoked pot and listened to Derek and the Dominoes every night we were there. At some point, I had to ask him to turn it down, then I asked him to teach me how to roll a joint because I was really bad at it. Then I just sat there and listened to *Bell Bottom Blues*. “*And if I could choose a place to die, it would be in your arms...*” I thought of Mike as he continued his interview.

The thing about him is this: He’s a magician of sorts. He has this ability to make a Monday afternoon into a Saturday night, an apartment into an art gallery, an average-looking girl into a princess. He has this ability to take a raw script and a ragtag group of actors of various levels of training and talent, and make it art. He works with his actors individually; he talks to them about their characters. “Maggie,” he says. “She’s almost thirty years old and still all she wants is that Cinderella dress. Her nanny took her to Boca and the Keys, but she only wanted Disneyworld, with *her father*. She’s a little *girl*.” This is how he created the magic, and then we transferred it to an old speakeasy theater.

On Opening Night, I tried to conjure all the notes I had gotten, the argument we had had during the rehearsal process.

“Mag, I need you bigger. Start again.”

I took a few steps back and re-entered.

“*Mag*, I need you bigger, I said. Start again.”

I took a few steps back and re-entered.

Before I said a word: “Bigger.”

“This is as big as I get! Fuck!”

Ben, my cousin in the play, my scene partner on that day, chewed on his lower lip and waited for the storm to pass.

“That’s not her!” Mike cried. “Molly’s not afraid of looking foolish. She’s not afraid of anything!”

But I was so afraid. Afraid of looking foolish, and afraid of Mike’s going to rehearsals without me. Afraid he’d have an accident or a panic attack or fall down when I wasn’t there. He had taken to standing up in his walker, which was good, but he was still wobbly. I was afraid of being a terrible actor, afraid I’d never get good enough, afraid that I’d embarrass us both, afraid that I was wasting time. And that’s why I needed to go away and worry only for myself.

Mike motioned for me to come closer to him. I bent over and he whispered, “I know you can get there.” But he said it as if he was tired of saying it, and as if it was taking a good amount of effort.

It’s true. I had nothing to lose. I was leaving for Prague in six weeks. Even if I got an unflattering review, it would be forgotten by the time I returned. So why not go for it? I had certainly gotten through harder things. Mike still has this ability to strike me down with

perspective. If I'm anxious about a deadline or a debt, he simply says, "Take a deep breath, dear. There are children dying all around us." And because we witnessed this together, it always makes an impact.

On Opening Night, I sashayed up the backstage steps to the second floor doorway in my designer jeans and high heels. I lit my fat fake joint and breathed in deeply. I listened to my cousins' conversation about this couch, the family room couch, all the memories of this silly couch. I pushed open the door and entered, high as a kite. Lazy eyes, pot smoke coursing through my body, ready to kill them all with my wit. I swayed in the doorway and said in a voice, so different than my own, "*I hate couches...Couches blow.*" The audience broke into laughter, communal laughter, loud and uncensored laughter. And this was how my journey in the play began.

The audience laughed at me, but they felt for Ben, this poor little rich boy, and his waspy mother in the midst of a nervous breakdown. They watched us all *try* to laugh at ourselves. I'm not claiming this was a life-changing event, but it was a world we all lived in as honestly as possible.

Brendan, our old friend, played Ben's best friend in the show, the totally-together best friend who had a wife and a house and everything we think we should have by this age. He seemed to really love his wife and his house, and that made it even worse. Brendan and his scene partner, Lauren, lived in the world so honestly that we all saw them falling in love offstage, a little more each day. Their onstage kisses would last too long. Lauren would go to the bar after the show and stay out late, even if she had to work at seven a.m., just so she could drive Brendan home. Brendan would quote from his Bob Dylan biography in the dressing room. "He said colors looked brighter after he first spent the night with her." I don't know how everyone else felt, but I was seething with envy. Not because I wanted new

love, but because they walked home from the theater some nights. They rode their bikes around the city. They went out dancing one night and grinded against each other all night long. Lauren still had a boyfriend to deal with, but I was jealous, I wanted them to fail, and I hated that about myself.

I found my cousin, at some point in Act Two, in a state of depression, unwilling to leave his apartment, devoid of all humor, and I always felt such urgency with that scene. It was the way I felt with Mike and myself on nights when we fell sad. That desperation. I need to make this better! How can I make this better? I went to my cousin, tried to convince him to smoke a joint with me, have a drink with me, take a Chicago vacation with me. Light bulb! We'll fall in love with our city again. Come on! That was the moment where Mike wanted me bigger, but this was about me and Ben now. I studied my cousin, my friend Ben who is a classically trained actor, trained in London, trained by the best, and he looked inconsolable. I knew that his father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and that his mother was going a bit crazy over this. I knew he was lonely for a woman like he'd never been before. All I had to do was make him laugh. Forget that there are one-hundred strangers watching us, strangers who might write nasty things about us in the newspaper, or worse, audience members who would go to the bar across the street and agree that this scene ruined the whole affair. This was about me and Ben, and this scene needed some life. I started singing to him, in a bluesy voice. "*Come on, baby don't you want to go?*" In a voice like a big black woman. "*Come on!*" He looked surprised. I started crawling all over him, messing with his hair, pinching his cheeks. "*Back to that same old place, sweet home Chicago!*" He looked at me for a minute, impressed, I think. I started dancing around the room, playing an imaginary saxophone, pleading with him, pushing my little bag of weed toward him. *Have fun with me!* He broke out laughing, and I would know if he was faking. He put on his coat and said,

"Okay. Let's go." The audience cheered a little, the energy changed, and I felt like I never needed to accomplish anything else. I would think of *Sweet Home Chicago* when my plane took off. I would think of this song and wonder why I was leaving my home, which was Chicago and the theater.

Most reviews criticized the playwright, unfortunately, but all of them championed the ensemble and Mike's direction of us. Rick Reed wrote of Ben's "appealing winsomeness" and Mike's "fine craftsmanship," his ability to keep things going at a "sprightly pace." Reed described Molly as "tough and funny." Hedy Weiss wrote of my "wonderful turn." It was a wonderful turn, if I do say so myself, and it was also my last show.

I miss that life sometimes. Ten people with the same goal, striving for excellence, just wanting to tell the same story and entertain an audience, make them think a little differently and feel a little more deeply before going home to make love or drink wine. I miss bringing a writer's characters to life. I miss Alex vacuuming the unraveling backstage carpet, Ben brushing his teeth obsessively during pre-show, Lauren and Brendan holding hands before their entrance. I miss adults behaving like children without the assistance of booze. And I miss Mike's laughing from the audience. The she-finally-got-it laughing. That knowing laughter that kept us all going. The Pied Piper and all of his followers. The constancy of the creation, the immediacy of feedback. I really do miss the theater, and the strange things that happen when you're living under that spell.

On Opening Night, three of the actresses wept during pre-show because they had broken up with their boyfriends. Three women, on the exact same night. Lauren wore eyeshadow and Brendan wore a tie. At the party, at the bar across the street, after Lauren had cried with the other girls, she announced that she and Brendan were a couple. She had broken up with her boyfriend so that she could be with Brendan.

I sat in Mike's lap at the party. At some point, he bit down on the fingerless gloves that helped him get traction when he pushed his chair. He pulled them over his hands with his teeth. Then he wheeled toward the jukebox. He took a five-dollar bill from his shirt pocket. "Whatever you want, Princess," he said.

"Was it a Gift show?" I asked.

(A Gift show signified our highest standards.)

"It was a Gift show," he said. "No Billy Joel, okay? You know how I hate Billy Joel."

I didn't play Billy Joel. I played songs I knew he would love. Old songs and new songs, songs that made him sing to me. I played Derek and the Dominoes, and it sounded so good on that jukebox.

"Mag," Mike said, forcing a chuckle. "Are you gonna break up with me?"

"No, babe," I said. "Why would you even ask me that?"

What kind of woman would do that?

Somewhere around midnight, when Mike's parents felt sleepy, we all went home together to their little ranch house. After getting him into bed, I pulled the urine-soaked seat cover from the wheelchair and scrubbed it with soap and hot water. I took it outside in the back yard, laid it flat in the grass to dry, and wondered who would do this when I left.

I am grateful for the theater because it gave us an escape from helplessness, if only for a couple hours. It gave us power during that period where existing day to day was sometimes challenging. It gave us the pain of others when we had become so self-absorbed.

*

Now we don't have to rent space anymore—we have our own storefront theater, where I volunteer sometimes, and every poster, for every show, hangs in our black box lobby. Sometimes, when I'm taking tickets or taking out the trash, a patron will ask me if I'm

an actor. “I used to be,” I say. (Which is hard, because it took me so long to think of myself as one.) I lock the door when the show begins, listen to my friends become sick women and despicable men, people I have never met. I hear the noisy Milwaukee buses who have no consideration for a show in progress. And then the posters seem to come alive; all the ghosts always seem to wake up. Boys’ Life: 2001. Orestes 2.0: 2002. Language of Angels: 2003. A Young Man in Pieces: 2004.

I think of Lynda, who moved back to Boston when her father got sick, Brendan and Lauren, who are still together and living in Brooklyn. Ben, who’s gone off to L.A., and Mike who shuttles back and forth. There’s an invisible barrier between us when we’re not sharing the same dressing room, the same shitty take-out, the same colds and flus, but I still see their shows as an audience member, and they feel a little nervous when I do. I still drink beer with them late into the night, on occasion, but it’ll never be the same. The truth is: My life is so much more solitary now, I can’t imagine creating in those conditions. But the point is: I loved those days. Better to go out on a high note, I say. And they’ve all gotten so good, I couldn’t keep up anyway.

*

The Thorntons hosted a going away party for me in the yard. A perfect summer night. Everyone from The Gift came. Frankie manned the grill and tended bar. Alex and David filled the garage refrigerator with Czech beer and spirits, which was so thoughtful of them, but I didn’t drink that night. I watched all my friends get shitfaced on Budvar and Pilsner Urquell, Becherovka and pear brandy, and I felt so far away from them already. Paulie, Brendan and Lauren went swimming in the dark. Lynda built a fire in the pit and Gawlik told me about the history of oppression in Eastern Europe. I sat next to Mike and tugged on his ear, then I whispered, “Muy guapo” over and over again. “Muy guapo.” Mike

laughed and blushed, and swatted at me. “Stop it, Mag! Knock it off.” Connolly looked over at us, shook his big head smiling, and said, “You guys make me sick.”

22

Evanston's Next Theater produced Among the Thugs, a fascinating play about European soccer culture and macho aggressiveness. Halfway through the run, the lead actor fell down in a mosh pit, shattered his leg and finished the show before his fellow actors took him to the emergency room and got him into a cast. The show won Best Ensemble. Dennis Letts, Tracy Letts's father, played a pivotal role in his Pulitzer Prize winning play, August: Osage County, and died of lung cancer halfway through the run. The playwright's father was gone, but the director re-cast him and the show went on.

I limped a little and thought of the old adage “The show must go on” as I made my way through O'Hare Airport. It was those damn thrift store heels that I wore in A Young Man in Pieces, I think, but anyway, my toenail had turned black and I was leaving the country in a matter of days, so I went to the doctor to have it checked. I lay on the examining table and he held my foot in his hand, looked at it closely. “Yes,” he said. “Some sort of fungus. If you're on your way to Eastern Europe, maybe we should just remove it. Who knows about the doctors there? Who knows if it'll get worse?”

“Let's remove it,” I said. “Just get rid of it.”

I could've explained that Prague was a pretty cosmopolitan city -- the Las Vegas of Europe, I'd come to find. But I wanted physical pain somehow, and I knew I could endure it. I always felt guilty worrying about pain or temperature when Mike's sense of those things was so impaired. Also, I knew that feet were nothing to take for granted.

The doctor followed my order and the procedure itself didn't hurt at all because he numbed my foot so thoroughly. He gave me antibiotics and painkillers, said not to drink alcohol if I wanted them to work. I wouldn't need painkillers, I thought, but when the numbness wore off, I went to my parents' house (so Mike wouldn't know) and lay in their bed, clawing at the sheets. The pain was terrible, and I felt like such a sissy.

*

I limped through O'Hare Airport, Mike's former place of employment, his parents' house just a few miles away. I said hello to the Aer Lingus girls, friends of his family, girls I knew he wished I looked like. I don't remember who drove me to the airport. It could've been the Thorntons or my parents, but I was there now anyway, alone, and O'Hare looked like a totally inconsiderate place to me, because I could only see it through the lens of disability. What if we were running late? Mike couldn't run through the concourse with me, as we had done so many times. On the way to New York, San Francisco, Dublin: I think we were late every time. Once we got on the plane, would his wheelchair even fit in the aisle? Could they pull up a seat to make room for it? He still had trouble shifting from one seat to another. Getting from the wheelchair to the shower seat was slow and terrifying every time. He could stand in his walker maybe, then swivel and sit. But what if he needed to be changed during the flight? Eight hours was a pretty long time. I took some deep breaths, and the anxiety melted into sadness.

I passed the bookstore where he always stopped to buy overpriced magazines and newspapers before a flight, then the food court where he always stopped to buy overpriced concessions. This is how he travels. He believes that money and diet are no longer real things to worry about when traveling. He sees every trip as an adventure, and now I was going on one without him.

We got into our first flight in a foreign city. First, he was annoyed because my suitcase was so heavy and I expected him to carry it. "That would be the gentlemanly thing to do," I said. He rolled his eyes and said, "The practical thing to do would be to buy one of those little suitcases on wheels. Then you could be more independent." How true, I thought, as I wheeled mine through the international concourses.

