

Pretty From a Distance

stories

BY

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THESIS

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Earlier versions of the following stories appeared in the following publications and, where appropriate, documentation regarding copyright is included in the Appendices as noted below:

Frangello, Gina. "Café de Flore." *Fence Magazine* 13, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 152-166.

Frangello, Gina. "Café de Flore." *Five Chapters*, September 16, 2011.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20110916033124/http://www.fivechapters.com/2009/cafe-de-flore/>
(see Appendix A)

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<http://necessaryfiction.com/writerinres/HelloandCafedeFlore> (see Appendix B)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE YUPPIE THREESOME NEXT DOOR	1
THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS.....	22
VULCAN LOVE.....	45
MY PARASITE	68
CAFÉ DE FLORE.....	80
YOUR MOVE	98
CANNIBALS	118
TRUCK STOP	134
APPENDICES	152
Appendix A	153
Appendix B.....	154
Appendix C.....	155
Appendix D.....	156
VITA	157

SUMMARY

A collection of short stories, *Pretty from a Distance* deals with characters coming to terms with past demons and decisions, while negotiating sexual and romantic power dynamics and familial relationships. Comprised mainly of stand-alone stories, the collection also includes a triptych chronicling the same characters at different stages of life and the ways in which an intense but destructive affair between a fortysomething attorney and a dancer in her early twenties sends rippling effects into their futures. Due to the power imbalances of age and money, as well as echoes of the young woman's abuse history, their disastrous ending impacts both the aging attorney's efforts to single-parent his teenage daughter and his young lover's ability to forge a "normal" life that does not fetishize her damage. Other stories also concern sexual politics and gender roles: a preschool boy develops an alternate feminine identity; a married couple immersed in the BDSM scene of Washington, DC, moves to a rural community as each privately unravels following the wife's late-stage cancer diagnosis; a young woman in Greenwich Village circa 1968 must face that, beneath the façade of sophisticated, bohemian intellectualism, the father of her newborn daughter is an addict and saves herself by abandoning them both. In two stories incorporating magical realism, a conjoined twin views her sister as an albatross to sexual freedom only to miss her intensely once a plan to kill her comes to fruition; and a group of longtime friends are haunted by the cloying fiancé of their deceased friend, driving them all apart. The collection as a whole examines the intersection of victimization and agency, maintaining a feminist lens while also interrogating the ways women are complicit in patriarchal systems that oppress them and set them against each other.

THE YUPPIE THREESOME NEXT DOOR

(an earlier version of this story appeared in *Ploughshares* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 91-108)

The first time Merel and Fen spoke to their yuppie neighbors, the Yuppie Husband pointed at the Yuppie Wife and said, “This is Christy Parker. If you happen mention her to anyone around town, make sure to use both her first and last names, cool? She’s the top realtor in the state and her name is her brand.” Christy Parker’s photo was on billboards all over town and bordering the highway. She had impeccable posture and held her neck at a rigid angle. Merel had never seen such scrumptiously ripe breasts on an Asian woman, and wondered if they were fake. While the Husband talked, Christy Parker rolled her eyes in an artfully sarcastic manner at nearly constant intervals; at home, Merel and Fen joked that she would make a perfect Stern Nurse. “Fuck me, Christy Parker,” they muttered to each other for weeks, in the produce aisle or a silent movie theater, dissolving into adolescent giggles. “Oh, do it to me, Christy Parker, harder, Christy Parker, please may I lick your boots, Christy Parker.” Though they never made the joke in bed.

The next time they interacted with the neighbors, Christy Parker was openly disdainful when Merel cheerfully mentioned having just scored her new purse at the Farmer’s Market for ten bucks—Christy Parker said, with an imperious eye roll that made Merel’s knees buckle, that the bag looked more expensive than that and Merel shouldn’t broadcast its worthlessness. This pissed Fen off. In what must have seemed a non sequitur to everyone but Merel, he said the gate being built around their community was bullshit, and that people like Christy Parker were precisely why this shit was allowed to stand. The Yuppie Husband, a man named Bill who sported a different baseball cap every time Merel spied him, said in a booming, good natured voice, “Wait, so on your Marxist principle, we should let hick meth heads come in here and kill us in our sleep, is that what you’re

saying? Because what the fuck good is a bargain handbag and organic vegetables from the farmer's market if you're getting skull fucked by some meth head before he pops a bullet in your brain?"

Fen started laughing at that. He laughed for awhile; the smoke from his cigarette got into his eyes and he took off his glasses so that his long, cat eyes were visible without the glare of the lenses, and he said, while laughing, "You're a fucking idiot—ists and isms are bullshit, Marxists don't even believe in identity politics, fuck Marxism, I'm talking about a *gate*. I'm talking about the word *handbag*—it's on her goddamn shoulder, look, see, are there any fucking hands involved here?"

The Yuppie Husband laughed too. They both stood laughing. "Identity politics," the Husband scoffed. "Look, I spent ten thousand dollars on that fucking bag—she'd better still be able to sling it over her shoulder when those meth head buddies of yours hack off her hands." He grabbed Christy Parker's arm, and she did another Stern Nurse eye roll; he simulated hacking and then slung the Hermes bag neatly over her shoulder. "It's fucking meth head proof is what I'm saying here. Can't put a price on that."

"That gate is bullshit and if you had any self respect you'd know it," Fen insisted. But after that, he and Bill began going out for beers.

Merel had remained silent throughout the exchange. Maybe something that cost only ten dollars at an outdoor market couldn't be referred to as a *handbag*—had anyone thought of that? Maybe she was handbag exempt; maybe she had a permanent, irrevocable pass, somehow, from the Handbag Club. Maybe, in spirit at least, she was still a "backpack woman" instead of a "purse woman," even if now, actual backpacks just made her look as though she was headed somewhere she was probably never headed again.

Fen was in the early stages of something he referred to, with deliberate irony, as Drinking At Five PM. He'd been a junkie for eleven years before Merel had known him—from the age of sixteen

until twenty-seven, high every single day of that decade-plus until exactly one month before they'd met. Drinking had never so much been his main thing, but that didn't mean he couldn't put it away. The stories of Fen's past were full of incidents like going to a party at a neighbor's in Connecticut and waking up on somebody's lawn in Montreal, no socks on under his Chuck Taylors, no money in his wallet, and having to sell the diamond earring he wore from his dead aunt—pronounced *ont* instead of *ant*, as Merel's family said it—to get money for a bus home, but then buying Oxys with that money and hitchhiking home anyway. For a while he'd lived in his car in Florida. He'd been arrested in several states, though the longest he'd ever been held was twenty-four hour lockup before some then-girlfriend bailed him out.

There were always women involved. Fen had a litany of ex-lovers dating from the thirty-six-year-old mother of his best friend, who devirginized him at seventeen. The most miraculous part of this story was that Fen had *been* a virgin at seventeen. After that had come a string of slutty Florence Nightingales who had tried to save him, in between their own drug binges and hospitalizations for anorexia. Most of his lovers were punk rock chicks with shaved heads and at least one visible scar, but they were still acutely gorgeous, like slightly toxic, delicate aliens. Fen had not one photo of his family or childhood, but he kept several envelopes full of arty nudes of his ex-lovers, including lewd shots of himself jerking off for one of the women while she held the camera. At twenty-seven, his second engagement to a punk waif had crashed and burned, and on a whim Fen had decided to come back to Connecticut and take some literature classes. Merel fell in love with him on first sight in their Bloomsbury Group seminar, though this was not something she liked to announce when people asked how they'd met. At the time, she was in a polyamorous relationship with a married couple; it was her second such threesome, and the arrangement had suited her well. She'd left the first couple when the wife became so in love with her that it caused both women to ignore the husband; now, in her second arrangement, a similar dynamic seemed underway, and it was causing

Merel consternation. Again, she and the wife had started covering their tracks so the husband—a dear man, slightly older—wouldn't realize how much time they spent alone together. Then Fen was standing there smoking a cigarette outside the Humanities building and, although Merel's lungs scraped raw from having chain smoked in her Jeep the entire way to class thinking of her dilemma and whether it might be time to move on, she went up to him and asked to bum a smoke.

He was beautiful in a disturbing way. His eyes were feline and color-shifting and she wasn't sure she'd ever seen hair as thick on a white man. His nails were bitten so low that his fingertips seemed nakedly swollen, and his knuckles and the backs of his hands were littered with old scars and a couple of fresh scabs, yet he held his fingers with a careful curve, like he was perpetually strumming a guitar or cradling a woman's breast. *Delicately ruined*, she thought of his hands. It made no sense, the way she was gone for him so quickly. She had never *lived* with anyone, even her married couples; she always maintained her own studio where she could escape, but within a month Fen was living with her and she hadn't seen her married couple in weeks, although he said he didn't mind what she did. "I'm just glad to be with you," he said when they lay in bed side by side. He was always touching her, like a feral animal seeking to nurse. Sometimes he went down on her for two hours straight. "I want you to be happy too," he told her when the phone rang and she didn't answer it. "You don't have to worry about me. Anything that makes you smile can't help but be something I love."

Who *talked* this way? Merel's father had used language like a careless weapon, while her mother cried and drank and rarely spoke at all.

They'd moved four times over the next ten years. At each location, Fen found a new NA chapter. He occasionally went to AA meetings, too, but the more religious aspects troubled him. He preferred the company of junkies. "Junkies hate drama," he often said. "Drunks, coke heads, speed freaks, they're all about drama. Junkies just want to be left alone." At first she'd had to suppress

laughter at these hypocritical commentaries: Fen seemed to her, in those early days, the epitome of a Drama Queen, always doing things like forgetting to take his Suboxone and then throwing up from withdrawals while they were at the mall; wondering aloud if he could still sit with his knees drawn up to his chest, as he was fond of doing, or whether it made his stomach poke out now that he was pushing thirty; having anxiety attacks if he had to use the phone for so much as a freaking pizza delivery. But soon she came to think of these dramatics as merely the jagged surface of their lives: underneath, Fen was a creature of comfortingly obsessive rituals, his loyalty as steadfast and unflinching as a dog's. The Opposite of Drama, if well-versed in its facsimiles.

He was thirty-seven now—ten years clean and sober—but suddenly, since relocating to rural Vermont, he'd started indulging in beer. Merel had trouble pinning down her exact feelings on this count: daily, her stomach twitched in dread of the beer's gassy hiss when Fen opened his first—daily, she fantasized about confronting him and making a cathartic scene. In the end, however, she couldn't summon the energy. Fen did nothing drunk—if he even *was* drunk—but sit on the deck. What was he harming? More often, she told herself she should lighten up and join him, though she didn't like beer, and with all her medications she didn't dare drink anything stronger; it only made her feel worse. Unlike her parents, or the wild boy who figured in his stories of misspent youth, Fen never drank in the daytime. Still, come 5pm, he also never failed to crack a beer to sit out on the deck and stare out into the distant green mountains; he never failed to carry his beer with him as he scattered crumbs for the deer to find in the morning.

The money was running out. Merel wasn't copy-editing anymore; Fen wasn't touring; his modest inheritance barely kept them in health insurance. While the houses had been roughly a lateral swap, despite the current beauty of their Green Mountain surroundings, this place had no fucking character unlike their old, quirky place in DC. Fen had rehabbed the DC house methodically, room by room, nail by nail. His focus was zen-like, like when he was eating pussy; he never seemed

frustrated or bored. Their very first night in DC, on the porch of their dilapidated fixer-upper in the Adams Morgan neighborhood, he had put his arm around her shoulders tightly, with the kind of intensity that lately caused her to wince. “I feel like fucking Gatsby,” he’d whispered, and when he looked at her there were tears in his eyes. “I never thought I’d have a chance at reinvention like this. I feel like I’ve just rolled in and bought the biggest house in town. It’s so tacky it’s beautiful.” Merel beamed and kissed his hair, though she didn’t see much relationship between Gatsby and the mango-on-a-stick peddlers or rasta dealers of dodgy Adams Morgan. Fen thought in circular connections; it often took him forty-five minutes to make a simple point because he had to whirl around the central vortex furiously first—sometimes, when he arrived, his mark still felt elusive. Merel’s own happiness felt simpler, and although perhaps less romantic for that, also less easy to ruin. It didn’t surprise her when, as fireflies burst in the air around them lighting up their new world, he abruptly said with something like reverent terror in his voice, “It’s too good to be true.”

The new woman and her young daughter moved into the house next door with volition. Moving trucks out front and Asian artifacts being carried through the doorway indicated that they were not only visiting. Immediately Merel felt confused. Was it Christy Parker’s sister? The new woman, despite her ethnic-chic furnishings, was not Asian, but perhaps it was an adopted-from-Korea kind of thing. The new woman was muscular and wiry, next to Christy Parker’s Barbie buxomness, and had a tan during mud season; Merel would have placed money that her shoes were all Prada. She looked urban, like a Summer Person in from Boston, but it was spring and weeks passed, and come May she and her daughter still remained—the little girl even started waiting out for the school bus with the other children in their now-gated community. Bill stopped texting Fen at random and asking him to drive into town to the closest bar; he seemed otherwise occupied. Mid-spring evenings, out on the deck in wooly sweaters with Fen on his third or fourth beer, Merel

would run down scenarios. “Fleeing an abusive husband,” she would say, and Fen would counter, “Recently rescued from a cult.” Or, “Mormons,” Fen would say, and Merel would quip, “He drinks—he says ‘fuck’ even more than you do,” to which Fen would protest, “His shirts, they never have wrinkles . . . Mormon hair, too—when he takes off the hat, his *part*, it’s like a Ken doll.” But Merel was unconvinced. She stared over at the dimly lit kitchen of the inexplicable Yuppie Threesome Next Door, where presumably they were all sipping chardonnay, their couture shoes left on a neat rack near the door so they wouldn’t scuff the hardwood floors. Fen’s black boots, laceless for some reason and flapping open, were coated with dirt, but he had them up on the table next to his arsenal of bottles. “So you really think she sleeps in their bed, not with the kid?” he asked, and Merel nodded. “Yes. I absolutely think so.”

In Boston, in DC, they had fallen into the BDSM communities with a gravitational force, like coming home. They’d never gone out *looking* for play parties—for a “community” at all—but others simply seemed to recognize them for what they were—The Fraternity of Freaks and Perverts, Fen joked—and invited them along. It had seemed part of a natural, if separate, trajectory that each had followed even for years before their coupleship: Merel with her ménage-a-trois and Fen with his Anarchist Don Juan list of lovers boasting shaved heads and pussies but hairy armpits, wearing latex dresses and strap-ons. In the early months of their union they had each, without a language for such assumptions, taken for granted that Fen would Top: Merel had confessed spanking fantasies, which she’d never acted on despite what seemed an unconventional sexual history. She felt virginal next to Fen, really—it was hard to explain that her threesomes had been less about being a sexual outlaw and more just about keeping intimacy . . . other people’s *neediness* . . . at bay by always having an extra person on hand to share the emotional load she felt inadequate to coping with alone. This made little sense now, in light of her life with Fen. He was the most high maintenance human being she

had ever encountered, and yet she had no desire to flee. While her bisexuality had always been just sufficient to keep her happy in a shared bed, in truth she preferred male bodies and female minds: in Fen, she seemed to have found both. His body was all *boy*, with its mess and damage and reckless beauty. But emotionally he was more a dangerously precocious teenage girl. He worried, analyzed, spun, all in between romantic rhapsodies. His eyes teared up easily; he asked frequently, despite his lean flanks and protruding ribs, whether he was fat. Fen had years' experience with a casual, informal kink, but the first time he spanked Merel she was shocked to find reality nothing like her fantasies: she was shocked to find that, in fact, she hated pain. Who would have guessed? Since girlhood she had grown wet at the thought of being pulled over a man's knee, ass exposed to scrutiny and smacked until twitching and bruised. But Fen had barely *started* when she'd fussed, "No, cut it out, this is awful, this sucks." They had no safe word—neither, yet, even knew of such things, and for a moment of raw panic Merel realized that people being beaten probably often protested, and their partners might not take them seriously, might regard this as part of the fun—but Fen, perennially agreeable, ceased. "You could do me," he offered, and strangely Merel's body grew aglow from within. "I don't know what I'm doing," she said. The thrill of her hand's first impact against his ass shot sparks of recognition through her body, a humming like *Yes, yes*. They shopped for better restraints than Fen's vintage neckties; they bought a sleek black paddle, a proper riding crop and Fen, always handy, began crafting canes. His appetite for pain was creative, bordered on insatiable; at first, on his untrained skin, Merel's efforts left monstrous marks. These must have been noted by Fen's chiropractor in Harvard Square, as one day the doctor, an angularly attractive woman in her early forties, said abruptly, "Do you two play? You do—I can tell."

The parties were not what they expected. Fen wasn't shy—always had a posse of friends, both female and male—but his high anxiety made him fear strangers, and Merel . . . well, she had always preferred her own company. If anyone had asked her, even two years prior, whether one day

she would find herself leading an electroplay demonstration, or sitting in a chair while a line formed out the door of men—and some women—paying five bucks each (a fundraiser for a local shelter for runaway teens) to massage her feet, the idea would have seemed preposterous. Even by the end, at their Adams Morgan/Gatsby house, when the mango-on-a-stick man stopped by to see if Fen wanted his usual mid-day snack, if Fen happened to be out Merel would stay inside and refuse to come to the door. She didn't like chitchat; she didn't like *people* for the most part, especially men. Her father had taught her early that being desirable didn't pay, and the advances of high school teachers and band coaches had verified this truth: although she'd always been told she was pretty she'd worked hard to sabotage the fact, kept her hair shorn short and dressed in overalls, face scrubbed bare. In this new world, however, the men didn't frighten or repulse her. They weren't like her father—the last thing they wanted was her weak. Instead, they cast her as a goddess; they wanted her to walk on their backs in high heels, and for the first time she donned the stiletto boots she'd always believed some tool of an abstract but ominous patriarchy; she felt luminous and glowing as she wielded a violet wand, watching the shock arc between thrilled, servile bodies.

At first, she and Fen tended to keep to themselves. They availed themselves of delightfully medieval bondage furniture while people happily looked on, indulging Fen's exhibitionist streak. But his beauty—their good looks, Fen corrected—attracted others to them, and soon enough the most sought after dominatrix in DC was teaching Merel to use urethral sounds on Fen, who moaned that it was like having a blowjob inside his cock; now and then they even spent a whole night under her complimentary tutelage, whereas others, including high power politicians, spent thousands for the privilege. Soon, Merel began occasionally withholding orgasm from Fen—twenty or thirty days at a stretch—and finally, while he was shackled and sobbing with frantic desire, would invite a gaggle of women friends over and have him plead to come, then let the other ladies dole out the verdict. They were *busy*. Fen's band often went on tour, and when he was in town he was busy playing local gigs.

Merel was copy-editing, for websites and the occasional university press, taking on as many assignments as she could handle between three-hour trips to the gym. They exhibited Fen's creations at sex toy trade shows, and sometimes just to be nice Fen would help with wiring the hall in advance; they threw fundraisers for various sex-positive and feminist coalitions; they spent hours in their sex room, having moved out the guest bed in favor of a dual-purpose massage/bondage table. Fen wasn't much of a sleeper, but in those Adams Morgan/Gatsby years, he started drifting to sleep like a baby in her arms and sleeping through the night for the first time since she'd known him. Possibly she was misremembering it now, but it seemed to Merel that during those four years in Adams Morgan, Fen hadn't even twitched in his sleep the way he always had, his "fits," as he called them, similar to a toddler's night terrors, having slipped into his turbulent past. Their happiness felt pure, elemental, primal: sufficient to kick the ass of any Dark Thing. Despite Fen's front-porch anxiety the night they'd moved in, it felt to Merel like this contentment could never end.

Then, while having bloodwork done in preparation for a minor surgery on her wrist (Fen liked to tell their friends that she had carpal tunnel not from computer work but from snapping a whip), the doctor found an elevated marker in her blood that "could," he said, indicate a tumor. It seemed far-fetched: Merel was the picture of health; she had never taken a sick day; Fen was the one constantly taking to his bed and coughing things up, suffering crushing migraines until he puked. The doctor did a bit of follow-up, but Merel didn't even *mention* it to Fen, who was so fucking neurotic he would imagine she was dying or something; she went in for the appointment herself, and when the call came the very next day, she didn't know enough—just as it had once been with safe words—to even realize she should be alarmed.

Ovarian cancer. Stage III-c. Metastatic, spread to her colon, her stomach, her lymphatic system. She would need an immediate hysterectomy, followed by chemo, and if that didn't bring on remission, possibly radiation and future surgery. But she was young and otherwise healthy, extremely

physically fit, and the chances of remission were excellent, everyone said. “Don’t look at the internet,” her new oncologist warned her, and Merel, numb and childlike with fresh terror, heeded this blindly. Fen, however, perpetually bucking the goddamn Man, did not. She woke one morning days before her hysterectomy to find him slamming his head over and over again onto their roll-top desk—a favorite find from a Boston thrift store—not speaking, eyes blank and glassy despite blood on his forehead.

The five-year survival rate for women with her stage of disease was less than thirty percent.

It was June before the Yuppie Threesome Next Door finally invited them to dinner. The invitation came in Christy Parker’s handwriting, which Merel recognized because Christy Parker often left little flyers around their cul-de-sac, reminding neighbors about such things as which day the trash was picked up, so that people wouldn’t litter their front lawns with Hefty bags full of empty beer bottles, as Fen, an avid but unscheduled recycler, was known to do. It *had* to be a dinner party—even a high-power, Hermes-toting Stern Nurse like Christy Parker surely wouldn’t craft a hand-written invitation just to invite the conspicuously boho next door neighbors over to eat, would she? “I hate parties,” Fen announced—this was something the Vermont Fen did: announced his own preferences and characteristics as though he and Merel had never met. “They’re probably going to roast a fucking pig or something—I’m not going.”

“Baby,” Merel said patiently, “you don’t hate parties. We used to go to parties all the time. We used to *throw* parties all the time.”

“Not the kind of parties that had a suckling pig roasting on a spit,” Fen said, as though the pig aspect of the evening was decided, as though this were an immutable fact now.

“Don’t you want to find out who that *woman* is?” Merel said. “If they’re all really sleeping together, maybe it’ll be a better party than you think. Besides, you said you missed Bill.”

The words seemed preposterous the moment they left her mouth. How could he—her husband, her Fen—miss a man named *Bill*? What the good holy fuck were they even *doing* here, in a gated community in rural Vermont, surrounded by Christies and Bills? How in a million years had this ever been her Master Plan? *I want to spend my time hiking in the fresh air*, she had told Fen nine months ago, after completing chemo. It had all gone even better than anticipated and she was in a full remission without any need for radiation or additional surgery—if by *better than anticipated* one could mean that she now suffered from near-debilitating peripheral neuropathy in her fingers that prevented her from typing; if by *better than anticipated* one could mean that she had ongoing diarrhea from the trial drug she would be on “until it stops working;” if by *better than anticipated* one could mean that her menopause left her dried up like an old prune and that Fen’s efforts to turn her on—he still wanted her to sit on his face and smother him with her pussy and ass; he still craved, she knew, to wipe the juices of her in his hair and then refuse to shower so that he could smell her on him—mainly only left her embarrassed for them both, as though they were acting out a parody of what had once been so transcendent. She had cited, as a reason for moving to the country, more “togetherness,” but the truth was they had spent the bulk of the past decade years in each other’s constant company unless he was touring—it was Other People she had sought to avoid. Their friends, who had once seemed “like family” (their fraternity of freaks and perverts!) seemed strangely alien once word of her cancer leaked out, once she had lost her hair and was too fatigued and nauseous and loose-boweled and frightened for anyone to pay to caress her feet. Or no—that wasn’t fair—it wasn’t about sexiness or its lack. It was merely that she and Fen had been in their 30s by the time they even reached Adams Morgan, and those adult friendships, however real they felt in a moment, were *always* built around a common interest or lifestyle, whether working in the same office or sending one’s children to the same school or learning the ins and outs of needle play together . . . they were simply beyond the age—just did not have the requisite *history*—for the kind of

unconditional love that enables people to persist doggedly together despite having not one damn thing in common anymore. The way their friends no longer knew how to relate to her made a bottomless pit open up inside Merel's ravaged gut, made her need to go where no one would remember the vibrant, powerful woman she'd once been and would accept her return to mousy anonymity without question. She would tell no one, wherever they ended up, that she was sick. She would talk to as few people as possible, period. The moment her hair grew back enough to simply pass for fashionably dykey, they fled.

"I'll bet the yuppie dinner party will feature good scotch," she said acerbically. "Since you're so enthusiastically drinking again."

Fen flinched like she'd slapped him. "I'm not drinking," he said. "It's just beer."

"Oh that makes all kinds of sense, Fen. Have you explained that at your meetings? Have you asked them if five or six beers a night for the past four months constitutes a fucking *slip*?"

"Why didn't you say something?" He sat down on the sofa, and white hairs from their cat clung to his black pants. It was hot outside, but he was dressed like Miles Fucking Davis. His ethereal loveliness—the vestiges of Youth that somehow still clung to his skin's molecules—made it hard to breathe. "Why didn't you say you didn't like it?"

She was speechless. The question made him seem, perhaps for the first time ever, stupid. Yet perhaps it was fair in its way, too. Why *badn't* she? "Because you can't be sober for me," she tried, but he rolled his eyes ala Christy Parker; they hated these clichés—she would not descend to sounding like a self-help book. "Because I've caused you to give up too much already," she whispered at last. "You've given up everything for me."

"That's not true," he said, barking a laugh. "Given up *what*? What did I have, when we met? Anything I've ever had is because of you."

“Please,” she begged. “Don’t do this, baby. Don’t make me the perfect one. I can’t bear up under the weight of it anymore. You don’t want to be here, out in the country. You’re not touring or playing gigs. I can’t even fuck properly anymore. Everything you love is gone.”