But the real fight happened when we missed our bus to Dungarven, where my father's aunts and uncles lived. We had spent the entire week before with Mike's family. We'd gone all the way from Dublin to Monaghan, had biscuits and tea in all their homes. I asked for one night in Waterford so I could meet family I had never known. It was important to my father.

We ran into the bus station after oversleeping. We ran into the station – the two of us running madly. *The two of us running madly*. We saw the bus pull away and I felt all the air go out of me. We stopped to catch our breath. We sat down on a bench. The next bus didn't leave until the following day, and we were scheduled to fly back home.

Mike looked at me and said, "Sorry, Bruise. Maybe next year, huh?"

"Next year? What the fuck do you mean, next year?"

Everyone in the station stopped to stare.

"I just spent a week with your family. We are going to see mine."

"Keep your voice down," Mike said. "Jesus, you're a mental case. This is *not* my fault."

Then I stomped away childishly with my old-fashioned suitcase, and he didn't follow. I walked through the city, fuming with anger, and he stayed at the station, stubbornly, and waited for me to return, which I did, but two hours later.

We made it to Dungarven—we found a train that got us close enough. It was a good thing too because my father's cousins had prepared a steak dinner for us and their triplet boys had been eagerly looking forward to meeting the Yanks. We played make believe games with the triplets. Aunt Nancy called Mike the map of Ireland and said, with some dismay, that I looked like a Spaniard, like my mother.

On the train back to Dublin, Mike admitted that he was glad we made the trip, but that he had never so badly wanted to pull those heavy Irish coins out of his pocket and whip them at my head. Then we put our coats over our laps and touched each other underneath them, kissed our way back to the city.

*

I waited for the plane to take off without a pile of Mike's books and magazines in front of me, without his empty sack of McDonald's beside me. I pulled my composition book from my carry-on and had no idea what to write. Until the plane took off. The plane climbed higher and higher until Chicago became a geometric pattern of rooftops, a child's miniature playland, and then my ears popped and I felt relief. I wrote in my journal: Maybe I will never go back again. I wrote a favorite line of poetry: *"Death cannot hurt me like you have hurt me, sweet life."*

*

I got off the plane in Prague and the airport was underwhelming, not much different than any small Midwestern airport, except that many of the employees were smoking cigarettes and there was a distinct smell of sausages and cabbage. I went to my baggage carousel and waited – too long, I thought. I waited and didn't see any bags. I went to the customer service desk and waited (again, a long time) for someone who spoke English. She explained to me that my bags had been lost. Maybe they were in Amsterdam, she said. Might be two or three days until they found them. Was there somewhere she could reach me? I searched my carry-on for my itinerary, but found only a couple paperback books, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a letter from Mike, some chewing gum and a change of underwear.

please be smart around strangers, esp. when travelling...we americans are not very well liked these days. what a profoundly sad sentence to type.

and remember: it's a great/overwhelming feeling to feel like you're behind and have to catch up. intimidation is a wonderful friend, if perceived properly. i'm sure you are already rising to & above the occasion.
please send me anything you're working on. i won't give any feedback if you don't want any.

i feel like we're a team--each half of us getting better on different sides of the world; one half improving physically, the other artistically and intellectually. the walking yesterday felt very good when it was good, very frustrating when it was bad, but i am totally dedicated to making a full recovery, can't wait to start working out with tara tomorrow & to get on the mat this afternoon. maybe so many people give up b/c they can't find anything to fight for.

i'm fighting for our future.

please try to call once in a while, but i won't expect to hear your voice every day. jeez, leave me alone, would you?

it's very weird writing to you right now. i don't know why. i might be trying too hard to not sound needy. in fact, i'm sure that's what it is.

i love you endlessly & timelessly & can't wait to see what this experience does to your beautiful heart.

love,
michael

When I realized I had packed my itinerary in my suitcase, I felt a surge of panic. I told the Czech woman I would call her later that day and let her know where I could be reached. I took her business card and hurried to a payphone where I called the Thorntons' house on my credit card. My parents didn't have Internet at home, which was the thing I thought might help.

The phone rang and I looked down at myself. Mike had always told me to dress professionally for flights. You never knew if you might get upgraded to first class, you never knew who you might meet. But here I was, in a white V-neck T-shirt and baggy corduroys, my neon pink hair pulled into a half-ponytail. I hadn't slept on the flight, wasn't wearing any make-up, didn't have any soap or deodorant. I was a mess, and had no idea where to go. My classes were being held at Charles University, I knew, but the dorms were somewhere else. The phone rang many times; it was the middle of the night in Chicago. Independence Day -- my big independence mission, and I was calling Mike and his parents in the middle of the night.

Mrs. Thornton finally answered the phone and seemed disoriented, but eventually woke Mike for me. “Are you okay?” He was in bed, so his mother searched the Prague Summer Program website for me, couldn’t find what I needed. “Hold on, try something else,” he said to his mother.

“No, just forget it,” I said. “I’ll figure it out.”

How the hell did I think I was going to figure it out?

“Did you have a good time at your party?” he asked.

“I did, babe. I love you so much.”

*

I got into a black cab and said to the driver, “*Dobry den. Mluvite anglicky?*”

“No. Czech only.”

“College? Dormitory?”

He smelled like cologne and I smelled like absolute fear.

He looked seriously annoyed, then started driving toward the city. Everywhere I looked, I saw graffiti and Communist architecture. Small, dilapidated houses with Spanish roofs and old, toothless women hobbling down crumbling roads, street garbage everywhere. The cab driver took me to three dormitories on the way toward the city center. In every single one, I had to ask several students before one spoke English. I would explain my situation, then they would tell me there was no American program here. “*You don’t know where you’re going?*” Finally, we pulled up in front of one that had a sign in front, a sign that advertised the Prague Summer Program, sponsored by Western Michigan University. I owed the cab driver a good deal of money, and I gave him a generous tip. I smiled and said, “*Dekuji.*” He looked like he wanted to strangle me. Then I walked in to meet my colleagues, looking like a homeless person.

The foyer was Grecian, looked more like a hotel than a dormitory. The man at the front desk hated Americans and the vending machines all carried cans of beer. I went to a folding table and checked in with an administrative assistant. She gave me my room number and a packet of materials. The first faculty reading would be tonight after a cocktail reception. She gave me public transportation directions and told me to beware of gypsy pickpockets on the train. I told her I'd lost my luggage. Then I walked up a winding, concrete staircase to my room. Maybe if I washed my face, I would feel better. Maybe I had some lip gloss in that carry-on somewhere. I was beginning to feel lighter. I got to my room: A small room. Two skinny beds and some shelves on the wall. A desk at a window, overlooking a courtyard. An open window without a screen. I would share a bathroom and a kitchen sink and a hot plate with two other women, one who turned out to be a speed freak and fell in love with me in a very aggressive way. (But that's another story.)

The neighborhood was working class in composition. There was a goulash tavern on the corner, a subway station a block away, a convenience store that had anything I needed, and a laundromat with expensive washing machines. Plenty of herna bars (meaning: open twenty-four hours, thick cigarette smoke and slot machines), one upscale restaurant, specializing in duck and cognac. A gypsy park where ex-pats and hobos played guitars and drank absinthe all night long. I couldn't wait for my luggage to arrive.

*

Mikey,

My first class was unreal. You would be in love with my professor, Gail Wronsky. Older, very attractive woman with crow's feet and the highest of educations. Knows everything about poetry. I'm totally intimidated. My class is full of MFAs and professors even. I was so afraid I'd end up with all the undergrads writing about last night's frat party but I lucked out with a Native American professor who lives on a horse ranch in Eastern Ohio and a Psychology professor from New York whose parents were radical communists. This university used to be a holding place for Jews. Everything is like a maze that you can't find your way out of.

We covered so much in three hours. Started with poems we liked. I brought Sharon Olds of course. We had a good discussion about her. Gail doesn't much like her but that's okay. Gail is fascinated that I'm an actor. Everyone seems to be.

I had a fried cheese in a Czech pub for lunch. Yum.

Now I'm in the computer lab doing homework because I have that already. Need a nap pretty soon. Gorgey weather today. I miss you. Hope you have another good walking day. I am so proud of you for not being frozen on the ladder of your life.

My fave new poet is Levis. He has blown my mind wide open. I'll bring him home for you.

Love, love, love, love, crazy love.

*

When my luggage did arrive a few days later, I unpacked my beige bras and practical underwear, and settled in. I wrote Mike's parents a postcard thanking them for the party, but I never got around to sending it. I never got around to reading most of the books I brought to read.

I did see Marvin Bell read, at the Ypsilon Theatre, in the middle of the city, in a neighborhood of fashion boutiques, wine bars and posh restaurants on the water. Before the reading, I sat in the theatre bar and drank a mug of beer while looking at all the play advertisements on the walls, the art deco Mucha women. When Marvin Bell read *To Dorothy*, in that gorgeous theatre, I cried silently in the balcony.

You are not beautiful, exactly.
You are beautiful, inexactly.

I thought only of Mike, slouched in his wheelchair, laughing and exposing his crooked tooth, his eyes sparkling and sparkling and sparkling. I was so far away from him now, and I knew he would love this as much as I did. Marvin Bell has the most endearing Jersey accent. He looked out at his wife, who was age appropriate, who was old and gray, like

him. (And that was unusual in this faculty, to have an age appropriate wife.) Dorothy smiled like a child, even though I was certain she had heard him read this poem hundreds of times. *All things lost are not equal*, Marvin Bell said, forcefully. *If you were to leave, I would have to ask the grass to let me sleep.*

And then I was pressing my lips together, trying to strangle the sadness rising up in my throat. “Are you okay?” the speed freak asked me. I nodded my head vigorously. Why was I crying? Because I had always wanted to grow old with Mike and I feared that might not happen now? Because I was so grateful that he *was* alive, that he hadn’t left me after all? Because I needed him in a way that was being articulated so beautifully? Marvin Bell’s poetry was something powerful and I wanted to do that too.

The next morning, I woke up and went downstairs to the cafeteria where I had some bread and cheese, some yogurt and a coffee. I re-read the submissions for my poetry workshop, prepared notes for discussion. Then I rode the subway to Starometska and smiled when the sexy pre-recorded voice announced my stop. I walked into Charles University, a statuesque old building, the ones you hope college will look like. I visited with some colleagues in the hallway, remembered how much fun we’d all had the night before, after the Ypsilon reading. I had met plenty of kids my age, and all of them wanted to be writers, had read all my favorite books. When nine o’clock struck, I went to class. We talked about the readers of the night before, argued about Marvin Bell’s work and which stuff was his best. My professor recited his poems from memory, yelled at us when we couldn’t articulate our arguments. I knew she was the woman I wanted to be. When I saw my future self in that classroom, it was like fireworks shooting off inside me.

After class, I went for a long walk through the city. I climbed a hill and found a neighborhood with brightly colored doors on houses, a restaurant with garden seating and a

little one-screen movie house. I saw a Czech movie with subtitles—Stesti. The title translates as Almost Happiness, and I knew I had to commit the phrase to memory. *Stetsi: Almost Happiness*. I went home to work on my class assignments. Then I had dinner at the goulash tavern with a playwright and his wife. We talked about plays and Chicago, and that was the first time that day I thought about Mike. *That was the first time that day I thought about Mike*. For the past several years (six years and six months, to be exact) he had been the first thought of every morning.

*

My foot started to throb about a week into the trip. I probably wasn't staying off my feet as much as I'd been told. I was taking several-mile walks every day. But that was for Mike. That was the only way I could stop feeling the injustice of it all, the often unbearable anger. There were very few elevators in Prague, and Mike's wheelchair would've been a nightmare on those cobblestone hills. I went to a Canadian doctor who told me again to stay off my feet. "I'll just take another aspirin," I said, and limped back to my dorm.

*

baby,

i cried when i read your beautiful e-mail. i am thanking jesus for technology right now.

medically, i'm a bit of a mess, with my toe infected and swollen right now, but intellectually, i am satiated.

just had a lecture about the inferiority complex of czechs. similar to irish in that way. and it makes sense of eastern european immigrants for me. after the fall of communism, it is difficult to persuade the people to read literature when they have have never seen baywatch or read a harlequin or seen die hard. they want to do that all before sitting down and reading david foster wallace. this is why they wear bart simpson t-shirts. it indicates freedom to them.

i have a lot of revisions to do right now before my workshop tomorrow. please call me anytime. i should be in my room tonight after ten p.m. my time. and up until at least twelve. i love to hear your dreamy voice.

there's a line in a poem that reminded me of us and made me cry. "if the sky should fall, we shall have clouds for supper." AH.

went to the bridge last night. it really is heaven. i need to take you there. had drinks and dessert with elysia, my tough girl southern friend. i see my poetry prof read tonight so that should be fun.

i promise, i am being careful and traveling in groups. did i tell you about the george bush nesting dolls they sell here?

i love your face off.

it's okay if you feel needy. it's only love.

dreaming of you and believing in you,
maggie emlyn

*

fascinating about bart simpson = freedom. that's so sad & endearing. i tried you a few times today (your night) around 10:45PM and 12:45AM, but didn't get you.

had a good long workout yesterday & read a great book, THE SORROWS OF EMPIRE by chalmers johnson. read palahniuk's SURVIVOR today. going to take a shower now & do a light workout before tara. very panicky last night but i think it was a big breakthru in recovery on the horizon. had a dream last night of the walking putting itself together & being perfect, walking around a penthouse apartment holding sheldon's hand!

which levis poet are you loving? i googled her/him & there's a few. the chick or the dead old italian guy?

i started writing a bit last night. a collection of short fiction called THE INVENTION OF MONSTERS, inspired by the dali painting of similar name. it's divided into chapters, one character per chapter, and they all share RIC in common.

<Author has edited out the entire list of short stories and his detailed descriptions of each.>

My professor had asked us to read an anthology of Kafka's short stories and then write a poem about Prague, mixing the Czech author's words with our own. I flipped through the book, copying down the lines that stuck with me, for whatever reasons. The first one would have to be, "Yes I'm tired, I said and sat down on a boulder near the spring." I looked out my window and wondered where my great-grandmother had lived, exactly how she had

endured her own tragedy. "Ancient traditions that recommended the place." Thought of all my friends who were getting married soon and felt so happy for them, my oldest and dearest friends, but even that couldn't eclipse my sorrow. Perhaps it only heightened the feeling. "Married people among them who were expecting children." But no, I thought, no. Remember what your mother said. You confessed to her once that you had hoped to be married and have children when you were still young, just as she had. And she said (somewhat sadly) that she had always hoped to write a book. The pace of the writing picked up then. "Some people came to me and asked me to build a city for them. I ought to be in a place where all kinds of people meet. That's why I am here, I'm collecting advocates!" It's good I'm here, I told myself. Stop feeling guilty. This is where you belong; this is who you're supposed to be. "I do not have to go back again, the cell is burst open, I move, I feel my body." And that finally felt like relief, like a tremendous weight had been lifted. But in the end, it always came back to Michael. "Receive him in the name of the city." Make room for him, I thought, *please*.

When I submitted the poem to workshop, my professor said, "I like this, Maggie. It's so weird. I have no idea what it means but I *like* it!" I never told my workshop about Mike. But I did e-mail the assignment to him.

mag,

WAY surprised/intrigued/and admittedly confused (stanza III) by your epic. only a first read, though. what is most apparent is the sense of urgency and the repetition of certain lines/mantras elevates the entire piece to a wonderful level of folk. let me keep reading it: it's TOTALLY DIFFERENT and exciting. it's the first thing you've written (sadly?) whose voice is overwhelmingly woman as opposed to fascinated girl. the tone seems to shift toward the end of that transition. Also the line "I do not have to go back again, the cell is burst open, I move, I feel my body." makes me sad, if i'm interpreting it correctly.

And, of course, he *was* interpreting it correctly. The transition from fascinated girl to woman was something we both had wanted, but we hadn't suspected how painful it would

be. After reading that e-mail, I wandered around the Kafka Museum where the looped Klezmer music sounded perfectly haunting and sufficiently elegiac. Mike was acknowledging the first time I had expressed a temptation to leave the relationship, and then he decided to ignore it and hope for the best, which made it sound like the Klezmer music was swelling just for us.

in other news, good workout yesterday, as i said.
when you get a chance, respond a bit more to my last e-mail. and your letter hasn't arrived yet! i get so excited when the mail comes, but not yet.
well, time for the little dog to go crawl around his mat and do some steps and march in place. the little dog also hasn't shaved since you left, so he looks more like a little lion.
i love you very much.

23

There have been a number of plays written about betrayal, and some of them have been produced quite well in Chicago. Julius Caesar at Chicago Shakespeare was a highlight. The epic tale of ambition and consequence. "Et tu, Brute?" Caesar asks, and we cry for poor Caesar, but also for Marcus Brutus, who we all realize, will now have to live with the consequences of his spectacular betrayal.

Later that night, I went to the student union, which I affectionately called Fraggie Rock. There was always an odd mix of shaggy-haired and orange-haired Americans and Czechs hanging around, wearing striped shirts and funny glasses. I went there one night with Elysia, the speed freak, who knew a lot of people in the program because she went out drinking first thing in the morning instead of going to classes or doing her homework. She brought me to a table of men. "These guys are kinda old," she said, "but they like to party." I sat down and looked across the table, and the craziest thing happened: an electrical charge shot through me. I had never experienced this kind of attraction. Think about me and Mike: it wasn't instantaneous. This feeling was more like that unbelievable thing I saw in movies. The man I was looking at wasn't even handsome. He wore his gray hair closely shaved and had a mouth full of crooked teeth. He had faded tattoos up and down his arms and legs, and pretty green eyes, and he made me feel alive again.

“Hey,” I said.

We all started rapping, telling stories about where we were from. He, Rory, was a graduate student in Michigan, a teaching assistant in the Prague Summer Program. He had grown up strangely—his parents were trust-fund kids, some of the richest kids in Southern California, who essentially gave it all up to be wandering hippies.

“Cool,” someone said.

“Not cool,” he said. “We lived in a hippie commune in Hawaii for a while when I was a kid. It had to be shut down for hazardous waste disposal. No one knew what the hell they were doing.”

“Where did you go to college?” I asked at some point.

“San Francisco.”

“I was there once. Love that city.”

(Mike and I had gone to visit Paulie there before he moved to Chicago. We did wine country and saw plays and live jazz at Pearl’s and hiked in Muir Woods. Stop thinking of Mike already, I told myself. Who’s Mike?)

Rory told me about the college he attended—said it had a good writing program—said he couldn’t handle the rules at the dorms so he lived in an apartment with a couple of strangers who became his friends. He used to sleep with one of the girls, and the dude, who seemed really macho, actually turned out to be a cross-dresser. The memories seemed to keep coming, and truth be told, I was enthralled. He had so many. It was like the play Othello, where Desdemona’s father accuses him of manipulating her with witchcraft, but it was really his stories that seduced her.

“And then one night, I came home from class and he was dead on the living room floor. He had died of a heroin overdose. It was the first time I’d ever seen a dead person.”

Then he looked disoriented. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” he said. “I haven’t thought of it since I left San Francisco.”

“I’m really sorry,” I said. “That’s terrible.”

“But I don’t know why I told you that. God, you’re charming.”

*

I hung out with the kids my age, too. We found lunch specials all over the city—chic little Mediterranean restaurants and Chinese dives -- we drank absinthe together one night. We watched Barack Obama address the Democratic National Convention on television in a bar and everyone was impressed then that I was from Chicago. We went to every reading. Gail Wronsky read an elegy for Larry Levis and I understood then that the best elegies are the one in which you tell the hard truths; Christopher Merrill read about his travels and I knew I had much, much more to do. I watched the director of the program sit in the front row every night with his young daughters (the little one usually fell asleep by the end) and knew that that’s how I wanted my kids to grow up. The TAs read too, and the night Rory read, I told my new friends that I thought he was talented. They teased me and said, “Come on, dude. He’s old. And he’s such a snob, isn’t he?” I tortured myself with hesitation and became obsessed with writing.

*

We went to the decorative art museum and visited Prague Castle and St. Vitus, all of the cathedrals. I lit candles for Mike in every one. We went to a sex toy museum and I thought about him there too, and then just as quickly pushed him from my mind. I did not want to think about painful things. I did not tell my new friends about the painful things. I did not want to be pitied, or interesting because of something awful.

When I saw Rory at Fraggie Rock again, he was checking himself in a mirror. I teased him. “You can take the boy out of California, but not the California out of the boy.” He quickly got defensive and said, “Not everyone from California is image-conscious. How would you like if I said all people from Chicago were criminals?” So he couldn’t take a joke, but I stayed because I wanted to hear about his novel about a gringo in a third world country and alcoholics who had abandoned their families. I wanted to hear his thoughts about the readings. He was more critical than I, but then again, I thought maybe he knew something I didn’t. He’d been on the scene a while. A redhead student of his came over and started flirting with him pretty obviously, and I thought that was probably best, so I went up to my room and brushed my teeth, feeling lonely and quite frankly, relieved. Elysia swayed in the doorway and said, “Let’s make out. Come on, Maggie. Please.”

“No,” I said. “I told you: I’m not into girls. Go to bed now. Get some sleep.”

I went to my room and locked the door because it was the perfect time of night to sit in my window and listen to my headphones, the CD that Mike had made me. *Somewhere Out There* sung by Fievel Mousekewitz from a childhood movie we loved. But then: a knock on the door. Goddamnit, Elysia, I thought. Embarrassing. And when I opened it, Rory was standing there, panting.

“I ran all the way up,” he said.

“But the redhead...”

“No no no. I needed to see you. I need you to be mine.”

(And he was not an actor.)

The phone started ringing and didn’t stop. Somewhere in the world, a boy called and his girlfriend didn’t answer. She knew it was her boyfriend and didn’t pick up anyway. He would later ask her why, but she didn’t tell him the truth, which was: she didn’t answer

because this man was in her room and she wanted him to stay. He said she was smart and sexy, and those were things she wanted to feel. She didn't say that she'd dreamt of having sex with the man. She dreamt of having sex with him in the old-fashioned way. She didn't want the kind that she and her boyfriend had now, the new substitute for sex, which lately made her sad. Her boyfriend saying, "I think I just came." And her saying, "No you didn't." She, always positioned on top now, and she, the only one getting off. She hated that part the most. She wondered if he would try with another woman. But then again, maybe another woman who didn't know the arm unstuck, who didn't know the taste of him...Maybe a woman who didn't know the previous version of him wouldn't feel so sad. The girlfriend didn't say any of this because she was ashamed. The girlfriend didn't say any of this because the new substitute for sex was *almost* enough. Stetsi: almost happiness.

*

Rory leaned in to kiss me and I stopped him.

"Is this about that boyfriend back home?" he asked.

I nodded.

"We'll talk about that later."

We talked about a lot of other things that night. We sat on a balcony and I told him about my theater in Chicago—they were rehearsing right now for a show called The Pavilion about a high-school reunion. It would be the first Opening Night I'd missed. Paulie and Lynda were playing an estranged couple and that was going to be interesting because they used to date each other. Art imitates life and all that. But then I realized I was telling him about my life with Mike. What was my life without Mike? I told him about the neighborhood I'd grown up in—it had been rough for a while, but now was getting pretty gentrified and I had mixed feelings about that. My grandmother who had lived in the apartment above us—

she had always wanted to go to Europe—asked me to go with her when I was in high-school but I was too busy with my friends to go on a vacation with my grandmother. It was one of my biggest regrets, not taking that trip with her. “Is she dead now?” Rory asked. “No, but blind and practically deaf,” I said. I told him about my mother who was a better writer than I but had never really done anything with it, and my father who always mowed the lawn in swimming trunks and dress shoes for some reason. He said, “I want to meet them all. I want every single one at our wedding.”

I told him how I’d written obituaries and police blotters for a suburban newspaper, but I was done with that now. I wasn’t going to grow old and wonder about the talents I’d neglected or the trips I’d never taken. I wasn’t meant to change diapers for the rest of my life and I didn’t have to take anyone’s advice. I was not a practical writer; I was not an actor either. And I refused to be the one whose stories were less important. I was writing my own obituary now. The time had come. I told Rory about the Derek Walcott poem I’d read in Gail’s class. I tried to recite it from memory. “The time will come when, with elation you will greet yourself arriving at your own door, in your own mirror and each will smile at the other's welcome, and say, sit here. Eat. You will love again the stranger who was your self.” The scary thing, I said to Rory, is how happy I am being alone. I found the Walcott poem and continued: “Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart to itself, to the stranger who has loved you all your life, whom you ignored for another, who knows you by heart. Take down the love letters from the bookshelf, the photographs, the desperate notes, peel your own image from the mirror. Sit. Feast on your life.” “Ladies and gentlemen,” I said, “Derek Walcott.”

I told Rory I loved reading and writing and traveling, and I think that was good for him because he’d been doing those things so long, I think he forgot he loved them. He

kissed the top of my head and tucked me into bed that night. I fell asleep, determined to save the only life I knew I could. And I signed my e-mail to Mike the next day: Maggie Emlyn Thornton, which would never be my name.

*

One of my favorite lectures was entitled *Heimat*, which is a German word, for which there is no exact English translation. The closest English translation would be home or homeland, but that doesn't exactly work. *Heimat* is meant to denote the relationship of a human being towards a certain social spacial unit and usually carries positive connotations.

honey butt,

it was SO great to talk & laugh with you tonite--i could have talked to you all night, laying on my stomach, twiddling my ankles in the air girl-talk style! that sucked that your phone card cut out on you just as you were telling me how unbelievably sexy i am & how you can't concentrate on school sometimes cuz all your thinking about is my ***. <Author edit>

what? who said that? you pig.

anyway, i played upwards with my family tonight (i won twice in a row, frankie was PISSESSSED!) and drank some peevo in your honor.

i love you so much, mags, and we'll make anything work if you decide to grad school it. i called your mom today--we're gonna grab dinner next week.

goodnight you tough, beautiful, hot, sexy, talented, brainy bitch. god, i kept thinking tonight how badly i wanted you next to me playing upwards, watching you look all serious making mad combinations in your mind, a pen getting dizzy as you flip it in your left hand, right holding a smoke that hasn't been licked in ages.

again, so proud of you, and let's decide when to talk next. i'll just keep trying you intermittenly(sp?), but please, until then, as i say, "give a call."

by the way, that weird fuck is still winning on jeopardy!!!

I LOVE YOU!

God, you make me so happy. do you know that? as you always said in our apartment, "it's nice to be in love, isn't it?"

yes, it is. oh yes oh yes oh yes it is.

Heimat is a German concept, but you can find similar concepts in Russian and Czech cultures. Essentially, one is bound to their *heimat* by their birth and their childhood, but also, their language, their earliest experiences, their acquired affinities. It's a trinity of descendance, community and tradition, and deeply affects an individual's identity.

MAGGIE!!!