“I love *you*.” He buried his head in her lap. He used to coax her not to wear underwear so he could smell a trace of her when he rested his head in her lap; she used to read this way, a book balanced on his hair, him just with his face in her crotch, inhaling her for hours. *You’re my Zen*, he would purr into her legs, his breath hot through the fabric of her jeans. He’d studied meditation before she knew him—a junkie Buddha—and Eastern religion, though he didn’t understand the basic differences between Catholic and Christian. “If you think I give a shit about *anything* else—” his words were still hot, but their impact felt different, gave her a shiver—“you’re sorely mistaken.”

“Why are you drinking then?”

He sat up. His eyes were strangely dry, and she thought, *That’s why*. She thought, *So that he doesn’t spend all day everyday banging his head against tables and walls, upsetting me*. She thought, *I saved him just to annihilate him again*.

“So I don’t mess up,” he said quietly. “So . . . so it doesn’t get too much, and I don’t get impulsive, and do it before you’re ready. So I can wait for you.”

Merel felt her face scrunch up. If it was going to take him forty-five minutes to circle around to the connection of what he meant, she didn’t think she had it in her. She wanted to shout, *Cut to the chase!* She wanted to disappear. “What are you talking about? Wait for *what?*”

He smiled, and raised his hand up to her face, smoothing out her lines of confusion. Despite herself, her skin relaxed under his touch.

“You know,” he said sweetly. “For when it comes back. For when there’s nothing more they can do, and it’s time for us to kill ourselves.”

Merel was almost disappointed at the lack of a living room pig-roasting spit. Instead, the Second Yuppie Wife's Asian artifacts were spaced widely in a cavernous Great Room, with pretty Summer People, in from Boston no doubt, artfully draped over them. The furniture was unilaterally uncomfortable, but so stunning that Merel felt drunk. "Look," she elbowed Fen triumphantly, gesturing the array of shoes in the foyer. "I told you this was the kind of joint where they'd make you take off your shoes!"

"I'm not taking off my fucking shoes," Fen glowered. "Let's go home."

She ignored him. Sometimes you had to. Kicked off her cheap ballet flats from Target, which she thought she was probably supposed to be boycotting for some complex array of reasons—anti-gay policies at the very least. This was the one beautiful thing about having cancer, ha fucking ha: you could be a selfish asshole with aplomb. Nobody expected you to feel sorry for anyone else anymore. Actually, this was the *worst* fucking thing about having cancer. Everyone felt sorry for you instead.

She threw her shoulders back and strode towards the other guests.

"Look at you!" cried Christy Parker, making a speedy approach. Merel immediately suspected she had done some blow; she was not usually so animated. Christy Parker grabbed her arms and held them out spread eagle, surveying Merel's dress, 1940s and black, from a consignment shop in Woodstock called Who Is Sylvia? It was the sort of place she would recommend to all her friends, if she *had* any friends here. Christy Parker would never wear another woman's clothing. If the first owner had worn this dress at the age Merel was now, she was certainly dead by now.

"You look so heroin chic," Christy Parker proclaimed. "You're so skinny. You have to tell me your secret."

Cancer, Merel wanted to say. *I'm getting ready to pass this dress on once again. This dress will have belonged to the twice-dead.* But it was nonsense, really—brought on by Fen's histrionics earlier. Her CA

125 markers were phenomenal still—her remission going strong. If the average remission did not exceed two years, that didn't mean it *never* happened. She was on an experimental drug. She was healthier than the average cancer patient. If seventy percent of women didn't last five years, that meant that thirty percent *did*. In five years, there could be another experimental drug that would prolong her life still longer. In ten years, there could be a cure for cancer. It was madness, of course, to give up hope.

The Second Yuppie Wife was twirling her slick blond mane, talking to two men on a long Asian sofa with a table in the middle of it. The little girl was nowhere to be seen. Fen had come in, shoeless, and been befriended immediately by several women Merel had never seen before. Whatever Little Boy Lost thing he'd had going on that day in front of the Humanities building, he still had it.

It was madness, of course, to think that his life should end just because hers did.

Bill materialized next to Christy Parker. He stood next to her like a dangling participle, drinks in both hands. Merel had long noticed that he and Christy Parker never seemed to touch except when she was serving as a physical prop for his jokes. "Hey," Bill boomed, "glad you could make it! We didn't think you'd come!"

"He thinks you don't like us," Christy Parker said, with a Stern Nurse eye roll.

Merel blinked rapidly. "Really? Why would you think that?"

"Because you make fun of every single thing we say," Christy Parker said, voice still blank.

"Oh," Merel murmured. "Oh god."

"She doesn't mean it in a bad way," Bill said, his eyes darting over, Merel saw, to Fen.

"We're social masochists really—we love people who don't like us back. Doesn't everyone?"

Merel knew she was supposed to laugh. Fen would have some handy retort. He would shoot back that the only kinds of people he could even talk to *were* those he was sure despised him,

because then he had nothing to live up to. Or he would go off on an earnest tangent about the misuse of the word “sadist,” because Tops are rarely sadists since the Bottom loves what’s being inflicted. Real sadism, he might say, is like what you find among pedophiles or sociopathic serial killers, and has nothing to do with consensual sex. No one would have any idea how the topic would have veered to sex, consensual or otherwise, but people rarely minded sex as a topic. He might start reciting some old song lyrics from the band he’d had their brief year in Brooklyn—something about *If you want me to love you then treat me like you hate my useless ass/If you want me to love you throw my bags out in the street/If you want me to love you make sure to spit instead of swallow/If you want me to love you make me lick your feet*. He’s sung it in a faux hillbilly accent when he practiced at home, but up on stage that clownish gesture evaporated. Fen was never at a lack for something to say, even if what he said was often bizarre. If Fen were next to her, Bill would laugh raucously, and probably offer him an expensive scotch just like Merel had predicted; she had seen him flashing a bottle around just a minute ago. *She* was the one, really, who could not get through this world solo, not the other way around.

“Who’s that girl?” she asked, and pointed at the Second Yuppie Wife. “She lives here, right?”

“Oh, Dolly,” Bill said. “Yeah, that’s my sister. Her husband just died.” He lowered his voice, but the way you might do so on *Saturday Night Live*. “Cancer,” he stage whispered theatrically.

“I’m sorry,” Merel said. “That’s terrible.”

“Not really,” Bill shrugged. “He was a real bastard.” He held one of the drinks out to her, though she was reasonably certain he had not poured it with that intent. “Do you want this?”

“I’m good,” she murmured, but he had already put the cocktail—perhaps a gin & tonic—down on an artful end table and walked away.

“We should have her over,” Merel said, to Christy Parker.

“Who?” Christy Parker asked.

“Dolly. You know. To help her meet some people, if she’s going to be living here now.”

“You don’t want to do that,” Christy Parker assured her. “I’ll tell you what—she has irritable bowel syndrome and all she’s done since she’s been here is shit in our guest bathroom. I’m not even kidding, don’t have her over, you’ll need to fumigate your house afterwards. It’s been hell.”

Merel suspected this might be a joke, but she couldn’t be sure.

“That kid of hers,” Christy Parker went on. “You guys aren’t going to have kids, are you?” She waved a floppy hand in front of her own face as though wiping the idea away. “No, no, that’s why Bill was so relieved when you moved in—the minute he looked at you, he said, *We’re safe, those are not breeders.*” She threw her head back and laughed, her neck loose like her head might just roll onto the floor. “I’d just had my sixth miscarriage, and when they put the ‘For Sale’ sign on your house, I told Bill the Brady Bunch was probably going to move in, and that if I saw one sign of a kid, he’d come home to find me swinging from the rafters, that’s all. We were *so* happy to see you two—wow! We spied on you all day when you moved in, and at first I was worried you were those weird hippie types who nurse their kids until they’re in college, but Bill promised, *No way, that guy hates kids, that guy would trip a kid on purpose*, so I relaxed.”

In fact, Fen loved children. He could be dopey and gushy about it, playing with the kids at family parties instead of making conversation with the adults he only saw once a year. It was Merel who had never wanted a baby, though it had still been on the table *Until*. She blinked rapidly. The evening was starting to feel surreal. “Six miscarriages,” she sputtered. “That’s—I can’t even—I don’t know what to say. That’s a nightmare.”

Christy Parker, though, wasn’t having any of it. She waved her hands again, this time both in tandem, as though swatting a fly. “That little girl follows me around the house with those big spooky eyes of hers—she’s like some freaky kid in a horror movie. The other day, she recited every single

type of Girl Scout cookie from memory. She's not even a Girl Scout! There's something seriously weird afoot is what I'm saying. Please god let Dolly snag a man soon so they get out of my hair. You don't know anyone eligible, do you?"

"Um," Merel said, "Not right now. Well. Maybe soon, actually."

"Oh, please," Christy Parker begged. There was something strangely sexy about her now—or maybe there always had been. Desperation wasn't supposed to be erotic, but of course it was. Merel had seen a lot of ice queens like Christy Parker, in Boston, in DC, desperate and begging for one thing or another. She had seen them in their bondage collars and boots, bound spread eagle on tables or bent over spanking benches, their fake tits like buoyant balloons. All regal polish on the surface, but you never knew what lived inside. "I'd do *anything* if you take her off our hands."

Merel permitted herself a tight smile. *No, you wouldn't do anything. That much I can tell.*

Fen was walking towards them now, his cat-like, loping grace exacerbated by his shoelessness. Although Merel couldn't be certain of the last time he'd bathed, and he had not—on this she would bank—combed his hair since they had moved to Vermont, he was unquestionably the hottest man in the room. She turned her back on Christy Parker heedlessly, moved towards him and saw his eyes flash with light at the sight of her, and her spine went molten. At the moment the words had left his mouth earlier, *and it's time for us to kill ourselves*, her heart had simultaneously shattered and soared. She was ashamed of this now: of the soaring. It was dysfunctional, she knew, to adore—to worship—another person so much that your sail was tethered to theirs even unto death. This wasn't *Romeo and Juliet*; they weren't fourteen, or some Emo couple carving LOVE into each other's skin. For years, her needs and Fen's had clicked so symbiotically . . . but now he seemed a treasure map she could not decipher: how to rebuild the sum of his parts without her? Some ex-punk-rocker or glossy dominatrix or Bill's Sister/Wife seemed an inadequate solution to the loss of their particular, healing alchemy. Yet if this was true, if they were really so good for one another,

then why could she not even fathom some manner of rebuilding him from scratch? All this time, had she merely been the new addiction with which he replaced the old? Would the past decade have been better spent, for him, in therapy, belaboring his mother's numbed out benzo addiction or the time his father made the six-year-old version of Fen, already jumpy and insomniac, finish his Grape Nuts even after the milk had turned and some of Fen's vomit had fallen inside the bowl? Would talk therapy have achieved a superior, calmer goal than the glorious self-erasing of a riding crop or hours with his face between her legs? Was he willing to die, now or sometime close to now, for what had only ever been a placebo effect?

"It's *his* sister," she hissed in Fen's ear. "Duh. Her name is Dolly."

"I know." Genuine disappointment mixed with his snort of laughter. "What can we say, baby—this world's never as interesting as we want it to be."

"Except when it is," she said, taking his hand, that old electric charge sparking, stronger than a wand, stronger than anything she had ever known, just riding into her body from his fingers.

"Except when it is. Indeed."

This wasn't the woman for him—Dolly with her shellacked tan skin and supernaturally smooth bangs. There was no secretly kindred, polyamorous clan next door to take him in when she had gone: two women and some consolation child all working together overtime to compensate for the lack of Her. Or maybe it could still work out: with Bill and Christy Parker, once Dolly had taken off for greener pastures. Fen could tutor a willing pupil in the ways of Stern Nursehood—and if he needed rather a lot of *taking care of*, perhaps they needed someone to care *for*, too. Merel crumpled his hair under her free hand; she remembered a story he'd told her about his club days in the 1980s, when he'd once sucked a friend's cock because the friend came on to him and he hadn't wanted to be rude. *It was kind of a mistake*, Fen had explained, in their early days when they seemed to almost never leave the bed. *I didn't mind sucking his cock, that was kind of cool, but I couldn't really kiss him, and he*

wanted to date, and I wasn't prepared for that—I meant to be polite, but I ended up being an asshole anyway. I've always felt so shitty about it. The story had mystified her at the time. As though he should have entered into a gay relationship just to spare hurt feelings! Was there anyone else on the planet quite like Fen? This precarious mixture of child and animal and woman and man?

“What do you say?” he murmured into her ear. “We’ve made our appearances. There’s not even a goddamn pig. What are we sticking around for—let’s blow this popsicle joint.”