Very happy to hear from you. basically, working out and reading have kept me company. had a nice gettogether saturday, dice (the game, not the dog) in the garage, making ice-picks for everybody (i only had one at the end of the night.) tara came and hung out for a while--it was interesting to see how respectful people were to her, almost like a silent 'we know what you're doing for mike, & we love you for it.) just got done with a hard-core 90min. workout--walking feels so much better after taking sunday off. my heel hits first, then the toe, the way it should. same story--the bigger breakthru comes with a week of panic & weakness. body adjusting. but i felt great upright today, was able to lift my leg nice & high. 1 yr, 5 months. at the end of this nightmare, the time we've "lost" will seem like a dream.

i'm home alone right now. he-he.

anyway, here's the books i've recently read:

MY LIFE, Clinton; THE SORROWS OF EMPIRE, Johnson; BUDDHISM FOR DUMMIES; SURVIVOR, Palahniuk; YOU SHALL KNOW OUR VELOCITY!, Eggers.

Very excited about the novel i'm going to write: AIN'T NEVER KNOW WHO GONNA GIVE YOU A GLASS OF WATER WHEN: A Creative Non-fiction Autobiographical Tale. I'm seriously debating getting "iListen," Apple's dictation program (i talk, it types) only b/c i have so many ideas that one finger can't keep up with.

the party on saturday did end sourly, however. being respectful, i moved the dice game into the garage, shut the door, and didn't really blast the music (maybe a little). but reetee-reetz poked her sleepy face into the garage @ 2AM and essentially ended the party. i went from momentarily feeling "normal" to being painfully aware of the lack of my independence. i went to bed very angry, and when i realized that the only person who could make me feel better was halfway around the world, my head wouldn't stop leaking & i stone-faced cried myself to sleep.

fievel.

so, as you can imagine, i used it positively. i hated taking sunday off, but it was tara's orders, convinced that my 2-4hrs per day did, in fact, fatigue me a bit. maybe i'll just do a light workout sundays. yeah, it felt good to veg(sp?), but it was also a bit depressing. but anyway, things have been otherwise good. played some songs missing you, ain't no sunshine when she's gone, told lynda my heart hurt, but the time away is/will be good. the buddhism book was wonderful. been trying to meditate once a day, and it really seems to be helping everything. as long as i can still see the goal, and work towards it, then all this is simply transitional; albeit a long & slow one.

but my mood has been good. of course, i miss you.

how do i feel about marrying a poet? well, you've always been a poet. you just needed this fellowship for validation, i think. and validation, don't get me wrong, is an essential thing for everyone. that's why they call it "validation." maybe that's why you've never been able to really finish anything "long-form"--that at your writing/creative core, poetry is your medium: condensed beauty-just like you.

please let me know what you're reading: i'd love to read some stuff so we can talk about & you can teach me it.

so proud of you.

poet-actress mom & actor-director-writer dad. and i swear to god, the fucking kid will probably read Cliffs notes & be a baseball star.

girls names: Kasey, Ryan. thoughts?

i feel like going to the movies is this whole new world for me to explore! had a good time at fahrenheit 9/11. jittery @ first, of course, hadn't been in a theatre in over a year, but it went away. very exciting changes, maggie. as i recover slowly, and my poor mind mends itself, my ring of comfort expands everyday. the world, i realize, is my home. everywhere, i realize, is a safe-place. nothing external has the power to harm me; only my perception of the externals.

please promise me this experience won't make me unsympathetic to others' problems. the last thing i want to be is "Buddha on the mountaintop."

again, send me what you're writing. any good wine/beer tips? any new favorite foods?

i want you in my cells.
yours,
michael

The German professor, as he tried to explain *Heimat* to a group made up largely of Americans, said that home or homeland in English typically translates to a physical or geographic space while with many Eastern Europeans, physical and geographic spaces hold less power. So: it's a feeling, really. Without your *Heimat*, it feels like an appendage is missing.

subject: come home to your kids!

dear mags,
basically the tone is because i miss you incredibly, far more than you miss me, i'm sure, and i really need to just speak with you on the telephone.
it makes me feel dumb that i'm always the one calling b/c then i think that i'm being too needy, but i don't think it's needy to want to talk to you more than once a week. it's this horrible guy-trap i'm in: i want to be cool & give you all the space in the world during this incredible opportunity which you so aptly deserve, but on the other hand, i want to be able to be honest about my feelings without annoying you or angering you or appearing, yes, weak & needy.
the love in your e-mails is so apparent, but basically, i'll just put this out there honestly: i didn't think it was possible to miss someone this much. i really miss my best friend. and whereas you have new people/ideas/teachers/places to keep you busy and interested during this time apart, i do not.
i just miss you a lot & need to talk to you as soon as possible, okay? so maybe we can just start setting a time once a week or something. that would quiet my catastrophizing mind.
i have basically turned into a workout machine, logging in 3-4 hours standing & mat program. sit to stand from the wheelchair into walker is achieved!! i used to only be able to do it once a week, but saturday i did it 3 times in a row, and yesterday i did it 5 times in a row AFTER a three hour workout. of course, with every new breakthrough comes a stint of anxiety, so that's being worked through. but lately, i've just been quietly confident with a new addition of anger in my workouts.
got a letter from hayley (by the way, yours still hasn't arrived--i want your scarecrow penmanship!) from iowa yesterday. anyway, i talked to her on the phone yesterday & she might come out in september to visit, hopefully dragging doug along! hayley was so happy to hear we're still together & told me to tell you hi.
i feel a lot better after all that writing. give a call. i love you.

Heimat, according to theorists, was a reaction to the onset of modernity, and the loss of intimate community. We listened to the Czech national anthem in the lecture hall: "*Where is my homeland? Where is my home?*" And I thought it was much better than my own national anthem. The Czech Jews sang it as they went off to concentration camps, in their language, which was their *domov*, their only true home.

i'm off to bed, you bronze-bodied beauty.
have a wonderful day,
stop to breathe the air, and let it wash across your face.
i'll be dreaming of you; me in my bed, you in a classroom,
a washroom, a dormroom, a restaurant,
on the other side of earth.
me in my bed, you in my head,
have a wonderful day, i love you,
(goodnite)

And while I struggled to keep up with the German professor and forget all the e-mails from Mike that were making me feel dizzy, Rory passed me a note like we were in elementary school that said, "I am so into you," decorated with little music notes. It was then I knew I had to tell him. It wouldn't be fair not to. In retrospect, I should've known that Mike *was* my *heimat*, or a part of it at least—he and I shared a dual citizenship to the world belonging to Chicago artists and the world belonging to its working classes. Some choose one identity over the other, but we were proud to claim both. And I couldn't really connect with someone who didn't understand that. But I had mistakes to make.

When I did start to tell Rory, we sat in my dorm room, on my bed, after class while the sun was still shining, and I couldn't look at him. I told it in real time. My boyfriend. My first great love. Our theater. The affair. I lost myself somewhere along the way. *Thornton: Critical!* Spinal stroke. Another spinal stroke. *Thornton: Critical!* Did I tell you that I loved him? And he, this thirty-six year old man, just looked at my face, while the sun was going down and said, "Oh, baby." What else was there to say? It was then that we kissed. We met for lunch after school sometimes, paddled down the Vlatva River once, looked at old theater posters in the Mucha Museum under the bridge. He made us picnic dinners, bought Moravian wine and Swiss chocolate, put wildflowers in the wine bottle once we'd emptied it. After all of the ugliness and grit, I realized, I had been dying for beauty.

My friend Julie came to Prague around this time. She had been to see Mike and said he missed me terribly. This made me want her to leave, so I told her I was going on a

weekend trip with this guy named Rory, and she could have my bed while I was gone but then would have to find a place of her own. Rory and I took bus trips to Karlovy Vary and Telc, gorgeous little towns in the country where everything shut down by nine o'clock. We listened to classical music in the town squares which was the only kind of music that could convey the depths of my grief and the elation I felt when I thought I was outrunning it. All of the Czech composers were writing about the same thing, weren't they? I do not want death to come, and thank God I'm alive.

When Monday came, there was a symposium on Kundera, a sensitive subject with the Czechs. He was their most internationally known living writer, but he had fled the country during the Soviet Regime—he couldn't stand the oppression. He left, he said, to be worthy of a life of his own. He escaped to France where he still lives today, and never returned home, even after the breaking down of the Berlin Wall and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. The Czech lecturers called him a traitor to their country, but I knew better: I knew he was guilty and suffering, no matter what he said. I came back to my room after the Kundera symposium and Julie said, "What are you doing with that guy? Mike wants to *marry* you."

"Mind your own business," I said. "You don't know what it's like. Just leave me alone, Julie. *Fuck*. And anyway, I am not married. It would be different if I were."

The Czechs were incensed when Kundera published Ignorance in French in the year 2000 because this time, he had completely abandoned his *domov*, his language, a small language spoken by so few. But I read the book. And in it, he writes about Czech ex-pats who, by the novel's end, decide not to return to Prague, even though it will always be the most beautiful city in the world, to them. I knew that Rory was France and Mike was Prague,

and I did not want to go home again. Even so, reading my e-mail responses to Mike years later made me feel like all the good I'd ever done had been erased.

baby,

i am in an internet cafe with julie, feeling oddly homesick, i think. maybe. i don't know what i feel. the program is over so soon and i am beginning to feel freaked out about that. today we had some b-fast at an expat cafe and now we're going to embark on an adventure. possibly an architecture tour or the jewish cemetery.

we are having fun. i'll try to buy a phone card today and call you. becky is getting married today. wow, huh? i wonder who i'll marry...

i love you so much, fivel.

*

honey child,

stood perfectly on my own from chair to walker today. my legs work. they push. i stand. i love you & am going to bed.
huge progress tonite. and i stepped up on the little chessboard with my left foot.
slowly. slowly...already the pain has set in.

*

My last days in Prague were bittersweet. I had workshopped several pieces in my prose workshop -- a series of pieces called *Chicago El Stories*. My classmates responded well to them—my professor did too. And even when I did get criticism, I didn't get defensive like other students. Acting had prepared me for this. I attended lectures about publishing underground during Communism and they did wonders for my work ethic. I knew I'd better stop feeling sorry for myself and get writing—I had the luxury of freedom, the world was enormous, and time was ticking away. Julie went home and Rory went home and I stayed on a little while longer.

I took a city bus to a water park which was really just a big swimming pool where I was the only prude wearing both pieces of my bikini. Saw a Black Light show based on The Beatles: All You Need Is Love. Trippy. And then, a Czech piano player who said, "I am

going to play classical music for you, okay?” He played *Imagine* by John Lennon. Anyone who says the Beatles are overrated should go to the Czech Republic. While I was packing up to leave, Rory’s best friend stopped over to say goodbye. “Rory told me about your situation,” he said. “You don’t have to stay with him—even though I know that’s what he wants—but it seems you probably will have to leave Mike, huh?”

*

When I got home, six weeks later, my parents and Mike and his parents were all scheduled to meet me at the airport. I looked out the windows of O’Hare and my city looked totally uninteresting after Telc and Karlovy Vary. I took a long walk through customs. Outside the airport, in the oppressive heat, Mike’s father pushed him over to me; he was holding a bouquet of flowers in his good hand and had Welcome Home mylar balloons tied to the back of his chair. “I did it myself,” he said. “Good PT, you know?” His hair was oily, his face unshaven; he was sunburned on one half of his body. (That’s what happens to him in the sun now.) I crouched down and hugged him, kissed his cheek, but I did it like a ghost. “Honey,” he said, full of emotion. “God, I missed you so much.” I realized, in that moment, I had stopped believing he was going to get better.

Mike Thornton didn’t look like mine anymore that day. He didn’t look the way he had the night of the going-away party when I whispered, “*Muy guapo*” in his ear over and over again. He looked different now, somehow, even though he hadn’t changed a bit. It was like I had grown new skin, and the new skin had new nerve endings. It was like I was a stranger, and one I did not wish to know.

24

Sarah Bernhardt played to Chicago audiences in all six of her world tours. The archdiocese didn’t seem to care for her, but that didn’t bother her fans. After seeing the Union Stock Yards in Chicago, she was so haunted by the “dreadful and magnificent sight” that she fainted on stage that night and the curtain had to be

lowered so she could pull herself together. She had always been a histrionic character, but isn't that why they loved her?

Michael and I would often tell our friends that life *was* melodramatic, and we liked it that way. He once wrote that “we want to drink like kings, fuck like minks, kiss like vacuums, believe in The One, know God, write The Novel and be The Actor. We are the proud, humble, arrogant stars of our own play.” So: I have to write this like a play. I cannot miss my cue. This is the hardest part to write.

THE DEATHS OF TEENAGERS (or Boo Hoo Hoo)

MAGGIE and MICHAEL sit in a Jefferson Park back yard, two bottles of wine from the Czech Republic on the patio table between them—one red, one white. MICHAEL knows how MAGGIE hates to be indoors on warm evenings, knows that his strange reactions to the sun have kept them cooped up too many times while the city outside seemed to taunt them with the sounds of American Bandstand and the smell of hot dogs and grilled onions. They sit dangerously close to RITA and FRANKIE (his parents') open bedroom window.

MAGGIE

There was a man there.

RITA (O.S.)

I knew it.

FRANKIE (O.S.)

Shh. Honey ssh. Let them have privacy. Please.

MAGGIE

He took care of me, I guess. I needed someone to take care of me.

MICHAEL

I understand all that. (As if his soul is one-thousand years old.) But I try to take care of you. I mean, I pay for your cabs 'cause I can't drive you to work anymore. I know how to hug you after a bad audition. I always know how to make you feel better. I write you poems and long letters with one finger. (BEAT) How did he take care of you?

MAGGIE

I don't know. He bandaged up my toe one day. It was infected and I couldn't look. I really couldn't. You know how stuff like that makes me nauseous. He un-bandaged it and re-bandaged it and didn't seem grossed out. (BEAT) Do you really want to know?

MICHAEL

No.

MAGGIE

Let's have some more wine, okay? I love this—this is Moravian. Really good. How have things been here?