Abruptly then, she thought of Virginia Woolf’s suicide letter to Leonard. She and Fen had read it in their Bloomsbury seminar, of course, but then later, too, aloud to one another—along with Fitzgerald, along with Baldwin. Days had stretched out, then, like an endless track on which they could record their lives, intermingling with history. “*I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been,*” she breathed back, and her heart quickened under her only-once-dead dress. His eyes were sparking tonight, but she couldn’t yet tell if he recognized the line. His hand, which if she had her way would survive to someday be empty again in its perpetual curve—without her to fill it—clung on. But it had never been certain that hers was the stronger will; it had only been pretty to them both to think so. It had only seemed that way briefly, from a distance.

THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

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The Mistress watches James approach her car, his fur-collared vintage coat flapping around him in a way that reminds her of England. Back when she was a girl, the word “metrosexual” did not exist, but the boys she knew in her youth were often this way: lithe and effete, with a ruined, decadent air battling a watery bookishness that usually won out by middle-age. In her formative years, though—the late 1980s—androgyny helped get you laid, so she is hardwired to find it sexy. James gets into the car, cigarette still ablaze, and she thinks of Ethan’s asthma and wants to bat the burning stick from his hand. Then, “Hello, darling,” he says, affecting a British accent, his strange ESP at work. He hugs her, smelling of cold and smoke and faded cologne that may have come with the coat. “God, you’re so tiny,” he says pulling away. “You feel like you could snap in two. I love it.”

And this is how desperate she is these days: this is all it takes for her to sell her son’s lungs down the river. She takes the cigarette from James’ fingers, but instead of dying it out, fills her car with still more second-hand smoke, taking a hungry drag.

The Boy likes Emerson’s dress. Sophie’s dress is pink, too, but Emerson’s is a different pink the kind called hot pink hot pink is his favorite one. There are a lot of pinks. Pink like Mommy’s fingernails and pink like the cat’s nose. Those pinks you don’t have to look at if you don’t want to. Hot pink fills you up like when you look at the sun but close your eyes and the color is still there inside your shut eyes. Hot pink is like your eyes are on fire. Mommy has a shirt this color too but she doesn’t wear it. When he gets home from school he can take off his clothes and wear Mommy’s pink shirt as a dress but he can’t do that at school Mommy says it’s not allowed. She says the shirt is

too big for him and falls down too low and shows his chest. Showing chests is not allowed.

Emerson's pink dress does not show her chest but Mommy does not buy him a pink dress that does not show his chest because Ethan is a boy. Ethan has to wear boy clothes to school. Miss Illya can wear girl clothes at home but even when she does Mommy still calls her Ethan. Mommy lets him wear the pink shirt like a dress if they are in the house. She hangs it in her closet too high for him to reach and when he asks her she says, "Let's dress up like doctors!" or "Don't you want to wear your Woody hat?" but when he says no she will get the shirt.

Ms. Oak claps her hands. "Okay, everybody!" she says loudly. "One, two, three, eyes on me!" The class claps two times and yells back, "One, two, eyes on you!" The Boy forgot to clap from looking at Emerson's dress. He has to pee all of a sudden. He looks at Ms. Oak, but she is smiling and looking at something else; she didn't see him forget about the clapping. Everything is okay! Fast, he trots to the carpet to sit on his square. He doesn't even have to pee anymore.

The Alcoholic needs to urinate. She has pressed the call button four times, but the nurse has not come. In the hospital, you are at the mercy of nurses: a prisoner in a jail cell is less dependent on his guards and warden. A prisoner can use his own toilet, even if he has no privacy—a prisoner is not prodded in the middle of the night for taking heart rate and blood pressure. A prisoner can stand in his own crowded shower and soap his own body. The Alcoholic does not own her body anymore. Her body is a thing handled by other people, but people who cannot feel its urges, to whom her skin and wasted muscles are so much dead meat.

Nurses tell her when she should eat and drink. They say this ceaselessly, though she is nauseated and cannot keep the food down; they say it even as they mop up her sick. They cannot feel her stomach's waves as her body rejects the nourishment, spasming it out again, mixed with bodily acids and foul-tasting now, back through her mouth. The nurses give her Potassium tablets to

prevent dehydration, to prevent her heart giving out, and refuse to crush the horse-like pills because they are “time release,” so she throws these up too. Every way you look, the outcome is the same, but in the interim still they insist on the food and the pills and the IVs to rehydrate her; still they persist in keeping her here, the third time this month.

This is what you come to, then. Her liver is no longer functioning enough to rid her body of toxins, so her body itself has become a toxin. Though she has been too nauseated to take a drink for weeks now, still she is being poisoned to death by *herself*. Five years ago they diagnosed her cirrhosis, and she had not thought to last this long. Her preparations for the end, then, had felt surprisingly easy, surprisingly clean. Her daughter, Imogen, was thriving—a circuit court judge, which was both trivial and prestigious in its way—and still married to her Upstanding American. The two had seemed a muted-but-complete painting, hung safely (if sanctimoniously) above the hearth of a distant shore. But these doctors, playing at their Brave New World, had managed things otherwise. They’d suspended her dying just long enough for matters to complicate: the birth of a grandson; Imogen’s divorce. For *desires* to complicate.

The Alcoholic has to urinate, which must show her liver is still filtering something. She presses the call button again but the nurse does not come. Fine. The world is full of incompetent people, so full of them that now they seem to run things. She will get out of bed, then, and do it herself.

“So last night,” James says, “I’m driving home after the show, and she calls me no less than eight times while I’m on I-94. Can you fucking believe it?” He holds his hands up in surrender, “I know, I know, it was my own fault for calling her when I left the bar. I should have called two minutes from the goddamn house and said, Hi honey we just wrapped, then by the time she hung up I’d be walking through the door and everybody’s happy.”

The Mistress laughs. She does not find James' marital dramas particularly amusing, but laughing at his wife is her role—it is what he is here for, she sometimes suspects, as much as sex.

“It's the twins,” he explains, shrugging. “They're demons. They've turned her into a crazy person.”

“From the stories you've told me,” the Mistress stipulates, “she was always a little nuts.”

James gets up from the sectional sofa to get them a beer. The Mistress is annoyed, because you are not really allowed to move when reclining on the sofa in James' studio or the entire contraption comes apart, sliding away from itself under your ass. The sofa is red faux leather and supposed to be kitsch, she assumes, but really it is just some kind of furniture abortion, ugly and incomplete. They cannot even fuck on it because of the way it will not stay put, so they have to rut around on the hardwood floor like teenagers, though James has a bad back and the Mistress is going to be headed for knee replacement if she spends any more time on all fours on this floor. Lately, she has been bringing her yoga mat, claiming to have just come from the gym, so they won't slip and slide around the floor like pratts too. This has been going on three months, but if James were to buy furniture to accommodate comfortable middle-aged copulation, it would be a commitment of some sort that neither is eager to make, so for now the yoga mat; the metrosexual coat spread atop it, will have to do.

“Sure,” he says from the mini-fridge. Naked in the afternoon sun that streams through the tall windows of his art studio, he doesn't look like the boys of her youth anymore. Those boys had not an ounce of spare flesh on them, like feral animals. James' middle is not fat, but it is loose. There is a smattering of gray in his pubic hair. “She was nuts, but she used to be crazy in a sexy way,” he explains. “Like thinking I looked at some other woman and freaking out. She was territorial, she was a drama queen, sure, but it was because she was obsessed with me. Now she doesn't give a shit who

I look at—she just calls eight times cause she wants me to get my ass home and help with the twins.”

“She may not care who you *look* at,” the Mistress says. “But she probably cares where your dick has been.”

“I doubt it,” James snorts. He hands her a beer, though she does not drink. She has been playing a little game with herself, a game of not touching the beers or glasses of wine he casually hands her in this place, not even one sip, to see if he will notice, if he will ask, but so far nothing.

“I wish I had someone to harass to come home and help me with Ethan,” the Mistress says wistfully.

“See?” James says, nodding as though she has taken his side. “You’re a mother too, but you haven’t turned into a screaming shrew who doesn’t care about anything except your kid. Some women just aren’t built that way.”

The Mistress’ head feels cloudy, despite her lack of beer. “No,” she says. “I didn’t mean it like that. I was being sincere. Being a single mother can be incredibly . . .” She does not want to say “lonely,” does not want to give him that power. “Isolating,” she decides on. “I often feel isolated, especially when Ethan’s asleep.” She thinks of her mother, who remedied this problem with endless bottles of wine until she passed out on the couch, rendering the prospect of facing another lonely night moot. She thinks of her childhood, spent wandering rooms while her mother was passed out, sometimes not going to bed until long past midnight because there was no one there, and the feeling of being shipwrecked. “At night, sometimes I feel like I’m trapped on a desert island,” she tells James. “I wish I had someone to call eight times in the car.”

“You can call me,” he quips. “We’ll have phone sex on the highway. Live fast, die young, right?”

The Mistress suddenly feels incredibly tired. Sometimes this happens when she is at home with Ethan: if they play a game that involves lying down, she will fall asleep right while he is talking to her or sitting on her legs or brushing her hair. She can sleep even while he is banging on a frying pan with a metal spoon. Sometimes, she is simply too tired for Ethan's games. For the games of boys in general.

"Too late, honey," she tells her lover, turning her face away so she will not even have to smile to soften the blow. "We left *young* a decade ago. If we die now, it's not tragic anymore, it's not poetic. We're just dead."

They are learning about the rain forest. The Boy draws the howler monkey's eyes in red because school markers don't have the right kind of pink. Miss Illya walks up to the howler monkey and says, "A howler monkey." Then Mommy comes over and says, "Do you want a band-aid?" The Boy is not sure how to spell band-aid," so he writes it SICWA, which is how you spell things you don't know how to spell. Miss Illya's name was spelled that way for a long time until Mommy taught him how to spell it right. She said he was spelling it so it sounded like Sic-wa, but that wasn't right: SICWA doesn't sound like Sic-wa, it sounds like whatever you need it to sound like.

Ms. Oaks comes over to the table to see what he is doing. Since he started going to speech, she writes down things he says. She does it so she can tell Mommy if he is talking enough. Mommy says he is supposed to talk at preschool like he does at home because Ms. Oak thinks he doesn't know how to talk he is so quiet. It is loud at school so it's easy to forget not to be quiet because there is already so much noise you forget you're not making any of it. There are so many things to look at that if you say things it takes away from the things you are looking at and you have to think about your mouth and what it is saying. Ms. Oak says to him, "What is your picture about, Ethan?" Ms. Oak is pretty with black eyelashes. Ms. Oak's hair is honey with colors in it—Ms. Oak has a

honey face. The Boy feels so happy it is hard to know what to do with all the happy. “The howler monkey’s eyes are on fire!” he says, proudly.

Ms. Oak frowns. “On fire?” she asks, making a sad face. “That’s too bad. How did that happen?”

“From the pink,” Ethan explains. The happy is gone already though, it can go so fast, it can go and now he wants to cry. He didn’t mean to make Ms. Oak sad. “It’s only from the pink,” he assures her.

“Oh,” she says, looking at him in a careful way. She writes something down on her paper. “Ethan, do you know what color this is?” she asks, pointing at the howler monkey’s eyes. “This color is red. Remember we learned about red?”

The Boy has to be careful. He knows about red. He does not remember learning about red in preschool, but he learned about red in other times. There was powder from the inside of a flower and it made red on Mommy’s hands. There was paint in the art cabinet and he made it into a hermit crab on the wall and Mommy said no, no red on the walls, but what she meant was no hermit crabs on the walls, no paint on the walls, Mommy was sad about the walls. He does not want to make Ms. Oak more sad about the howler monkey’s eyes on fire, so he points at the picture and says, “Mommy fixes it, look! She puts a band-aid on the sun so it can’t make pink anymore. The pink is all gone now!”

“Ohhh,” Ms. Oak says, but her voice is far away and she is not looking at the picture anymore; she is writing something else down about him, something to tell Mommy, and Mommy will tell him to talk at school but he did talk at school, he did and Ms. Oak is still writing something down. Ms. Oak’s hair is *not* like honey. The Boy thinks about the pink teacup at home that Mommy lets him drink tea with honey out of. If Ms. Oak keeps telling Mommy he does not talk, maybe Mommy will not let him use the teacup anymore.

“I don’t like you when you do that!” he yells abruptly at Ms. Oak. “You make me very frustrated! Your hair is poo-poo now!”

But even though they read a book called *The Feelings Book* and Ms. Oak told them to talk about their feelings, and Mommy told him to talk at school, still the Boy has to spend five minutes in the naughty chair.

The Alcoholic lugs her body towards the toilet. Her body weighs less than 100 pounds now, but it feels leaden as she leans on the table with wheels that normally hovers over her hospital bed, trying to use it now as a walker to get to the bathroom. She leans and pushes, so that the table wheels away from her, and she hangs on to it so that it pulls her along, her feet stumbling leadenly to keep up. The pressure in her bladder makes it hard to move her legs. Everything feels focused down to that one area, swollen and full. She pushes the table but it sticks and will not roll. Harder, she leans on it with her torso, trying to propel it forward, but some wire is in its path and it sticks there like a car run into a guardrail; she cannot push the table over the small protrubence of the wire. “Please,” she murmurs, “please.” Who is she talking to? There is no god here. Her Uncle Owen was a vicar, and that taught her all she needed to know about that. There is nothing after this life. This is what we come to, then: a skeletal body unable to best a small lump of wire on ugly hospital tiles. The fullness of a bladder like an ocean tide, uncontrollable and following its own rhythms. The Alcoholic pushes herself off the table with a violent jerk, but the motion is too much for her and she vomits into her hands, which automatically rise. Her legs collapse beneath her, her body banging like a sand bag into the wheeled table so that it falls and her body on top of it, its sharp angles colliding with her sharp bones. Somewhere on the way down she has pissed herself: she did not even feel it happen until she hit the floor and found it wet. At first she took it for blood; at first she prayed for blood,

prayed to the god in whom she does not believe: *Make it fast*. But no, it is only her own waste: urine on the shoe-scuffed tiles and the tang of vomit in her hair.

She had feared so much, during those long hours in the car, that her mother would thrash her for wetting herself, for being sick on her new dress, that she can remember the spanking even though it never took place. She must have confused it with some other time. She knows only that when she woke after the long drive from her Uncle Owen's country home, her parents were no longer in the car. She must have been three—maybe younger? Her father left for good when she was four, so it was before that. Her parents had quarreled on the drive home, as they did nearly continuously, so continuously that their quarreling did not prevent her from dropping to sleep on the backseat. Her father was threatening to leave again, but at that time she did not realize it was not just something fathers said. At that time she knew no fathers who had left and did not think it permitted, so the movement of the car lulled her into sleep.

When she came to, the road was dark and the car no longer moving. Her house was outside the window—they were home—but her parents must have forgotten she was back there, so carried away by their quarrel, because they were gone and she was in the car alone. She tried the door but it didn't open. She did not know how to open the car door. It seemed a complex matter beyond her. How was it to be accomplished? This was something her mother always did. Her small hands slipped, slick on the door lock. She was not sure whether or not she was locked in, or even if she was setting out to open the door in the proper manner. She knew nothing of it. The road was dark. Her parents had forgotten her. Noticing that she needed to use the toilet, she began to cry. Her voice cried out for her mother but nothing happened except the echo of herself inside the locked car. The house was far from the road. It seemed a great distance. She yelled again but no one was on the road. She tried again the way she thought you might open a car door. She beat on the windows with her fists and wept some more—in her mind the Alcoholic can see herself, as though on the other

side of the car window: a pitiful little near-sighted girl sobbing and banging on the glass in a panic, glasses askew. The vision sickens her. She thinks the little girl deserved to be thrashed. Something was the matter with her, clearly. She was simply in a car, that was all. Did she think her parents would forget her forever? That she would starve and die out there, as she is starving and dying now in this hospital? Yes, yes of course she thought that, or something like it. She pounded her small, sweating fists on the glass crying, “Mummy! Mummy!” like a fool. Maybe her parents had *not* forgotten her at all, but had decided purposefully to leave her there. They fought about her often, and her father said he would leave. He said he did not like the way her mother treated her, and that he would go away if she continued. He did not like the way her mother struck her and shouted at her and would not stand for it, he said. He would leave. He never mentioned taking the Girl with him, even though he said he did not like her mother hurting her and this was why he would go. It seemed clearly nonsense, even to someone who could not open a car door. It seemed nothing but silliness to threaten to leave your child alone with the woman whose treatment of said child you could not abide. It seemed only words. But maybe it was more. Maybe her mother had said, Don’t go, we’ll just leave *her* here and then I won’t treat her in a way you don’t like anymore. Maybe her mother had said, She’s the thing we always fight about, so if we just put her out we’ll be happy again. Perhaps they had *not* forgotten her in their quarrel, but walked to the house hand in hand, delighted with their plan. Perhaps the car door was locked in some magical way known only to adults, so that she would never get out again, would never eat again. She soiled her underpants, and if it was at all possible her parents were coming back for her, her mother would thrash her for that. She would use the hairbrush or possibly her father’s strap, when her father wasn’t looking. She would take the Girl’s wet underpants and for them she would give her a proper thrashing until the Girl did not cry anymore. Her mother was driven mad by her crying, so the Girl tried to be strong when thrashed and not to cry, but the crying didn’t stop until you were too weak to continue it, that was the bad

part of it all. But that made no difference because they weren't coming back. The Girl cried and smelled her own waste and thought of the spanking she would never get again because this was her home now until she died, which had happened to their cat, the dying, which meant you went to God, and God was terrifying, more terrifying than her mother. She wanted her mother—she remembers this, that it was her mother's name she called, never Father's. She vomited into her hands, and sick clung to the ends of her hair.

When the Girl woke, she was in her own bed. What passes for sun in Wales shone in through her lace-curtained window. Her clothing had been changed, including her underpants, and her nightgown smelled fresh. At breakfast, her father was already at work and her mother acted like nothing had happened, so the Girl believed for a moment that she had dreamt it all, about the car. But although they had changed her clothes and wiped her down, they had not bathed her properly in her sleep, and so she knew it was not a dream, for she could still smell the sick in her hair.

The Boy sits with Mommy in the car. Mommy is driving so he is in the backseat by himself: this is his seat and that is Mommy's seat. Often he calls to her, "I want to sit on your lap," while she is driving, even though he knows she will say no. He can't stop his mouth from saying it anyway, because sometimes things you don't expect happen and maybe she will say yes, but if he doesn't ask how will he know? Something funny is going on in his belly, like it does sometimes when Mommy drives him home from school. He is getting too excited because he knows he can be Miss Illya soon. Mommy has told him he can't call himself Miss Illya at school, though he does not understand this because he gets to pretend other things at school. Today in the garden he and Emerson played pigs because of her pink dress. He said, "Pretend I have pink too and we're pigs" and she said, "Oink, oink," and they ran through the garden shouting oink and telling everybody they were pigs and nobody was upset. Nobody said he could not be a pig. The Boy understands that he can be a pig but

not a girl, but he does not know why. It is okay to dress like a dog on Halloween, or like Woody if he is going to a *Toy Story* birthday party, but it is not okay to dress like a girl anywhere because Ethan is a boy. Ethan is not a pig or a toy any more than he is a girl—Ethan is more like a girl than he is like a pig or a dog or a toy because the only difference between Ethan and a girl is that Ethan has a penis. So the Boy is not sure what this means. Mommy does not want him to be a girl but she does not mind if he is a pig. Mommy does not want Ms. Oak to know he wants to be a girl. He feels nervous in his belly because the pink shirt is up high on the hanger and he will have to ask Mommy for it and even though she will give it to him she will say other things first and she will not like it about the dress and Miss Illya and the Boy wants to make Mommy happy. He thinks maybe he will not ask about the dress right away. Maybe he will play a puzzle with Mommy first and be Ethan. Mommy likes Ethan better than Miss Illya. She says Ethan is her baby and Miss Illya is just pretend. She calls Ethan “My little man,” and the Boy likes it when she does this and the way she hugs him and the way her eyes look shiny and happy. Mommy smells like Mommy and her boobies are soft for his head. She is even prettier than Ms. Oak. Mommy is the prettiest one in the world. When he gets to his home, he will tell Mommy he wants to do the planet puzzle, the one where Pluto is crying because he’s not a planet. Pluto can’t be a planet anymore just like Ethan cannot be a girl. Mommy likes how fast he can do the planet puzzle. She always says, “I’m so proud of you!” and lets him sleep with the Pluto piece, still crying inside his hand.

Clybourn is bumper-to-bumper, their car barely moving. Already, James is texting. *Great time,* he writes. *You are a marvel. Off to conquer the world now, eh?*

Since James’ wife sits at home all day while her twins are in preschool, and then harasses James to help her every evening when he would like to be out playing unpaid gigs with his band like a slacker teenager, James apparently believes that the Mistress’ ability to hold down a job and

raise a child simultaneously is tantamount to conquering the world. The Mistress finds this both flattering and idiotic. In fact, she feels capable of conquering little of late. At one point, prior to Ethan's birth, she was actually a circuit court judge and believed herself on her way "up," though now "up" seems a less clear destination than it did at that time. Now, however, she trains other attorneys, because training other people to do things permits more time flexibility and less dedication than actually doing the thing herself. The work is not particularly exciting, but it pays well enough that the Mistress can afford a fancy preschool for Ethan, and a real house rather than a condo, and other things that children with fathers might have. She is determined to provide Ethan with everything a father might offer, excepting, of course, the father himself. She is the third in a matriarchal line of Divorcees. The Mistress had not wanted to get divorced, but her inability to keep her legs shut for other men had seemed to indicate otherwise to her husband, Ethan's father. After he left, he became prone to saying things like, "You're like a black widow" and "A woman like you should never have tried to have a normal relationship with a man."

But what did it mean, a woman like her? She is not any particular type of woman that she can see. She is a type of *person*—that she will consent—a member of a club with wide membership, including many famous men like Bill Clinton and Tiger Woods. In some circles, she could claim sex addiction and make scads of new friends at Twelve Step meetings, but she lives in Chicago, a large but provincial city, not Los Angeles, and nonsense like that does not fly here. It is not the sex itself she is addicted to, of course. She cannot speak for Tiger Woods, but on the whole she doubts it is the sex that motivates most members of her club. There is, in her, simply the clawing, craving need to be desired, to be paid attention to, to be held and complimented, to be the center of a drama. Knowing this is so makes it no less so. Since Ethan, she has tried to be pragmatic about her needs. Married men fit well within her current perimeters, because they are high intensity and full of mad

desire when you're with them, but usually unavailable which—like training attorneys—allows more time flexibility for a working mother.

The Mistress has never gotten on particularly well with other women, so the wives do not bother her much. Lately, though, she increasingly finds herself empathizing with them rather than with her lovers when her lovers regale her with some story or other of the way their wives fail to understand them. Increasingly, she has started to view her lovers as silly children with whom their wives have to put up, and to covertly hope she may be helping their wives out by sharing the load. Increasingly, she can understand the concept of polygamy, and the kinship of women saddled with one man's nonsense for the long haul. Lately, she has found herself closing her eyes during sex, so as to lose herself in the physical sensations without having to actually look at the man involved. When she first met James at the annual fundraiser for the preschool his twins and Ethan both attend, James reminded her of a fresher, cleaner time in her life, when everything about the male body was magic and desire to her—when she could not get enough of men. But although she *likes* James, his informality and harsh wit and inappropriate-to-private-school-fatherhood chain smoking; his studio where he records music as though it has entirely escaped him that he is forty-five with gray pubic hair, still she finds her eyes closing when he pumps into her so that she will not have to see the intent look on his face, like a little boy building a tower or trying out his new, fast sneakers. If she looks at him too long, the mystique of him seems to evaporate and he seems a child trapped in an aging body, and any tenderness she feels towards him is less to do with sex than pity, and this seems a dire state of affairs, worse even than the prospect that her own desirability and beauty will soon dry up and render her unfuckable to most men. The prospect of a life of unrequited desire seems bearable to her, but a life without desire altogether sounds like death.

Can I see you tomorrow? James texts. *Can you get away?*

Tomorrow is Saturday. She does not like to leave Ethan on the weekends, but maybe she should give it another try, and if James is just not doing it for her, she will have to move on, find someone else who can bring her back to life. She pushes the texting icon of her iPhone—

The noise! Worse than the garbage disposer, when Mommy says “Run and cover your ears” because she knows he doesn’t like loud things. Loud everywhere inside him so he can’t run away from it. Hurting in his neck and the window gets closer to him, rushing at his face until it splits, a hundred pieces flying like when the Boy’s project for the hundredth day of school—he brought in one hundred pieces of pasta—all fell out of his bag and splattered on the floor. The glass splatters like that, like he is the floor, spraying across him, biting his face. Glass bugs flying through his hair and he screams, brings up his hands, *Mommy!* Mommy calling his name, “Ethan, Ethan, baby;” Mommy throwing her body over the seat and pulling the glass off him, her hands bleeding. “You’re okay, you’re all right, Mommy’s here, I’m getting you out, you’re all right.” He stares at her. He is crying though he does not feel sad. His face is hot and wet, and Mommy puts her blood hand to his cheek, presses her face and hair into him; the boy notices his pants are wet too, that he pee peed without knowing it. Mommy’s hair against his wet face, unbuckling the straps of his seat and pulling him towards her, “Oh, my little man,” she sobs. Ethan clings to her neck. He holds on to her and breathes her and breathes the still air now around them, no glass bugs anymore. People are outside the car calling to them, but Mommy doesn’t answer and Ethan doesn’t answer and nothing happens for a minute they just hold on.

“Why are you out of bed?” the nurse snaps from the doorway. Soundless rubber shoes approaching. “Well, look at this. Now look what you’ve done. You know you can’t get out of that

bed yourself. Just look at yourself, lying there. You've made a fine mess, haven't you? Well, no matter, it's not like you've got to clean it up, is it? I'm here to serve you, isn't that right?"

The Alcoholic lies on the floor. "I pressed the call button," she says. "I pressed it five times."