MICHAEL

The Pavilion is really good. Gawlik did a great job directing. Trying to think about next season. I think The Glass Menagerie is next. We've done some new stuff. Now it's time for the classics. Keep thinking about Tom and Laura, for some reason. What about Mary Ann Thebus for Amanda? Did I tell you who's taking her class now?

MAGGIE (Over MICHAEL, to AUDIENCE)

And when he starts to tell me all the gossip I used to thrive on about who is dating who and which shows got which reviews, I couldn't be less interested. I'm missing an Eastern European city across the world, where no one knows any of these people, where their lives don't seem to exist. Where my happiness is not contingent on the next role or the director who might discover me.

MICHAEL

Maybe the playwright will come in to see Pavilion. He's pretty famous now, but maybe. Maybe it'll pick up a couple Jeff Awards. Who knows?

MAGGIE

But I'm also missing Michael already, and thinking of the women that will come. Will they know how to love him? Will they know that he loves the simulated feeling of having an egg cracked gently over his head? That he doesn't have the fine motor skills to crack a beer so they'll have to do that for him and in a subtle way so no one notices? Will they know? That dropping out of college is his biggest insecurity so don't ever make too much of that? That he *needs* to be yelled at sometimes just to get the fucking point? I want to write a manual. Because otherwise, how will they know?

MICHAEL

I feel really far away from you. I feel like we're on different planets. (BEAT) Do you think you love that guy or something?

MAGGIE

He's ten years older than me. He's a snob.(BEAT) No. I do not love him.

MICHAEL

Why didn't you answer the phone when I called? It rang and rang and rang...

MAGGIE

I don't know. Let's have some more wine, okay?

MICHAEL

I'm sorry this happened to us, Bruise.

MAGGIE

Me too. (Pause) Me too. (Silence) Don't you want more wine?

MICHAEL

What do you want, Mag?

MAGGIE

(Blurts it out) I've told you a million times. I don't want to live here. With your parents. I don't want them to drive us everywhere. I want us to take a cab sometimes, or the train or the bus or something. I told you about the free cab service, but you're always so afraid. I hate going everywhere by myself and I don't want to lay in bed all the time. I want to leave Chicago, Mike. I want to go to graduate school somewhere else and be by myself, and really learn to write. It's the only thing that makes me happy for any length of time. I don't want to be an actor anymore, I don't think. (BEAT) I think I want to break up. (Relief and despair.)

MICHAEL

(Calmly) This is temporary.

MAGGIE

Michael. What if it's not? (Crying her fucking ass off)

MICHAEL

Do you love me?

MAGGIE

Of course I do. God, this is worse than high-school.

MICHAEL

Are you *in love* with me?

Silence.

MICHAEL

But you said you loved me unconditionally. (Furious) That's what *you* always said. (Repeat the phrase "unconditional love" until MAGGIE starts to drown.)

MAGGIE

Maybe I can find a way to make a lot of money and we'll hire a part-time nurse or something.

MIKE

No. That means you're giving up. Do not give up. Not now.

MAGGIE

What if this had happened to me?

MICHAEL

(Too quickly) I would've become an alcoholic. (MICHAEL does a pantomime of what he would've done if MAGGIE had been rendered paralyzed.)

MAGGIE holds up one empty bottle and starts to open the other one. She offers it to MICHAEL and he waves it away.

RITA (O.S.)

Go get him, Frankie. Please go out there and get him. If he has to take anti-depressants now because of this girl, because of this *girl*...She's a friggin' monster, Frank. I have always thought so. Why didn't this happen to her instead? Frank, he's our only son. Please, honey, go and get him.

MAGGIE goes to MICHAEL and sits in his lap. (We hear the violins of REM's *Nightswimming*, the song they kissed to when they were teenagers, when she was just starting college and he was still in high-school.) She buries her head in the crook of his neck and they cry for the deaths of those teenagers who floated toward each other in that little swimming pool in the dark so many years ago and kissed each other's chlorine lips, stopping and smiling, then starting again, while the same parents sat in the window and eavesdropped.

NEXT DOOR NEIGHBOR KID (O.S.)

Mommy! Mommy! Mikey's crying. Ahahahaha. Mikey's crying!
Maggie is too! Maggie is too! Aren't they *grown-ups*?

NEXT DOOR NEIGHBOR PARENT (O.S.)

Oh my God, Jim. So help me God, if anything ever happens like that to our kids. I swear to God, I think about it all the time now. I imagine every possible scenario. The other day, I thought the baby's head looked kinda big and maybe it was a brain tumor. I even called the doctor. I mean, Jimmy: I pray, I go to church, I'm a good person, but so is *Rita*. What if this happens to *our kids*? Oh my God. Poor Rita. Poor baby.

FRANKIE (O.S.)

C'mere, Rita. Honey. C'mere, my beautiful bride-eeen.

MICHAEL (to MAGGIE)

Everything will be okay in the morning. (Finally and firmly.)
I know it.

*

We broke up, in part, because I needed to tell the truth now to survive, and Mike needed imagination. We broke up a year and a half after the stroke, when I was twenty-six and he was twenty-five. We had become an official couple when I was twenty and he was nineteen. We had been friends (or something like it) since I was seventeen and he only sixteen years old.

*

A few seasons ago, The Gift did One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. In the play, Dale says that people like him go crazy because they feel weak and small, and people like McMurphy go crazy because of people like Dale. And when I heard that line, I thought of the night Mike and I broke up, the stroke and RIC, how all of it has left me with my own set of anxieties. I thought of all the things that didn't used to scare me, that now had the power to keep me awake at night. Like skiing or riding a bike in the street. Having a high fever or driving a car. Ending up like all the poor women at RIC who were paralyzed from high-risk

pregnancies and deliveries. Feeling a pain in the back of my neck. Or falling in love with someone who wasn't Mike.

*

In the morning, I woke to Frankie's footsteps in the hall. I listened to his morning routine for the last time. Listened to him blow his nose and take a good, long piss, and I missed him already. I listened to him light his first cigarette of the morning and crack a few eggs. I looked over at Mike who was flat on his back, staring at the ceiling. I knew he hadn't slept all night while I breathed laboriously through the night, drunk enough and empty enough to finally fall asleep. His legs started to spasm involuntarily as they did in the morning. It meant it was time for him to take a good long piss, too. I sat up in bed and hugged his legs tightly, held them to me, let them shake my body for a few minutes, until they stopped. I held them for a minute more. I kissed him, probably stinking of spoiled wine, went out to the kitchen and greeted his father who was making me breakfast in his underpants. Then I hurried off to Redmoon Theater, that suddenly wonderful place, that makeshift office decorated with jar shrines and decorative masks, where I could escape into hours upon hours of catch-up work.

*

I saw Frankie for the first time in a long time at an opening at The Gift. He waited until he had a few beers to ask me how I was doing. He's always cautious with me now.

"You a History major, Little Bit?" he asked.

"English," I responded.

(It's okay. He knew me when I was an actor.)

"How's my car?" he asked.

"It died last year," I said.

“Back with your parents?” he asked.

“I live alone,” I responded.

And then he teared up, and I called for a cab.

Sometimes I still feel lonely without him.

*

As soon as I was settled, I went to see The Pavilion at Victory Gardens. The postcard image: Lynda and Paul sitting on a bench, looking so young, tanned and thin, literally gazing up at stars—this couple who loved each other so fiercely but never could make the romance work, for whatever reason. I understood them now. Paulie and Lynda: still the cement of our theater company. The ones who, in their forties, have never married or had children, but instead have devoted themselves to the theater and made every member their family. In this play about a high-school reunion: one of my favorite lines ever: *For us to be together, the universe would have to start all over again...* I sat in the audience, knowing I would never act again, but also knowing it was the art form I valued above all others. I saw my friends after the show and we had a drink. I told them all my favorite parts because I knew that’s what they needed. I told them what to work on because I knew they needed that too. And as soon as we had finished our first round, Brendan and Paul looked at their watches and said, “Shouldn’t you get back to Mike?”

*

And because Amelia and Eddie were getting married, and I was the maid of honor, there were plans to be finalized. I had planned the shower before I left, but now there was the bachelorette party, which is important. While I was away, the other bridesmaids wanted to know about the bachelorette party. Which bar are you thinking? they asked. Would she

like strippers? How 'bout the racetrack? I didn't ever respond, and then I dreaded opening my e-mail because one message was worse than the next.

I can't believe how rude you are, not returning my e-mails. I know you're in Prague, Mag, and I hate to be the master of the obvious, but this is Amelia's fucking bachelorette party. Stop being so fucking selfish.

I called Amelia and said I hoped she didn't regret her decision, said she could choose another maid of honor if she wanted. She said she couldn't think about what I'd done to Mike, but she was disappointed in how I treated Julie. I told Julie I was sorry. We were home now and I realized my mistakes. I should've spent more time with her in Prague, but I was working through some things.

Your "situation" doesn't entitle you to anything...Based on the Maggie Andersen Reward System, what does Amelia get after watching her father die for five years? And Julie Lutz? She's getting a divorce after struggling with her husband's mental illness for three years. Surely both of them are entitled to more than a month at fantasy camp.

Fantasy camp meant I felt I was entitled to six weeks away after a pretty shitty year and a half. Fantasy camp meant I felt entitled to have an affair and even expected my friends to understand.

Mag, you told me several things that turned out to be less than truthful, i.e. that your relationship with Rory was platonic (Kissing and making out is not platonic)... To say it was uncomfortable for me is an understatement (hopefully Mike will shed some more light on that) and rather than address that or understand it, you acted and continue to act self-righteous.

Not self-righteous, necessarily. But I *was* trying to be selfish. Mike was the one who had always accused me of being too accommodating to my family and friends, said it held me back in a number of ways. My friends accused me of exhibiting "textbook Maggie Andersen behavior," always needing a man by my side.

I can only hope that soon, you'll come crashing back to reality... Don't forget to tell Mike how genuinely happy you were upon hearing that he stood up three times in a row... what a sweetheart.

And I *had been* happy to hear the news. Of course I had been. But I also knew, from experience, not to get my hopes up because they always ended up getting smashed. The point is: I didn't want to come crashing back to reality.

Let's stop this here; everything they said was true. I shouldn't have made my friend feel unwelcome, and I had completely betrayed Mike's trust. And the stuff about me always needing a man? It was true enough, though it was difficult to accept this criticism from women who were about to get married, who were about to never be alone again, when I knew somewhere deep inside that I was about to be lonely for a long, long time.

At Amelia's wedding, I stood on the altar in an eggplant gown, and listened to her vow, "In sickness and in health." I felt the congregation's eyes burning holes into me. But maybe they were just thinking what a beautiful bride she was. At the reception, I sat at the head table and Mike sat on the other side of the room with all the members of The Gift. I watched as Brendan cut his steak for him ("Small pieces," I thought) then played cards with him ("Gin rummy," I thought) while everyone danced the night away. I gave the Maid of Honor toast and then made my way over to his table.

"You want to dance like we did on the Lokomat?" he said. "I've been practicing."

So we did. He got up and we danced, for a minute, and then he sat down, defeated, and said, "Go dance with your friends. Get outta here."

These girlfriends and I were forever changed; we would never all be in the same room together again, but we put on a show for the bride. Now Amelia and I rarely speak. She has two healthy sons and a beautiful home, and just didn't seem to like me much anymore after I left Mike.

At the end of the summer, I went to a local street festival with my family and saw Amelia and Julie, standing on a street corner, laughing. I immediately went to them, knowing

that all we had to do was look at each other's faces and we'd remember: our years of friendship. But as I drew closer, smiling, trying to think of something witty to say, they turned their backs on me, as if it was something they had choreographed. My father, who always said these would be my lifelong friends, turned bright red with helpless embarrassment and my mother said, "You don't need friends like that." But it certainly felt like I did. My trinity. The women I wanted to be. We always thought we'd grow old together. They said I was selfish; they decided I didn't deserve them. To put it simply, they broke my heart.

*

When I told Mike about all of this, he said, "You'll all get over it, and we will get back together." I tried again, to remember my lines, to play my role with conviction. "But I'm leaving, Mike. I mean it. Please don't try and stop me." Finally, in the middle of the week, he called me at work. The finale was not dramatic. From my desk, I could look out a drafty old painted window to the residential city street below. Women were always running with their dogs or running with their babies in strollers or running all alone. That's all I ever really saw: women running. Once again, I remembered his singing: "*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine*... Yes, I'm calling my girlfriend. She hates the morning. Sing with me goddamnit! She deserves to be sung to!" But that day, no singing. He simply said, "You really are leaving, aren't you?"

I looked over at my pretty Moroccan boss and smiled politely.

"Yes," I said into the phone.

"I always wanted you to make an unpopular decision, Mag. I practically begged you to." He had to stop for a minute. His voice cracked. "I never knew it would be at my expense."

Brendan and Lauren took me out that night, probably hoping they could help in some way. We sat in the back of a restaurant, where they watched me cry until I could barely open my eyes, while my new cell phone rang and rang. Michael, of course. And every time his number appeared on the screen, I felt like the room was caving in, like I would never be able to escape this hopeless despair. “Why am I still here?” I asked my friends, and then they started crying too. The poor waitress continued to fill our wine glasses, and the other customers paid their bills quickly. Sometimes suicide was the most consoling thought.

25

Bob Falls directed Brian Dennehy in Death of a Salesman in 1998, and it was a heartbreaker. The production moved from the Goodman Theater to a triumphant Broadway reception in '99. Christiansen reported that at the opening night celebration, Falls made a rousing speech. “Well here we are on Broadway,” he said. “It’s the icing on the cake.” And then: “But always remember, Chicago is the cake.” It’s something I’ve never forgotten.