"Oh, rubbish," the nurse insists. "You pressed it one time, but I was busy with someone else. You're not the only one round here with problems, you know." The nurse hoists her up under her arms, yanking her to her feet.

"Ow," the Alcoholic says softly. "You're hurting me."

The nurse flops her back down onto the bed and pushes her legs center. "Some people do everything to take proper care of themselves and they're even sicker than you—what do you think about that?"

The Alcoholic begins to cry. She stammers, shamed by her crying, "You're a nurse! You've come on to help the sick—not to berate us. You're a nurse—this is your job."

The nurse stares down at her. She is a pretty woman, though her face bears the shapeless doughy quality of a working class lifestyle of pints, chips and take-away curry. "I know your sort," she whispers. "I was cleaning me dad's nappies when the cirrhosis got him, wasn't I? You did it to yourself and now we're all cleaning up after you." She yanks the blanket over the Alcoholic's skeletal legs and leaves the room, this time her rubber heels oddly loud on the tile.

The Alcoholic sits in her bed weeping. She can only presume the nurse has gone to get a clean gown, that she will be back soon to change her, give her a sponge bath, and the horrible helplessness of it makes the crying come harder. She would rather rot here in her own sick than have that smug, hateful young girl surveying her sagging, empty breasts and soaping between her legs. If only she could die right now. If only she had someone, someone to come in and complain about this nurse to a superior; someone to quietly slip her just enough sleeping pills to call it a day. These days,

you cannot go to hospital without an advocate: without someone to protect you from this sort of abuse.

The Alcoholic thinks briefly of Imogen, off in the States for more than twenty years now, raising little Ethan, whom the Alcoholic has met only twice. Her daughter does not like her. Her daughter never comes to England, and now that the Alcoholic is so ill she cannot travel to visit her grandson anymore. Her daughter is set to arrive next week on a visit, now that the cirrhosis has advanced to the stage that the Alcoholic is an object to be pitied (except, apparently, by the smug young nurse), but even then, Imogen is not bringing the boy with her. “He’s four,” she explained glibly. “What would I do with him, stuck in a hospital all day?” Ethan will remain in Chicago at a friend’s home, someone the Alcoholic has never even heard of, some shadowy figure in her daughter’s inaccessible life. Once, her daughter wrote her angry letters from boarding school, demanding that she needed to “admit your addiction” and “go into recovery,” but the words seemed like some strange childish code. One simply didn’t *do* things like that, or if one did, it was folly to think it would yield any result other than a wider net of noisy people with whom to make a mess of things. There were things Imogen could not understand, things she could not grasp because she had never been thrashed until she was too weak to cry by the same hand that fed her; could not feel because she had never been told she’d ruined her own mother’s entire life and was too ugly to ever find a man herself—that she was worthless and to blame for driving away the man her mother had. The Alcoholic’s daughter thinks it such a terrible calamity to have a mother who drank, who sometimes became vitriolic and did not word things in a polite, *appropriate* manner—but her daughter does not understand from the spectacular range of calamities possible when it comes to mothers, does not understand the heroic efforts it takes to merely love *badly* when you yourself have never been loved at all.

Perhaps she should have answered those boarding school letters. She could have tried to explain. But there is nothing to be done for it now. Now, her daughter is a middle-aged woman, an American, a refugee from all the Alcoholic has wrought. Maybe if Imogen could see the little Girl on the other side of the window, maybe then she could find forgiveness in her, but that Girl is gone now, long buried under the weight of denials and excuses and justifications, entombed somewhere under the flesh and bones and toxic liver of the Alcoholic's skin, still trapped, still abandoned, biding her time for the poison to win out so she can finally escape that car.

And her daughter will have to live and die by her own mistakes.

The Mistress' iPhone keeps vibrating with James' texts. She turned the sound off back in the ER while Ethan was being checked out, but there is no way spare smashing it to keep it from buzzing silently to signal the world trying to reach her, wanting a piece of her. Now, Ethan has a large bandage under one eye. Had that shard of glass hit one inch higher, he could have lost the eye, the doctor said. Her son, her beautiful son without an eye! She feels a tight sickness in her chest, as though the world would dim immeasurably without Ethan's eye to witness it. Now, he sits on the floor with his planet puzzle, doing pieces quietly and swiftly, a thirty-seven-and-a-half pound package of precarious breath. Anything could get him at any time. When the Mistress was young, her best friend from boarding school died of an asthma attack at the age of thirteen. When Ethan was first diagnosed with asthma, she could not sleep for a week, though the doctor and her friends kept assuring her that times had changed and that Ethan's asthma was not severe. Still, she had not done enough to keep him safe. She had not even seen the car approaching, she was so busy fiddling with her iPhone. By the time she knew what had happened, the shattered window was already laying claim to her son's face.

He may have a scar now, the doctor said. “Thankfully he’s a boy,” he added. “It will look tough. Tell him he looks like a pirate.” But Ethan does not want to be a pirate, his mother knows. Maybe it is her fault for not fighting harder when his father decided to join the firm in San Diego—maybe it is her fault for thinking Ethan was more *hers* anyway. But Ethan does not care about pirates. He wants to be Lady Gaga, or Princess Jasmine, or pretty young Ms. Oak. Ethan wants to be her.

In five days, she will get on a plane for England. In five days, she will visit her mother, who is finally dying after trying a passive-aggressive hand at self-destruction for more than forty years. She had thought not to take Ethan with her, but maybe this was a mistake. What if something were to happen to him while she is gone? Maybe better to keep him near. What if something were to happen to one of them only a week or two after she got back? She would not want to have relinquished that time with him then. Soon her own mother will be dead. Already it has seemed as though she *could* be dead, living as far away as she does, but while her mother has lived, the Mistress has been able to interact with her by not interacting with her—by choosing to avoid her, she speaks to her daily loud and clear. Twenty odd years have passed in this fashion, in this constant state of (non)communication. Soon, however, the Mistress will be on her stage of silence alone, the audience having left the building. Soon, her mother will be dead, and it will be too late for anything to ever be other than what it was.

She stands in the doorway to the kitchen, watching Ethan. It is late—they spent hours in the ER—and she needs to prepare dinner, but she cannot seem to take her eyes off him. When she picked him up from school, Ms. Oak said, “He’s still having some trouble with his colors,” but Ethan has known his colors since before he could talk. Ethan has gravitated towards certain colors, holding objects in his preferred shades for hours at times just to look at them: she remembers things falling out of his Baby Bjorn if he fell asleep and loosened his grasp on a pink hair clasp or plastic block—how the object would clack against the floor and startle her. “He had a little outburst today,”

Ms. Oak said, “but I think that may be a good thing. He was a bit more talkative. It just concerns me that he seems to speak out of context a lot of the time—I can’t always follow what he means. I’ll say one thing, and the answer he gives has nothing to do with my question. With your permission, I’d like to bring this up with the speech teacher.” And the Mistress had nodded. Her hand in her coat pocket had fingered her iPhone, waiting for the text from James that she knew would come, waiting even though she does not love him and never has, because he was something to do, something to fill the silence and the void, and Ethan is only four years old, and she is lonely in a way a child cannot solve.

“Mommy,” Ethan says. “I want to drink something.”

That funny formality of his, that stiff little way of speaking brings a lump to her throat. Her son, who owns two good eyes—her son who is alive for her to bring to England. If only she could hold on to this—to now being the only moment, to today being the only thing that counts—then maybe he would be enough forever. “Of course,” she says, her voice cracking, faltering. “What do you want, honey? Do you want some chocolate milk?”

“Uh, okay,” Ethan says politely. “Only, can you make tea with honey instead?”

One day, when she was a little older than Ethan, she had fallen outside and was bleeding, and when she ran into the house to tell her mother, her mother was sprawled out on the couch, unresponsive. She shook her and shook her mother but couldn’t rouse her. She shook so hard and shouted “Mum!” over and over again so loudly that it only seemed possible her mother was dead. At that time, passing out had not yet become a nightly occurrence. At that time, the Girl lay sprawled across what she believed to be the dead body of her mother. She sobbed for a long time, and when her mother did not wake she went out to tell a neighbor, who of course said her mother was not dead at all, and called her a poor lamb after that whenever she saw her.

Soon, her mother will be dead. Someday, in the best of all possible scenario, her child will grow up healthy enough to leave her. Someday, her body will move beyond desire, will enter, too, its final stage of decline. *All we have is today*, she thinks. Puzzle pieces of *today's* will make up her son's life to form a whole picture in his memory. The Day We Crashed The Car, he may call this one in his mind. He will never know his mother was texting her lover when it happened. So much he will never know. So much we never understand about each other. Everything lost to the color and noise of time, trapped behind our own eyes.

The Mother enters the kitchen to get the kettle. *This is it, you understand*, she says inside her head. To whom is she speaking? Perhaps her ex-husband. Perhaps herself. Perhaps (oh, how her mother would laugh), she is speaking to god. *This is all I have to give him—this is what he will remember. Right now.*

Quickly, the Boy pulls out his paper. Mommy is in the kitchen, and fast, before she comes back—she will have to make the water hot, for tea, so he has time—he can write her the note. He wants it to say, *I want to play with the pink dress now please thank you*. But he does not know how to write all those words. Ms. Oak says he is a good writer, that his writing is very good for preschool, but his writing makes him frustrated because there are so many words and he wants to know them all but he doesn't even know how to write this letter. He writes, *I want to SICWA SICWA the pink SICWA now peas thank you*. He looks at it. He thinks maybe Mommy does not know how to read this note. He wants to leave the note for her on top of the planet puzzle and then hide while she reads it so he can see what she does but without her seeing him see her. He wants to see if her face looks sad. He wants to not be there so she can't ask him about playing doctors or firefighters or Woody instead. He feels again like the howler monkey's eyes on fire only not in a good way like the color, in a bad way like when Ms. Oak was poo-poo. He crumbles up his note. His note is poo-poo! His face hurts

a little bit and he wants to take off the big bandage but Mommy and the doctor said no. Maybe he wants to play doctor. He can give shots to all his animals. Maybe he will play doctor instead. He will pretend like he is giving Mommy a shot and make her say “Ow!” and pretend like he gives her a lollipop. In the car, when Mommy called his name it *was* his name. Ethan was his name. He was not anybody else. When the glass flew at his face and cut him and the noise was loud, Ethan was behind his own eyes. He did not think about Miss Illya then. He still wants to wear the pink dress and to pretend about Miss Illya, but Mommy is right that Miss Illya is pretend. Miss Illya was not in the car with them. This makes him sad, but happy too. He does not know where Miss Illya was, but she was not inside his eyes.

The kettle is whistling, but instead of going to get it Mommy stands at the kitchen doorway again. For a second, Ethan thinks he is imagining it, but the pink dress is in her hands. Mommy’s pink shirt that she never wears, there, dangling from one of her hands like a present, and he jumps to his feet fast, though then he remembers that maybe the present is not for him. Mommy *got* the shirt as a present from Nain and maybe she is going to put it in her suitcase to bring it to visit Nain to pretend like she likes the shirt, the way she made Ethan wear his Transformers shirt to school because it was a birthday present from Max; even though Ethan didn’t like the shirt he had to pretend so Max would be happy. Maybe Mommy is going to pretend about her shirt to make Nain happy too, and she will bring it with her because he is not allowed to bring it to Emerson’s house when Emerson’s mommy babysits him anyway, so Mommy will take it with her, will take it away, and he won’t have it anymore or Mommy either.

“Well, hello,” Mommy says, still from the doorway. Her voice is like make-believe, like when she reads him a book. “I was looking for Miss Illya,” she says. “I thought she might want to have a tea party with me. Do you know where she might be?”

Ethan's hand goes up, like people do at school when they want Ms. Oak to call on them, though Ethan never does that at school—he forgets that he should want to be called on. “I’m here!” he says, like it is attendance, too excited. “I can come to the tea party!”

“Great!” Mommy says. “But you’d better change your outfit first. Your clothes are messy from the accident, and this is going to be a fancy tea party, Miss Illya. We’re going to put extra honey in the tea.”

Ethan's body is humming. His face doesn't hurt anymore. If he were a howler monkey, he would howl. If he were a rainforest toucan, he would fly. If he were a color, he would be so pink the sun would hide. He runs to Mommy and snatches the dress from her hand, kicking off his shoes and yanking down his pants. Mommy has to help him with his shirt; it feels hard and crumbly from the blood. Soon he is standing in nothing but his underpants, and Mommy slips the pink shirt over his head so that it is a dress that comes almost to his ankles. She ties the sash in the back in a big bow and turns him around. Her eyes are bright like marbles, like stars. Ethan thinks about telling her that he is still Ethan under the dress—that Miss Illya is just pretend—but he doesn't want to spoil the game, he is too happy. He jumps up and down in place. “I’m Miss Illya now!” he says. “I’m ready for the party! Can I put the honey in the tea?”

And Mommy smiles, and steps back from the kitchen door to let him in.