While I was away, Mike had paid for physical therapy sessions with Tara in his living room. For six weeks, they forgot about walking and worked on sit-to-stands-to-kneels. He had found a ring, then called and asked if he should visit in Prague. I told him the city was not ready for him yet (the only disabled woman in the program had had to leave because she was having such a hard time) so he stayed home and practiced kneeling. He never actually had the ring in his possession or paid anything for it, but this is what he spoke of while I was gone, and this is why some of our friends decided to never speak to me again. Many felt they had to choose, so they did, and many chose him over me. The ones I’d met in high-school with whom I had learned to drive. They chose him over me, said I was selfish and always had been. And then again, some of them stayed, and I will always love them in a special way.

*

Mike would have to go back on the dating market now, a twenty-five year old man who lived with his parents and collected disability checks and didn’t drive anymore. That’s

what killed me: His life had been a series of humiliations, large and small, since the stroke, and I had never wanted to humiliate him. I had always tried to save him from that, even before the stroke. I did not want him to be lonely like those men at RIC. But he was talented and handsome and had gotten very good at the art of love. I hoped that would count for something.

*

I went to my parents' house to tell my sisters that I had left Mike. My sisters who had grown from children to women during the course of our relationship, who expected him at their weddings. They said what my father and mother had coached them to say: "Whatever's best for you, Mag. You're my sister." Then they went to their bedroom, closed the door and blasted songs that reminded them of Mike. It was like I was a stranger, one they did not wish to know.

*

The artistic director at Redmoon Theater had heard the gossip. The news had spread like wildfire. Chicago felt like a small town all of the sudden. I knew I would never act here again.

"Let's go outside," my boss said.

He lit a cigar.

"You know what I think?" he said. "If he really loves you, he'll understand. I love my wife so much, I wouldn't want her to give up her life and take care of me. I mean that. I really do."

*

Mike's mother was furious, of course. Told him not to call me, not to see me, said he should kick me out of the company. "That's not unconditional love," she said. "She doesn't deserve you. She never has."

Mike asked his father to push him down to Charlotte's, then he asked him to come back in a few hours to pick him up.

"What do *you* think, Dad?" Mike asked, looking straight ahead as his father pushed him over alley cracks and broken glass.

"I think it's sad," Frankie said, and Mike thought he heard him crying.

*

When I returned to Redmoon, we had a show to put up. Sink, Sank, Sunk... Somehow, through various guerilla marketing strategies, we convinced thousands of people to come down to Ping Tom Park in Chinatown over a long weekend. In the park together, we witnessed a visual and totally compelling spectacle narrative without much literary cohesion at all. A young girl who had been widowed by thirteen husbands, a hot air bossman who had had his heart broken, hobos looking for the next train. And at the end, once the sky had grown dark, a fleet of small boats came down the Chicago River, lit with torches. The actors asked the audience to follow them along the riverbank in a lantern and fire procession with a thirteen-piece band leading. I did not feel alone on those nights—it felt like we were all together in a celebration of life, in a funeral march.

*

Mike refused to kick me out of the company; he said we were *evolved human beings*, and that simply wasn't necessary. But he did call me several times and ask me why I left, ask me to please come over, beg me to change my mind. He did tell me how lonely he was, ask me what despair was, write letters and send them through the post office.

The loneliest day of my life was thinking we may have to go on without each other. I want to walk from this chair and into your heart and kiss it. So if I gotta lose that smile or what your mere entrances do to my brain or your kisses or your tits or your attention for a while, or the only feeling of protection I can offer you currently: pulling up a blanket around your sleepy shoulders, for a while, I'll live and you'll live. But you're what makes living a life. Girlfriend to a wife.

I hate being a reality check, your sad punctuation mark to a wonderful trip free of me and my shadow. I hate being a moral dilemma, a liability, a burden.

I love holding you with my left arm at a party, listening to you talk. Watching you enter the world on Sunday mornings, my favorite part of Sunday football! Talking to you. Yes! Every conversation! The millions of them! And then pow! Zoom! There we are, making love again.

"I waited for someday," Mike said to me once. "The waiting for which nearly killed me. I waited for you to cry and scream in the rain. But you never did." I never, never did. Instead, I tried to start all over and figure out who I really wanted to be. I knew Chicago was too small for me and Mike now, and I had to go away and let him have it.

I started traveling around on Amtrak trains on the weekends, visiting graduate programs all over the country, listening to nothing but Tom Waits on my iPod. And maybe *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*. I visited Rory in Michigan. I dated him long-distance for a while, and would often get off the train after I'd been thinking of Mike all day. The first time I made love to him, he fell asleep a few minutes after, and I sat in a window and cried "Mikey," hugging my naked knees. I invited Rory to Chicago to meet my parents, a bit prematurely. We all went to see a Beatles tribute band (my parents' standing monthly date) and sang along to all the songs. The band started off with fun, poppy songs, but at the sound of the first lovesong (one of my and Mike's many songs) my mother had to usher me into the ladies' room, faking some sort of female emergency... Rory and I fought often because he suspected I wasn't in love with him, and that I was still in love with Mike. Frankly, I thought he should've known better, considering he was always bragging about how smart he was, how much he'd seen, how long he'd been around.

But to give him credit: We did have some fun. After all that feeling sorry for myself, I was ready. And he provided it. He would prepare incredible dishes for me—Cornish hens stuffed with cherries and fresh seafood salads and London Broils. He would mix up fancy cocktails that I didn't know how to drink (I was more accustomed to Miller Lite and cheap wine) and in the morning, we'd go to one of his local coffee shops and write, sitting across from each other, not saying a word for hours. I didn't write about Mike then. I wrote short stories about Chicago, my family, eccentrics I'd encountered and people I'd never met. Rory took me to faculty parties and literary readings, taught me that slam poetry and genre fiction are bad, and that writers can be just as crazy as actors. They just started drinking earlier. We would take long walks at night along abandoned railroad tracks. Until it was time for a pretty cocktail again, or to go back to his shabby chic apartment and fool around. This time, I knew what I was doing: I would learn everything I could from him, but not get too dependent. (That didn't sit well with him.) While I was visiting Rory and sending off portfolios to graduate programs and falling in love with trains and writing, Mike was researching vacant buildings in his neighborhood—buildings that might work as a permanent theater space.

26

William Pullinsi, fresh out of college, came home to Chicago, eager to set up his own theater in the big city. In 1961, he opened the Candlelight Dinner Playhouse in a roadside building owned by his grandfather at 5508 South Archer, a long way from the bright lights and the downtown action. It was something about that lonely old South Side—the kids there who had big dreams—the legacy of his grandfather.

Danny found a vacant old shoe store at Lawrence and Milwaukee, right in the heart of Jefferson Park, which was a popular shopping area in the '50's and '60's, but now saddled with empty storefronts. He checked it out and said he could do all the necessary wiring, get the bathrooms up to code. Everyone else could help build and paint the walls. Alex, Mrs. Thornton and Lynda would convert the basement into a dressing room with mirrors on the walls, vanities and costume racks. Mike's entire family signed on to help. Especially when

they found the black-and-white picture of his grandfather in his police uniform patrolling that very corner. The end. That would be the space. Then started the endless political red tape: Getting licensed, getting insured, e-mails back and forth with the alderman, a check for this, a fee for that, meetings with the zoning commission.

Meanwhile, there were company meetings and heated arguments between Mike and Will. Will said the theater should be built in a more “cultured” neighborhood, a place where we might have a built-in audience of theatergoers like Lincoln Park or Andersonville or Edgewater. But Mike insisted on Jefferson Park: otherwise, what was the point? Wasn’t the more socially conscious thing to do to bring theater to a neighborhood that didn’t have any? I always defended him on that issue. Defending him in these meetings was the only way I could show love without sending mixed messages.

Mike said I should audition for The Glass Menagerie, which would be the first show in the new space, and I was reluctant, but Sheldon was directing, so I did it. I took the train down to Columbia after work and read with Mary Ann Thebus who had once been my acting teacher. I read with her as Laura. She, my mother, pretended like I wasn’t disabled, exactly like everyone else. And that hit me in a visceral way. I started laughing, awkwardly. “*But mother, I’m **crippled**.*” And then the sound of that word made me feel like I was going to vomit. Sheldon offered me the role on the spot. I had beat out plenty of women who were more talented, but I think it was that line: “*Mother, I’m **crippled**.*” I think it was the way I delivered it.

We held a fundraiser in a Jefferson Park office building with garish lighting, to raise money for the new construction, and I tried everything I could to get out of it because Mrs. Thornton had planned most of it, secured all the silent auction and raffle items, prepared all of the food with her sisters. But Mike said I had to come. “We’re getting people excited

about next season. You'll be reading your audition scene with Mary Ann. You're an ensemble member. You are invaluable to this company. You have to come. The end." I went the night before to help decorate the space (Valentine's Day-themed, of course) and then I came early the night of to work the coat check. Mrs. Thornton and her sisters and friends wouldn't even look at my face. When I read with Mary Ann, they left the audience, making noise on the way out. "*Mother, I'm **crippled**.*" Uncle Jerry came to me and said, "Okay. I understand. You wanted to get laid. No problem. But go and apologize to Rita. She's done a lot for you. She was good to you. She feels betrayed."

"Leave me alone, Jerry," I said. "I love you, but please."

Tara, Mike's therapist again, had come to the fundraiser, and after it was all over, when it was just the company sitting around together, having our first drinks because we were finally done working, she sat close to Mike, like she was protecting him from me, from the possibility of late-night confessions ("This is not working. This is not fun.") from things I might be tempted to say.

"Did you see the new kicks Tara bought me?" he asked. Then he lifted his foot to show me his bright new gym shoes.

Everyone tried hard to make Tara feel welcome and appreciated, to help Mikey seal the deal, and I understood that, though it made them stay far away from me. That's not entirely true. Connolly and Gawlik made fun of the bright yellow ski jacket I was wearing for a winter coat. "You look like a bumblebee!" they cried out in what they thought were Czech accents. "A little bumblebee!" But I just felt like I shouldn't be there anymore, like it wasn't good for Mike. Chicago didn't feel like home anymore, for the first time in my life. So I went home and called Rory and told him I didn't think I'd be doing Glass Menagerie after all. "Sounds like the right idea," he said. "You have to work pretty hard to be a good writer. It

takes a lot of time.” I threw away all the paper valentines and conversation hearts from the party, then I read Tom’s last monologue from *The Glass Menagerie* before going to bed. “*I left St. Louis. I descended the steps of this fire escape for a last time...*” My cell phone lit up with a text message: Mike Cell: “I **WILL** marry you.”

I was accepted into my first choice graduate program (the one in Michigan, which I chose because I wanted to go back to Prague, because my favorite writers taught there, and because I had been given a generous stipend. Not as much because Rory was involved. I was smarter than that now.) And while I was packing and making preparations to move, our theater was being built. Mike put together a slide show for our ten-year anniversary and my favorites were the ones of Danny up on a ladder and Lynda holding a power drill, David with a hammer, Brendan and Gawlik and Ben with paint in their hair. All of Mike’s family and Frankie’s buddies hauling in dry wall. Mike sitting in his chair and supervising, looking determined as hell. And I was going off to start all over in a brand new art form with people I had never met.

Tom Wingfield said, “*I traveled around a great deal. The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches.*” I moved to a small city called Kalamazoo, and my grocery bags broke the first time I carried them home from the store six blocks away. After I made myself dinner, I sometimes sat and waited for someone else to come. There was a cockroach problem in that first apartment and a rash of forced entries on my block—most nights, I had trouble sleeping and kept the television on for company. Rory and I broke up and made up, broke up again.

But the harder thing to admit is that many nights I was happy. After a year, Rory and I broke up for the last time, and I moved into a new apartment with a deck for the summer and a fireplace for the winter. This neighborhood was called the student ghetto and I lived

there with graduate and undergraduate students, a few of the more interesting professors, and a number of low-income families. I got to know a new neighborhood and fell in love with this much smaller city.

I took workshop with Stuart Dybek, my favorite writer, a Chicago guy, the only kind who could appreciate my terrible accent that was only getting worse since I had quit acting. On the day of my first workshop, I stood outside the academic building and told myself I only had to worry for myself now, which was such a relief. I told myself I was ready for constructive criticism; I was not afraid of failure; acting had prepared me for this. (Which was absolutely true) And after Stuart said he loved the story, which is what all of his students really wanted, I held onto that small victory tightly. Each of my professors gave me lists of writers I should read, and I read all of them. I spent entire days alone in the library, then came home and fed myself. I went for long runs through forests and down abandoned railroad tracks. And I realized, in those days, that I actually *liked* spending time with myself; I discovered the ecstasies of being alone. Several days a week, I wrote—in libraries with wing chairs, in coffee shops with Pink Floyd blaring. And when I stopped and looked out the windows of these cafes, I realized: everything that had been screaming went quiet.

I did staged readings for visiting playwrights who didn't know Mike Thornton. I played femme fatales and single mothers without worrying about him in the audience, without worrying about being a reflection of him. I went to parties and progressive dinners with all kinds of fascinating people from all over the world, then came home and listened to records. There was a whole world, after all, that had nothing to do with me and Mike. I had affairs, yes, but was always relieved to go home to my own apartment.

And when I taught college English courses, I heard myself speaking in lecture halls with authority, and I fell in love with my students, every time. To put it simply, I learned to live alone. And finally, I knew who I was and what I was supposed to do.