VULCAN LOVE

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The Lawyer's back was killing him so instead of going back to the office he went straight home from court. As soon as he turned his key in the door and entered his apartment, he saw his daughter's boyfriend stealing handfuls of CD's, mostly, absurdly, classical. His first thought was, *Hasn't the punk ever heard of Napster?* His second was, *I'm surprised he even remembered to lock the door behind him.* Justin whirled around with a theatrically menacing look on his face; it was apparent he was high. He had been loading the CD's into a pillowcase as though he had seen a B-movie about robbers the night before and thought he might want to try it out. Had The Lawyer's back not been throbbing so even the slightest movement was uncomfortable, he would have cracked up. This had been happening lately, laughing at things not meant to be amusing. Just yesterday one of the junior partners had asked earnestly whether the murder of Daniel Pearl had changed his mind about the War on Terror, and The Lawyer started chortling like when he was a kid at Queen of Angels and the principal would ask if he wanted a paddling: a self-defeating laughter at what then seemed—with the little he knew of the world outside of Boston Catholic schools—the most ludicrous thing he had ever heard.

He sat down on his couch, not without some difficulty. Justin was still gaping at him, but hadn't dropped the pillowcase. It seemed evident by the silence that Justin was looking for a way out of the situation, which struck The Lawyer as fortuitous. He said, trying not to sound smug, "Look, how about you never call my daughter again, and just get the fuck out of here and keep whatever's

in that pillowcase. Though I'd suggest a grocery bag if you don't want the doorman to call the cops. They're in the pantry."

Justin muttered, "No way, man. No way I'd ditch Rachel like that."

That did him in. He almost snorted in laughter.

Then the second guy came out of the bedroom, carrying The Lawyer's laptop in one hand. In the other was a gun. He approached so hastily that it did not occur to The Lawyer to feel fear until it rushed up his throat too late to choke him because the blackness had already hit.

Rachel was still upset about the videotape. She had found it two months ago, and since then everything was different. Before the tape, his daughter had not seemed overly interested in boys. She had been a *young* fifteen, not the way he remembered high school girls from his own youth, but that had been during Vietnam, when the weight of war and change had clung to people like quicksand, making them want to throw off their clothes, float away on drugs. Now it seemed things had gone backwards; even baby boomers had become reverent, well-behaved children, toting out their flags and pressing their lips tight against any criticism of the status quo. His teenage daughter was almost like a child of the 1950's—it never seemed to occur to these kids that the way they'd been raised, all the emphasis on "protecting the children" and "children first" was just a way to train them to behave like pedigreed dogs fresh from obedience school. They were so full of their own preciousness, their own supremacy, that they seemed to feel no need to rebel.

The Lawyer suspected that if Rachel's mother were alive, she would have greatly approved of this turn of events, and this, irrationally, irritated him. Despite never having been particularly rule-abiding herself, Leigh had nursed faith in odd things—had, for example, once spent six months in voice lessons to remove the traces of her Brooklyn accent in an attempt to better fit into Chicago Gold Coast society. At first he had told himself Leigh was being ironic—that she was a born actress

always adopting a new role—but he eventually had to accept that she believed in a certain cultural hierarchy . . . believed, in an almost pure sense, that might made right. She habitually emptied herself out of whatever resin clung to her of what was not mighty enough to be worthwhile. Maybe this post 9-11 world, the eradication of ambiguities, this Right vs. Wrong where good children held bake sales for the families of the World Trade Center victims and, in the next breath, for the troops invading Iraq, would have made sense to her. That Leigh was the one who should be here to see it instead of him was so obvious that he had stopped thinking it consciously long ago. The fact of her death continued to feel like a heel jabbed purposefully in his ribs—a slight against him.

The Lawyer could not move his arms. His left eye felt sticky as if with fever; when he finally forced his lids apart he saw himself: tied to his dining room end chair with an assortment of his suit ties, each triple or quadruple knotted—Justin must not have trusted the silk’s ability to hold. He tried to stand, but no, they had gotten his feet too. His eyes were open now but still unfocused. Across from him they watched him, staring like he was a bomb that might spontaneously explode. The taller, not-Justin one waved his gun, gesturing in The Lawyer’s face, “Fucker’s awake.”

The Lawyer said, “You have got to be kidding.”

“You better shut up, asshole,” Justin said.

“For Chrissakes!” The Lawyer was surprised at the volume of his own voice, louder than his sense of vision. “You don’t want to break *up* with my daughter—you wouldn’t take your loot and run because you want to *see* her again—and now, what, I’m supposed to believe you’re going to shoot me in the head? Get out of here!”

“What the fuck’s he talking about?” Not-Justin asked.

“Nah, man, he started telling me, like, just don’t call Rachel no more and if you leave right now I won’t call the cops and that shit. Like I was gonna believe him.”

The Lawyer sighed. “This isn’t a movie, you stupid little prick. People don’t want to deal with the police in real life. What, do you think they’re really interested that you stole some of my toys? Now this—tying me up and holding me at gunpoint . . .”

“This guy’s a bastard,” Not-Justin said.

“He’s a lawyer,” Justin explained.

“Man, we shoulda got out of here.”

“Finally,” The Lawyer said. “Somebody with half a brain.”

The gun came down on the side of his head again.

Rachel notices that Margaret is squirming in her chair. From the way Margaret is holding the pages, though, Rachel can’t tell where she is in the story. The videotape? The gun? The introduction of the other Margaret? It occurs to Rachel that she should have emailed the story in before her session, so she wouldn’t have to sit her and watch. But she *wanted* to watch, really. If for no other reason than for the minutes it is eating up, so that by the time Margaret finishes, there won’t be much time left on the clock until Rachel’s fifty-minute-hour runs up. This way, Margaret won’t have much time to interrogate her. She thinks of something she heard her father say once, *Love is a constant interrogation*. It is not something he would make up—her father is not poetic—but though Rachel has flipped through all the books on their bookshelves, she has never found that quote. Not that Margaret, who is *paid* to interrogate Rachel, loves her or anything.

She forces herself to keep flipping through the pages of a *New Yorker*, like somebody who knows anything about New York. Like somebody without a care in the world.

Why hadn’t it occurred to the Lawyer that his daughter might come home? Christ, what kind of person was he, mouthing off to these stoned kids like he had something to prove, not even

thinking of what would happen if Rachel walked in the door? His daughter could be high strung, and if she lost it, started yelling or tried to leave, who knew what would happen?

The Lawyer had read a novel recently, a former Booker Prize winner, where a man and his daughter were trapped in their home in South Africa with criminals who raped the daughter right in front of the man. It had not been hard to read; for better or worse The Lawyer was not that kind of man, the kind to worry about things abstractly, to take things personally. He liked disturbing books, though he rarely had time to read fiction and mostly kept it to major prize winners people brought up at dinner parties. He had thought of Rachel not at all while reading the book. The daughter in the book was a lesbian, and if anything he had been reminded of a young woman he had not seen in years, the sanctimonious and over-protective sister of a former lover of his, since he had heard through the mutual grapevine that once bound his family to theirs that this sanctimonious sister was now gay (or, more likely, had been all along.) She despised him for what she believed he had “done to” her sister who had been his lover, and though he vastly disagreed with her assessment of things, he had never fully made peace with her hatred of him. This had been a complicated, almost torrid episode of his life, his entanglement with these two beautiful, much-younger sisters, but because it had happened very shortly before Leigh’s fatal car crash and Rachel coming to live with him full-time, it remained largely unprocessed and therefore raw and mythical, also sad and embarrassing at the same time, and so he didn’t care to dwell on it, though he had greatly enjoyed the book that reminded him of the sisters just the same.

What time was it? The Lawyer was having a hard time remembering the day of the week, which would help him pin down Rachel’s schedule and whether she might bound through the door at any moment to find him bleeding from the head, tied to a dining chair and feigning unconsciousness because he had determined not to carry on speaking, but realized he would be unable to keep his mouth shut unless the other two believed he could not hear them. Otherwise they

would incite him, and he was annoyed at himself for it, for how he could be incited by two sixteen-year-olds with a combined I.Q. probably not surpassing 150, putting himself and possibly his daughter at risk.

They were talking about how to get Rachel to run away with them: whether they would have to force her, or whether she would go by choice. Justin had acknowledged that her coming of her own free will necessitated not killing their captive, and Not-Justin grudgingly agreed. They postured for each other. The Lawyer suspected strongly that neither of them had ever killed anything more than an insect and that if they thought they might have to they would bolt out the door, and this almost roused him to open his eyes and declare himself awake and tell them the only way to escape prison would be to kill him, so that they would get out of his apartment and he could get to the bathroom to down two or three Vicodin and go to sleep, confident that his head injury would stave off, for once, his habitual insomnia. But he knew that sometime in any scenario he imagined, there would be the point in the story where he had to explain to Rachel what had happened, and so he kept his eyes shut now, thinking, trying to imagine how to best do this, willing her not to enter the apartment but, because of the videotape and how she'd been towards him since, somewhat secure that she would not, as the sun was still out and to return now would be much too early to provoke him or make him worry, which, these days, was what their relationship was all about.

Hence, Justin.

Though he hadn't moved in at least twenty minutes, the blood dripping from his head became more of a steady trickle. All the knots his captors had made in his various Armani ties began to blur together until they became wavy masses of gray, blue, red. Panic rose in The Lawyer's chest in a tachycardic rhythm; he felt his body jerk upright and the two boys turned towards him, the gun moving in synchronicity with their youthful, feline bodies. It looked beautiful for just a moment, and The Lawyer flashed on a phantom image of his daughter's tall, somewhat ungainly but young and

lovely body writhing under Justin's and possibly the other boy's, as the barrel of the gun met the eye less obscured by blood and blocked out the vision of anything else except that clearly he was going to—

Wires protruded from his arms. At first The Lawyer thought Justin and Not-Justin had found the stash of telephone wire he still occasionally used to tie up his lovers, in a kitchen drawer where it always appeared organic, not contrived like pulling fur-lined handcuffs out of a bedside table (though he had handcuffs too, old ones from when he used to do magic in high school, but since the videotape, they were well-hidden.) This enraged him—now whoever eventually arrived to untie him, whether Rachel after the boys had gone or maybe even the police, would no doubt cut the telephone wire with his kitchen scissors, and it would be impossible to explain to anyone, least of all himself, why the thought of his telephone wire being cut to shreds made him feel dangerously closer to tears of frustration than he had thus far, made him raise his head to scream at these assholes, goaded on by the darkness he saw faintly out a window that indicated Rachel might be home soon and so he had to push this thing to its conclusion quickly, before she arrived, even if what she arrived to was his brains splattered all over the wall. He heard his voice say, “This is bullshit. Go ahead, shoot.”

“Oh God.” It was Margaret's voice. Had she come over—his arm jerked, and he felt it move—the telephone wire wasn't tight enough, not a good job at all—*no, no*, pain blinding in his side like a bright light.

“Hey, hey, it's all right, they're gone. You're in the hospital. Can you see me? Look.”

He obeyed; it seemed the simplest thing to do. She was there, Margaret, in a chair next to a bed his body was stretched out in. The wires were *tubes*—IV's, protruding from his veins. His arms

could move relatively freely now, but his torso felt glued to the bed like a leaden mass. His eyes blinked rapidly trying to clear the fog.

“I don’t feel right.”

“Honey. You’re on a morphine drip. Enjoy it.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know exactly. You were robbed I guess—they said—”

“No. Know that. Why—here.”

“God. Baby.” She never spoke this way to him. “You were shot.”

“Oh. Right.”

“The bullet went through your ribcage. It’s a miracle it didn’t hit your lung or anything vital. You could have died, but you’ll be fine.”

He looked like his mother. Couldn’t see himself, really, just the hazy tubes and his own shadowy arms, but it didn’t matter—he remembered what she looked like near the end, so weak in the hospital bed and hooked up to everything the doctors could find. She hadn’t even been forty—he’d outlived her already by six years. It was inevitable, the body’s decline, whether accelerated or gradual: this was what you came to, these tubes and somebody murmuring endearments at your bedside if you were lucky, somebody who generally called you by your given name in the civilian life where you stood on your own legs, no IV’s, no bullet holes in your flesh, who never called you *honey* or *baby* even when she climaxed, who was more of a friend than a lover because that was all you could handle now and maybe all she could too for reasons of her own. His mother had died at thirty-nine, her own body declaring war on itself with the cancer, but the three of them—him, his kid brother and their father—had lurked around the hospital the entire time, almost slipping away with her when the time came. His father started drinking after that and never stopped, and The Future Lawyer had wrapped his car around a tree with booze once too, but walked away with

nothing but a scar on his knee. He liked Margaret a lot; if nothing else he felt a disproportionate gratitude that she was not emotionally messy, was smart and caustic and easily annoyed by men and preferred her solitude like a cat, only wanting to be petted on her own terms—his affection for her was genuine if not deep—but how the hell had he come to *this*, to her body being the only one next to his on a hospital bed? His wife was dead; it didn't matter if they had divorced five years prior; from the moment Rachel, their first child, was born, Leigh had become his wife forever. Where was Rachel? Had Margaret and the doctors been unable to track her down, or was this her message to him, this absence? A form of payback more successful than skipping curfew?