*

Tom Wingfield said, *"It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music."* But then I would meet couples who reminded me of the way Mike and I used to be—couples who had been together for so long and knew they should be together, like some people knew they should be carpenters. Those were the nights I'd go home and dig out all the CDs he had made me and sent in the mail. And on those nights, I'd lie awake in bed and think of the surest way to end it all. There were e-mails from him that would wreck me for days or weeks.

i want you to be happy, too, but short-term happy not long term happy, and that may very well be a mind-fuck, but 'happiness' without you will always be in lowercase.

i still don't like rory. i wish he and stuart dybek would just move to the north pole and have sex with each other and tell each other how good their novels are.

and i cannot imagine a moment in my life where i would be too busy to make time to see you.

don't write us as a tragedy. we isn't over yet, and we will be a comedy.

you have no idea how much i love you. i could devour entire worlds.

There were moments that would sneak up on me, usually while traveling. I called Mike from Key West, to wish him a happy birthday, and he sounded so lonely while I was sunbathing by the ocean. In the Japanese Tea Gardens in San Francisco, I didn't feel serene at the koi ponds or on the moon bridge or in the zen garden. I couldn't stop wondering if Mike would ever forgive me. The men I dated had trouble understanding why I couldn't forgive myself.

I would call my mother from my apartment in the middle of the night and ask why I had to be me. She sent me a card that said, *"Still thinking of you: in fact, holding you close. As Jonathan Safran Foer's character says, and both of us "in heavy boots." I wish crying had the ability to make it all better. In fact, if it wasn't your scourge, it might be a consolation to consider how truly loved you are.*

And always have been -

Mom"

Tom Wingfield said, *"Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger—anything that can blow your candles out..."*

The Glass Menagerie was the first show at The Gift Theater—it opened in October of 2005. Critics and audiences came to a dusty storefront theater on Milwaukee Avenue between Lawrence and Foster. No-man's land, really. A fifty-seat Equity theater that used to be a shoe store. An unassuming storefront with a black awning crunched between Fischman's Liquors and a taqueria without a name. A big old digital bank clock tells you what time it is, and you can pick up the Blue Line across the street. There's a statue of Thomas Jefferson there and a looped tape of strange bird sounds. The Gale Street Inn, an old-fashioned supper club, where we all ate ribs as kids, is two blocks down, and garbage and cigarette butts twirl in the street. Chris Jones, who was quickly becoming the kingmaker of Chicago theater said this about the space early on: "It's one thing to trust a starry Broadway revival or a major theatrical institution. It's entirely another to wander into a tiny, bowling alley-like storefront in Jefferson Park -- a theatrical wasteland before the Gift Theatre took up residence on the rough-hewn corner of Milwaukee and Lawrence... You decide what's worth your time. But consider that very few other cities in the world have decent

storefront...transpiring amid the Walgreens and exhaust fumes.” So we had that to deal with. But we also had the excitement of neighborhood folks trickling into a local Equity theater and feeling a sense of pride and ownership. The excitement of North Shore residents and South Loop residents making the trek and thinking it was worth it. Brendan was lovely as Tom Wingfield, and he was getting so old now, so good. The night I went: a standing ovation. And did I feel jealous of the actress playing Laura? Of course. It would take time to adjust to being a member of the audience.

I took the Amtrak back to Michigan after the show. My father carried my suitcase down the escalator, as he did every single time, and said, “Be good, kid. Make us proud.” My father who had always said that his biggest fear was his children moving far away from him. And in my family, Michigan was too far.

*

Hurlyburly was the next show—David Rabe’s play about the lives of Hollywood producers and wannabes whose neuroses and romantic entanglements turn insanely catastrophic. Mike directed. I laughed uncontrollably when Connolly came on stage wearing a neon warm-up suit, carrying a briefcase, playing the role that Gary Shandling had played in the movie. Lynda had cleaned up nicely for her role, and Paulie, who played the lead, won a Joseph Jefferson Award which he gave to his 90 year-old grandmother. Another incredible production. I stayed after and my friends said to me: “We miss you, Maggie. When you comin’ home? We need your honesty, we need your heart. And there’s nobody else who tells Mike when he’s wrong.”

Speaking of him, I asked that night: “How you doin’ since Paul got nominated?” (For the Jeff Award, I meant) Mike smiled sadly. “You know me too well.” After Frankie came to pick him up, the rest of us shared a cab home together. We still recited our favorite

lines from the play, had heated debates about the intersections of art and politics, told each other deeply personal stories. I said to Paulie, “I’ve been in academia, trying to be a Mickey, trying to be above it all, above all the *emotionalism*, but I think I’m really an Eddie. I feel like I’m going crazy.”

“You’re an Eddie, sweetheart. We know. It’s better to be an Eddie.”

And then a dispatcher came over the radio and said, “It’s a beautiful morning in Chicago. Good morning, American United.”

*

I could tell you about all of The Gift’s failures and successes, but I’d rather tell you about Mike’s first one, The Good Thief, the one-man show for which *he* won the Joseph Jefferson Award. It was the hardest I’d ever worked on publicity: I called every critic in Chicago from my apartment in Michigan, and hounded them until they agreed to come.

The play began with a man staggering onto the stage in a walker with a bottle of whiskey tucked under his arm. It took so long for him to hobble to the center of the stage that it was agonizing to watch. But then he took his chair in the middle of a blown-out Irish tavern and began his story. He was IRA, he was injured, he was beaten badly, beaten to a pulp. Set up by his best friend who was now married to his ex-girlfriend, Greta. He asked the best friend repeatedly to please, please, just don’t fuck her in the arse. (That was a laugh line, but not for me.) He told his story for an hour, the story of his injury, the story of him and Greta. The last line, after half a bottle of whiskey, was simple, and Mike fought every ounce of emotion. “*I’m just trying to get out of the rain,*” he said to the audience. “*Just trying to get out of the rain.*” And then he took his time dragging his legs off the stage and the audience collectively broke into applause, stood for him, and he turned around, looked back at me, and winked.

Just trying to get out of the rain. Aren't we all? Mothers whose little babies have brain tumors and men with elephantiasis arms who whisper in the night, "Sometimes I just get so lonely, Mike. Don't you?" We are all just trying to get out of the rain.

I stood in the tiny theater lobby, home from Michigan for the weekend, and tried to compose myself. Mike's return to the stage. He kicked out the stage door with his good leg, stood there in his walker, and I went straight to him, kissed him on the mouth, no consideration for our significant others.

"Was I good?" he asked.

He was so good.

The strangers packed into the lobby started speculating. "Oh, I see. That must be his girlfriend. That's his girlfriend. Don't you think?"

Mike called a few months later and said, "I've been nominated for the Jeff Award, Bruiser. Please come home."

But I didn't. I thought it might send the wrong message.

*

After The Good Thief, the critics raved and our houses were always packed.

Chicago Tribune-Highly Recommended

Thornton, a founder and artistic director of the company, is making a return to the stage after a pair of spinal strokes in 2003 left him paralyzed. He uses a walker to get around, and his left hand remains crimped. But his voice and his acting instincts have roared back to life, and in John Gawlik's precise direction, this performance is one of the more riveting hours on a local stage this season."

Michael Phillips

Chicago Sun Times - Highly Recommended

"...In Irish playwright Conor McPherson's gorgeously imagined one-man play "The Good Thief," actor Michael Patrick Thornton plays a Dublin thug who, about a decade after the fact, is recalling "the incident" that landed him in his current condition. But in the terrific

production now at the Gift Theatre, there is a parallel if rather different story concerning the actor himself, and it is well worth telling in its own right."

Hedy Weiss

Time Out Chicago – Highly Recommended

"...As an Irish thug recounting the day his life went to hell, Michael Patrick Thornton delivers what may well be the most interesting performance currently on a Chicago stage."

Novid Parsi

Chicago Reader - Highly Recommended

"...Michael Patrick Thornton, making a comeback after life-threatening multiple strokes and years of physical therapy, plays McPherson's unnamed storyteller with remarkable subtlety, never overemphasizing the violence, never punching the many comic lines. Thornton still needs a walker to move about the stage and seems to have only partial use of his hands, but that only makes his stage work all the more remarkable--and moving."

Jack Helbig

ChicagoCritic - Highly Recommended

"...Thornton smoothly, with a tilt of the head or a slight change of tone, moves from irony to remorse to rationalization as he totally thrills us with the thug's story. Only an actor with the craftsmanship and skill Thornton possesses could deliver as powerfully nuanced a performance as he does with the complex text McPherson penned."

Tom Williams

NewCity Chicago - Highly Recommended

"...Gift Theatre founder Michael Patrick Thornton is subtle and commanding as the thief. Seated throughout as he swings from his liquor bottle or caresses his walker like his best girl, Thornton seduces us into caring about his self-aware, mordantly funny thug."

John Beer

Windy City Times - Highly Recommended

"...It's not too often that you can get such a heartfelt combination of compassionate caring and frightening chills in one tiny package like The Good Thief. It's also the perfect comeback vehicle for Thornton, who triumphs in all aspects of the role. Thornton and everyone involved in this amazing Gift Theatre production deserves respect and admiration

for *The Good Thief*.”

Scott C. Morgan

*

After this production, I had a feeling we would both be okay, and it wasn't only because of the critical response. The critical response means validation, of course, and it helps us sell our tickets, but half the time I find myself disagreeing with reviews. Even after good reviews and television roles, all actors must return to the world of auditioning and rejection. All theaters must hustle for sales. Even after a show like this, an actor will not always shine. After being nominated for the Jeff, Mike worried that it was only because he was disabled. (Which I assure you, is not true.) But to me, *The Good Thief* had to do with his necessary empowerment — I knew he'd go on to do much, much more now — which he did -- and my quiet realization that the stage should be reserved for those who aren't happy doing anything else, who can't do anything else like *that*. It was after this production that I started understanding and writing our story.

*

Mike and I would call each other periodically while I was in Michigan, poring over journals and e-mails and trying to tell this story to the best of my ability.

“I'm taking classes at Second City,” he said. “They like me. They think I'm funny. They've hired me to teach a class. Please come home now.”

“I'm gonna write a book about us. Is that okay? I can't come back yet. You know that.”

“I'm seeing this Chinese acupuncturist. Wild. And by the way, I WILL marry you.”

“I finally drove on the expressway,” I said. “Can you believe it? But we can’t start over again.”

“I drive now too!” he said. “They make cars for people like me, I guess. (Meaning: he controls it entirely with his hands.) You’re the most beautiful girl in the world.”

“I’m dating this guy. He’s good looking and talented and everything, but too much of a pushover, I think.”

“Yeah, dating this girl. She has red hair. I’ve always wanted that, you know.”

“I’m playing The Elephant Man at Steppenwolf. Holy shit, huh? The director wants me to use one of those old-school wicker wheelchairs, you know?”

“But can you push it? Does it have the support you need?”

“Nope.” (He started laughing.) “Embarrassing day at rehearsal.”

“Oh God.”

“Hey. At least I didn’t live back then.”

“Thinking of you as the elephant man just kills me—your head so heavy with dreams...”

*

Once Mike had gained a certain amount of popularity at Second City, he asked if he might try to write a funny play about his current situation, if the theater might produce it. He called it The Princess and the Bear, and dedicated it to me: *For Maggie, who went through it too*. Of course, his idea was encouraged, monetarily even. Two-thousand dollars for the idea alone. At this moment, the play is still unproduced, probably because it turned a bit dark for Second City’s standards. Mike, the main character, imagines the ex-girlfriend (me) being sandwiched between men in space helmets and chef’s hats. Well, that seems like it could fly at Second City, actually. He is also haunted by panic attacks and nightmares of children

dying. The ex-girlfriend (me) is a children's author who left nine months in. Tara, the therapist whom he fantasizes about, is teaching him how to do a sit-to-stand-to-kneel so he can propose to the ex-girlfriend. And then, at a crucial point, he says her family never visited him and that he always had to beg for sex. I realized during that reading how different our stories had become; we were no longer telling the same one. And that's when you know any relationship is over.

At the end of the table reading, Mike leaned over and whispered, "When did you learn to act like that? I had a hard time keeping up with you." Maybe this seems like a given, but when I was acting, I couldn't touch roles that were too much like me. I'd fuck them up in an instant. I had to play girls with different accents, of different ages, girls who had grown up with trust funds or getting beaten up by their boyfriends, girls who were not like me. And now I had learned to play myself, all the evolutions and incarnations of me. But you know what I said to Mike that day? "Let some young actress have the role. I don't want it."

After the reading, the director said to Mike, "Damn she's good. Can we have her?" (Words I once could've lived on for weeks.) "Is that the real girl? Damn Thornton, you got bigger balls than I do, asking her to read that part." I wiped the mascara from my face, went to Mike and said, "It's wonderful. I only have a few suggestions." Mike thanked all the actors and the director for coming, then I pushed him across the street to the Old Town Ale House, and we sat at a barrel drum table to go over problematic scenes.

At first, I made jabs. "A children's author?" I said. "You still don't give me any credit, Thornton. And you've ripped off a bunch of my stuff." Then I started to get angry. We weren't married when he had the stroke, and if we had been, it would've been different. He's the one who had said, "Not until we make some money." He had had an affair just months prior to the stroke. And now he wanted an audience to feel compassion for him for

having the *idea* to propose? I didn't know he was researching rings. The anger grew until my face turned bright red and my hands shook until I finally exploded and screamed, "How can you paint me like an absolute monster and God gets to be a laidback yogi in a fucking Hawaiian shirt? *God?*" So loudly that the regulars turned around and looked at us.

He asked me (again) why I left and I tried (again) to explain. To be worthy of a life of my own. Even before the stroke, you (and the theater) required so much that there was very little left for me. I went straight from my father's house to yours and I needed to learn to take care of myself. Mike asked if I thought it wasn't the best thing that had ever happened to me. "I mean, look at you," he said. "You're so confident. A teacher and an artist. All the things you wanted to be." And then I didn't want to argue anymore. I would've done anything to erase what had happened to him, but it's true: I was proud of the people we'd become.

"Nothing will make it in without your permission," he said. And I made the same promise, so everything you see here has been approved by him. There are ethics in writing, after all.

*

The phone calls continued, but after that, they were lighter.

"I'm directing Stop/Kiss and we need your help, Mag. The scene with the wheelchair, you know? How it feels to help her? You're such a good person. Thank you for helping me."

"Mikey, I got another publication *and* I was accepted to a PhD program, all in the same day! I'm coming back to Chicago."

"I got a TV show, Mag. It feels weird. Really weird."

"I think I might be in love with him, Mike."

“Hey Mag, I wanted to tell you that I proposed to Lindsey last night, and she said yes. I wanted you to know.”

“Mike?”

“Are you okay? It’s after midnight.”

“We’re engaged.”

“Oh my God, thank God you’re safe.”

*

I think of Mike in our high-school auditorium, singing the first song I heard him sing. *“Try to remember the kind of September when life was slow and oh, so mellow. Try to remember the kind of September when grass was green and grain was yellow. Try to remember the kind of September when you were a tender and callow fellow...”*

An image from an amateurish independent film on which we collaborated. Shot in black and white until the boy gets the girl and then the screen explodes in color and Mike Thornton spins me around and around, a Chicago public beach at dawn. A sweaty high-school boy cornering me in the lobby of a junior college theater in 1995 and saying, “I have a ridiculous crush on you.” The postcard he sent me when he started college in ‘97: Bob Dylan laughing on the front: Mike’s erratic handwriting: *“When we meet again, introduced as friends, please don’t let on that you knew me when I was hungry and it was your world...”*

I think of his parents, to whom I wrote a long letter when I first moved back to Chicago. “Dear Mrs. Thornton and Frankie, I’m writing to wish you a merry Christmas. I’ve been wanting to write for some time now, to say all the things I should’ve said. I always hope it’s not too late...” His parents who I now deliver my box office envelopes to so they can deposit them at the local bank. His mother who manages the books and takes care of props for every show—his father who delivers the pizza and beer for closing night parties. His

parents who see me on the street now and hug me, ask how I am and call me honey. There are people who will always call you honey, and that makes the world a better place. *“Try to remember when life was so tender that no one wept except the willow. Try to remember when life was so tender that dreams were kept beside your pillow. Try to remember when life was so tender that love was an ember about to billow...”*

Now the only thing that remains of us is that dusty storefront theater on Milwaukee Avenue between Lawrence and Foster, one of my favorite places in the world, a place where magic happens almost every night. The place where Gawlik and Connolly took us back to Vietnam in Streamers, where Lynda gave us a devastating perspective on World War II in Absolute Hell, where Alex killed us in Wit, , and Paulie nailed it in Cuckoo’s Nest. There is improv every Wednesday, and we have new ensemble members—Hillary Clemens, Brittany Burch, Jim Faruggio, Ed Flynn...They don’t like it, but we call them Gift 2. We have Andrew Hinderaker, whose play, Suicide, Incorporated instantly became a hit, sold out and extended for months, and went on to the Roundabout Theater in New York. It’s a place where I now coordinate staged readings and try to give writers a chance, a place where we all work with Northwest Side neighborhood kids in our GiftED program, trying to convince them that art is for them, too. A theater that the mayor attends—he says it’s admirable that we are the best economic development in this “ghetto cop and firefighter neighborhood.” A theater that has fancy fundraisers inside gorgeous old theaters full of vaudeville ghosts instead of dumpy old office buildings, and a Board of Directors who say it’s so apparent how much we all really like each other. Perhaps personal chemistry really is the most crucial ingredient for any lasting theater company. Mike and all the people who made (and make) his life a little easier. Please don’t get me wrong: I’m not saying I saved his life. It was all of them who did. But in a way, he saved mine.

I was still a teenager when I first went to this boy's house in Jefferson Park, a neighborhood with which I was not familiar. We smoked cigarettes and drank 7-Up in his parents' kitchen while they were out to dinner. He said to me in a conspiratorial way, "I'm gonna start a theater someday, right here, in my neighborhood. I mean, there's no theater here. Have you noticed?"

And I said, "But can we really afford to pursue dreams like that? I mean: people like us do that?"

I was a child of cop, so was he. We'd been raised to think practically.

He smiled arrogantly and said, "Yes, people like us do that."

I let him kiss me after that.

Life is so sweet sometimes.

"Deep in December, it's nice to remember, although you know the snow will follow. Deep in December, it's nice to remember, without a hurt the heart is hollow. Deep in December, it's nice to remember the fire of September that made us mellow. Deep in December, our hearts should remember..."

So sweet.

*

I didn't tell you that I applied to the School at Steppenwolf when Mike was newly injured. I was asked to write a statement of ambition to introduce myself.

An excerpt of that essay:

My mother and grandmother went to the theater on Thursday nights. Usually, when they came home from work, they looked sallow and tired -- in winter and in spring. They slouched at my grandmother's dining room table in the apartment above ours, tapped their cigarette ashes lazily into a round, glass ashtray and yawned as they tried to outwit each other in the post-dinner game of Scrabble. But on theater nights, they came home late and sat up on their knees, recalling the actors as if they were old friends.

“Rondi was terrific,” my grandmother said.

“She always is,” my mother agreed. “What about Kevin?”

“Who’s Rondi?” I asked. “Who’s Kevin?”

“The actors,” my mother said. “The actors from the play.”

They looked bright and young and animated. I sat on my grandmother’s lap and did my best accents and impersonations while they were still in the mood for entertainment. “I have always hated my father,” I said in a British accent, quoting my favorite movie, Fahrenheit 451. “She’s good!” my grandmother said. “She’s really gonna be something.” My mother and grandmother were both terrified of public speaking; neither of them had ever had any desire to perform, but they made me want to try.

On Thursday nights, after work, they took the elevated train to the Steppenwolf Theater on Halsted, the actor’s theater, an ensemble of Chicago artists in a neighborhood that my father warned against. “Laur,” he’d say, handing her a canister of pepper spray. “I’m not fuckin’ around. It’s the ghetto over there.” For as long as I can remember, I’ve wanted to be a part of that world, that nighttime city magic that made the old look young again.

I was called in for an audition, but I didn’t make the final cut. The director of the program did call Mike to tell him that my application essay was the best he’d ever read. So I started listening to the universe. I started chronicling my first great love. And then I started loving the theater on paper. It’s like Charles Mee said—there are two great loves. The love of another person and the love of books. Anyone who’s ever felt like an outsider knows that.

When Mike first got the news about his first television role on Private Practice, The Gift gathered in a Jefferson Park beer garden. It wasn’t like the old days. We were calmer now; we drank our beer slowly and leisurely, laughed easily but not as loudly as we used to. Mike told us how much they were paying him and we were floored. Others had had cameos on television and film, but Mike was the first one to get a recurring role, the kind that would

get him a table at restaurants where most people had to make reservations three months out. He told us about the state-of-the-art wheelchair they'd give him on set. All he would have to do is push a button and the chair would raise him up to a standing position. (I still want to know why he couldn't keep it.) I gave him a tube of good sunscreen and a card that said I was proud and I loved him. He had already started dating Lindsey, and I had already started dating John Gawlik. I wrote Mike an e-mail while he was in L.A., staying in a hotel room with his mother (most apartments there are still not equipped for wheelchairs) after I had seen his first episode in the gym. I said how wild it was—we had known each other since *high-school*—this is what we had always believed would happen, isn't it? The show itself was a glorified soap opera, I said, but he was good. It was *wild*, I said, to see him while I and other girls were running on treadmills and ellipticals. I was so sorry about our past, I said, so excited about our futures. I was proud like a mother might be. (Even though the show should really get new writers, or America should get better taste.) His response sums things up rather nicely.

You didn't do anything terrible, and I'll always be in your life. Thank you for getting me to this point; trying to have fun and be free out here amidst the wonderful insanity swirling around. It's odd: I feel quite home on a tv set. Everything's so inexplicably, beguilingly familiar.

Bruiser, I want only the best for you, and while I'll never (or at least have decided to never) love you the way I used to, I love you in a new, slowly articulating way. You didn't fuck anything up and I wish you could, soon, forgive yourself for it all. Life happened. And we not only survived, we triumphed. Our greatest act of courage was not trying to put the pieces back together, telling each other that endless story of 'someday', the waiting for which nearly killed me. No. Our greatest act of courage was the bold, quiet, admittance that we didn't love each other the same way. For whatever reasons.

But look where we are. We are "successful": PhD, Hollywood, etc. All forms, all illusion...we're doing okay. We still have our sense of humor, and our friendship. And while it seems often the right thing to say, that we'd trade it all to go back to the day before the parade to simpler, lighter days, I'd wager to say that privately, in the deep dark purple true part of our hearts, we wouldn't. I'd wager to say that through all the pain and hellfire, we're quite proud of the people we've become. And we should be. We goddamn better well be.

And now I think I'm in love with someone else and you have a very scared, often locked-up, but beautiful, intelligent, and funny man waiting in the wings to love you, to make his entrance.

Let him. Just let him and let him and love him and love him. He's the one to save from the fire, and he'll pull you out, too, for he is not a box of letters; he's a man. Breathing,

waiting, standing--just as awed and confusedly as I imagine we often are--at this majestic perplexing thing called Life.
It is time, my dear sweet darling Maggie, for the new stories to be told.

Love,
Michael

"There's only love..."

*

I already loved John, but I hadn't told Mike yet. I don't know when I loved him first. When I first saw him in Flanagan's Wake and thought he looked just like a young Ted Kennedy? No. I was still in love with Mike then. When he looked at me at Si and Lia's after I'd found out about Suzanne? No. That was more brotherly than romantic. Was it during Language of Angels when he chased me around in his sheriff's costume and shot at me with a prop gun? Or during the Walk of Life exercise when we got to the end of life and he broke down crying and I went to him and held him like a baby? The way he did a Czech accent and made me laugh until I was five years old again? I honestly don't know. But I did love him now, enormously, in that teenage way that I hadn't felt since Mike, but also in a grown-up, unselfish way. And I had been waiting for Mike's approval, for him to say it was okay.

I took Mike's advice one last time and told John Gawlik the truth, which was that I loved him madly. And one last time, Mike was right. It was time for new stories (finally) and our old friend Johnny Gawlik is my husband. My husband who is always my first reader and values me as an artist (and I him), my husband who has made Chicago feel like home again. My husband who directed Mike in The Good Thief and coached him to be brave enough to walk out on the stage, no matter how long it took, my husband who pushed him up a ramp to the stage where he accepted his first Jeff Award, my husband who understands that I was once in love with Mike and I'm not anymore, but we survived a hell of a war together and so will always love each other, in a way. My husband who I will do the walk of life with (in

sickness and in health.) The one who proudly walked into Mike and Lindsey's wedding with me where plenty of people turned their backs on me, and he danced with me all night there. I love him for all of these reasons, and countless others.

And Mike's wife? Lindsey? One night, she and I sat on a picnic blanket and looked up at the stars, and I thought we probably understood each other in ways that no one else ever will. I trust that their marriage is good, and true. Because he bought himself a first-floor condo when he met her (in Jefferson Park, of course). Because she is Artistic Director of her own theater company and he goes home early most nights to be with her, even when he's doing a show. Because she was acting long before she met him, and had already traveled the world, and *then* she fell in love. She fell in love with him, knowing he used a wheelchair, and on their honeymoon, she pushed him around London and Paris and made all the necessary accommodations. Because she danced with him in his walker on their wedding day, and it was a happy song.

*

The Gift Theatre celebrated their ten-year anniversary by producing a series of short plays by writers they had produced in their ten years of existence. David Rabe, Eric Bogosian, Craig Wright, William Nedved, JT Rogers. They wrote these pieces specifically for The Gift's ensemble.

I took the train from a local university where I was teaching, walked into the theater, and an accumulation of things came back to me. A chorus of voices, gusts of cologne, a thousand tendernesses. Connolly and Danny wore suits, Mary wore a conservative dress. Then she said to me, "Remember when we had that pot luck and Kenny brought a bag of chips?" "I do," I said. "And then he took them home when we didn't finish them?" We poked at Kenny until he laughed, too. Ben said he was getting married to a wonderful girl and Sheldon said, "What's wrong with her?" He leaned on his walker and winked at me. I stretched across it and kissed him on both his cheeks. Mike said, "Look at him standing. What a show-off." There were actors from other companies who were eager to work with us and celebrate our successes. There were directors we had long admired who had happily signed on, and accomplished improvisers who were going to put on the halftime show. It was crowded and chaotic, just the way we liked it. Then I saw Brendan, home from New York, and Lynda, who had just flown in from Boston. We looked at each other, laughed in disbelief, and shook our heads. Brendan swept me up in his arms and Lynda rested her head on his shoulder. How could we ever say all those incomprehensible things? I introduced them to the new blood. "Lynda, Brendan, this is _____. We are so lucky to have them."

*At the end of the evening, the sound designer cued up the Tom Waits, Paul let out a sigh of recognition from the wings, and we walked out onto the stage. Brendan first, wearing a sportcoat and khakis, then Lynda in a black dress, me in a white one and Mike in a Gift T-shirt and jeans. We opened up our binders and told the story of us. It was the first chapter of this book and the last event of the evening. Mike and Brendan read their lines, Lynda and I read ours. Brendan's mother wept when thinking of him young. My mother wept because we were all so old now. Lindsey and John sat in the audience, nodding. Actors from other companies said it made them think of their own humble beginnings, and new-to-Chicago artists said they couldn't wait to start. The audience is always the best part. The critics wrote kindly about us, but better than that, when Mike announced that he was going to start a theater company called The Gift, the stage **lit up** with stars. It was like they had been there all along.*