Under the threadbare sheet, his body was wrapped in one of those hospital gowns. He had not been in the hospital since he was seventeen, after the car crash. He avoided doctors—his health, other than the bum back, had been impeccable, always. You were *supposed* to go, supposed to don your gown and have the doctor ram a finger up your ass, especially at his age, but The Lawyer always counted that as akin to the way you were supposed to hang a yellow ribbon on a tree or go to church on Sundays: his mother had done those things, but it hadn't helped. He had taken it for granted, despite the early deaths of both his parents, that he would thrive physically until at least his late sixties or seventies, and then—it had never been so much a plan but just a gut knowledge—he would just decide when enough was enough. Maybe by then there would be grandchildren or some other incentive to make a reasonable amount of discomfort and indignity worth the price, but you had to know when to cut your losses—he had always known that. Almost always. He'd never planned to wrack up hours in a hospital bed. He thought now, with a self-important shame that seemed adolescent to him, that he would never want to fuck Margaret again since she'd seen him like this.

He sat up hard, this time enough so to tug at what he'd imagined, in his morphine haze, were his old telephone wires.

“I’ve got to get out of here.”

“Forget it!” Margaret almost swatted him back down against his pillows. “Jesus, you can’t even walk. Leaving isn’t an option.” Then, her litigator-voice evaporating: “Hey. Are you okay? You had a rough time, huh? It really shook you up.” Her tone held a glint, amidst the concern, of bemusement, and he remembered abruptly why he liked her, why he trusted her. “You sound,” she told him, “. . . kind of hysterical.”

“I feel pretty hysterical,” he said quietly, closing his eyes again.

She was silent, accepting this. He didn’t say the part about how, the moment Not-Justin had pointed the gun at his bleeding head, he knew it wasn’t bullshit, that a bullet was about to gush into his brain. The kid must have panicked, lowered the gun just enough to save his life at the last instant—The Lawyer didn’t remember the pain of impact, any knowledge of where he’d been hit. He knew only that when the gun’s barrel poked him in the eye like a kaleidoscope through which he would see the last prisms of his life, he felt a frightening absence of fear. The moment was brief—too brief to linger on Rachel or anyone—but his sense of impatience that this drama needed to end before his daughter got home did not recede or amplify. Though he realized his actions might be construed as being willing to die for her, he had not thought in terms of *missing* her, or even so much of the fallout his death might cause her. Yet neither had the prospect of his imminent death offered any *relief*—he had, other than that reactionary drug-and-alcohol-induced bout with the tree, never been suicidal, never found life unbearably painful or longed to flee it, though he often felt blank, indifferent, in need of some stimulation to jolt him, yet generally too cynical, too practical to actively seek out anything chaotic enough to actually do the trick. He had believed, often with a certain self-satisfaction, that he’d *spent* his raging emotions as a young man, on a mother he adored to Oedipal proportions; that by the time he reached adulthood, he was done with those childish notions of

love—not incapable of enjoying life’s pleasures, certainly, but perhaps a bit inured to its sentimental pains.

Urbane, his young lover, the not-lesbian sister used to call him. Mockingly in part, but with another part need. She had admitted near the end, *I can’t trust myself anymore, but I can trust you because you’ll never lose your head completely*. And before her, Leigh whispering into his ear at night, *My little Vulcan*, sweetly, without malice, because he never wept, rarely raised his voice—but then after they lost their second baby to SIDS she had left, screamed, *You don’t know how to grieve!* Still, all of that was meant to disappear the moment you stared down the barrel of a gun. It was supposed to melt away, the reserves, the defenses, all your neurons firing at once *I want to live!*

How does the story end? What do you do with the protagonist when his epiphany has happened without him?

Margaret looks up. She is not finished yet, Rachel sees that much. She says only, “I think it would make more sense—I think you and I would both be more comfortable—if you sat in the waiting room,” and Rachel stands up and walks out.

The videotape was simple. The Lawyer could see it as if he had filmed it yesterday. His young lover, the lesbian’s sister, her body nearly emaciated, no longer the body of a the professional dancer she’d once been, but of a junkie. Bent over his dining room table. Throughout the whipping, the camera remained focused on her face, not the more pornographic back view (there would be plenty of that later on.) The telephone wire he’d bound her with was invisible, because he usually tied her hands under her body so that she couldn’t start waving them around in an effort to cover her back, buttocks and legs when the pain became too intense for her to control herself any longer and play along. He stood behind her with the belt she had delivered to him from his closet, the

leather doubled over, about half his body in view as he delivered the blows to her ass. The video-cam chronicled her slow descent: the way she first tried to hold her face regal and impassive—how she succeeded, no doubt due to her years of classical dance training, almost amazingly through the first series of loud snaps on skin. Then began the twitches of her lips; the sweat breaking out on her brow; her efforts to look away from the camera's eye as she eventually broke, struggling, screaming even before she would succumb to the weeping, but then bawled, snotty and spitty as a child, as he went on and on. The camera did not capture the blood—not until later when he untied her and there was a glimpse as her body lowered to the carpet.

The Lawyer had not filmed his lover in order to watch the scene alone later, to jerk off to the memory of it—though at times over the past four years he had done just that. No, he had done it to *show* her. It took some time to set the camera up right, and he'd almost given up, afraid of ruining the mood before the whole production even began. But the impulse to play it back for her later, to witness within her the constant intense battle between shame and arousal as she watched what he had seen—it was that desire that spurred him on: to have her know he could see her that way at any time; to have her see her own transformation from beauty to something ugly and broken down, in hopes that she would understand the power that held for him—maybe even that she could explain it to him. At least he knew she would share his fascination. They were the oldest story in the book—yet The Lawyer had felt powerless before it at the time; had succumbed to the belief that what was between them was utterly unique, not the usual older man on a power trip, the usual young woman with punitive Daddy fantasies. He had let himself believe that they were transcending . . . *something*. With her, there had been no distance, not so much between the two of them (there had always been that, no matter any game they played to eradicate it), but between him and *himself*.

She had found the videotape. Rachel, snooping in a box high in his closet, not curious about his life but about her mother's, hoping for some relic of Leigh. Instead there was her father beating

a ninety-five pound woman until the next day (Rachel only twelve at the time and living with her mother) he'd had to have blood stains professionally removed from his carpet. The truth was, he had not even watched the damn tape in two years, maybe more. Why hadn't he just thrown it away? He imagined Rachel staring at it, rewinding over and over like some CNN junkie after the Twin Towers fell; he imagined how a young girl's life changed in an instant like that. Still, he hadn't been able to act contrite in the way she needed him to. He *wasn't* sorry. Christ, that wasn't what it was about. All that blame came later, from his lover's now-lesbian sister. He'd tried to explain to Rachel, just as he'd tried to explain to that sanctimonious young woman who hated him, but just like the lesbian sister, so sure in her righteousness, so sure of the blacks and whites of the world, his daughter had turned away from him. Had screamed, "How would you like it if somebody did that to *me*? Would you say we were just consenting adults then?" And he should have said a zillion other things whether he meant them or not, but what he'd said was, "You aren't. When you *are*, we can talk about this. For now, you're the child and you play by my rules."

When had he started sounding this way—some member of the cult of childhood innocence? Always he had tried to treat his daughter as a thinking person, if not exactly an equal. Never a possession to be trivialized, protected from truths, bossed around. But soon after the videotape, she started coming home with boys, coming home late. Before Justin there had been another. The Lawyer hadn't taken it overly seriously. A boy that age wanted to get laid, sure—he worried about AIDS. He'd even debated with himself as to whether he should leave Rachel condoms in her room, but hadn't gone so far as to do it. But the rest, no. Not these kids. Even if they were trying to play-act at what Rachel had seen on the tape, The Lawyer had felt reasonably certain the appeal of it would be lost on some horny sixteen-year-old boy. Too much work for an only vaguely sexual payoff. If there was one thing having . . . *perverse*; his young lover had liked that word . . . bedroom tastes assured you of, it was that most others did not share your world view.

And, indeed, he'd been right, but not in the way he expected. In her chase to emulate his perversions, to punish him with them, Rachel had *topped* them. What had been for him a powerful, transcendent violence became, in the hands of an angry boy with one foot dropped out of school already, a plot to kidnap a fifteen-year-old girl after shooting her father with a gun.

The office door opens. Instead of leaving them on her chair, Margaret still holds the stack of paper in her hands. Staring into the waiting room, Margaret looks as though she expected to find it empty; as though she has never seen the girl in it before. Rachel thinks Margaret is probably not aware she is waving the papers back and forth nervously but gently, like a fan. The laser-jet letters on the white paper flash like an old-fashioned cartoon strip in the low office light. Rachel watches them, the way they form together to construct her life and not-her-life.

"Come in," Margaret tells her, her voice a bit unnaturally loud and cheerful in the quiet. Rachel resumes her position in her usual chair. She feels buoyed by Margaret's artificial tone, suddenly confident that they will be artificial together now, that this is something she knows how to do. Then she will get to go home.

Margaret's tone, though, changes as soon as her skirted behind makes contact with her expensive but worn down chair. "I don't know," she says like a defeated medical student starting at the brain scan of a fatal tumor, "what I am supposed to do with this."

"What do you mean?" Rachel asks, purposefully obtusely. "It's not like you can *grade* me or anything. This isn't school."

"No," Margaret consents. "My dilemma is whether or not I should show this to your father. Since you've made no effort to hide his identity, and even used *my* name in the story—though I need to say for the record that this woman isn't me, that I've never had any relationship with your father

other than a professional one . . .” She seems to lose her train of thought, says abruptly, “Were you under the impression that your father and I were having an affair?”

Rachel shrugs. “Not particularly.”

“Then you used my name to get a rise out of me? Maybe to *encourage* me to show your story to your father? Is that what you want?”

“Not particularly.”

“Hmm.” Margaret at last puts down the stack, on the end table. “I’m not sure. I think maybe you do. I think you hope to manipulate me into embarrassing your father by showing him this and asking him if it’s true, and doing, in a sense, your dirty work—but I don’t want to do that, Rachel, at least not yet. Not until you tell me if it *is* true.”

“What do you mean *if it’s true*? My dad hasn’t been shot in the head recently by any of my boyfriends!” A high, tinkly giggle. “You *know* my mother died, you *know* my baby sister died when I was six. Yes, my father’s mother really got a brain tumor and died before she was forty—he had that accident too, with his car, you can ask him. Yeah, I have an uncle who lives in Oregon—he’s an orthodontist or a chiropractor or something. I haven’t seen him since I was a baby. He and my dad aren’t . . . close . . .”

“Do you see, Rachel, your response here tells me that you’re playing games. I don’t mean to undermine your pain, especially about your mother’s death, but you know full well that I was asking about the videotape.”

“You want to know if I found a videotape of my dad torturing some twenty-year-old girl?”

But Margaret doesn’t flinch. The air in the room feels stagnant. “For lack of a better way of putting it. Yes.”

Rachel throws her long legs over the side of the chair. “Of *course* not.”

“Why, of course not? You seem to know an awful lot about it.”

“I know my dad, don’t I?”

Silence. The vaguely New Age music on the office soundtrack has run out, signifying that her time is up. Margaret doesn’t move.

“There are numerous things I want to say when you say that, Rachel. The first is that you seem to know your father rather *too* well, if what I’ve just read is factual on any level. The second is that you say it isn’t true, yet you use your knowledge of your father as justification for the story’s plot. How can both things exist at once—if the story isn’t true, then how can your knowledge of your father be the impetus for your writing it?”

Rachel snorts. “Yep, you’ve got me there.”

“All right. All right, Rachel. I guess we’re going to have to have a session with your father then and ask him what he makes of this. Is that what you’d like? I’m not trying to break with your confidentiality—I’m trying to give you what you need. You don’t have to lie to me or manipulate me . . . I’m *here* to help you. Tell me what you want and I’ll do it.”

“Then wait,” Rachel says, “don’t call him in yet. The story isn’t finished. I got stuck—I couldn’t figure out how to end.”

The bandages were gone by the time his daughter was allowed visitors, but due to the rain, The Lawyer found he moved slowly up the walk, the ache in his side more acute today than in recent weeks. He said to his new wife, “Her psychiatrist is named Margaret too,” and his wife said, “Oh, is she Korean?” His wife believed that because of Margaret Cho and herself, all women named Margaret were Korean, which The Lawyer found inexplicably endearing, perhaps because when he was growing up in Irish-Catholic Boston, almost every girl he knew not named Mary was Margaret, and perhaps because it was one of the only times he remembered Margaret was Korean, since in every regard she practiced the same bland Americanism—albeit a secular humanist northern urban

blue state Americanism, which was becoming its own ethnic minority—that most women he knew did, regardless of their origin. But he only said, “No, I think she’s Irish,” at which point Margaret said, “Does she have an accent?” and then The Lawyer laughed mildly and said, “Irish people only have accents in Dublin and Shirley Temple films,” and then Margaret laughed and affected an Irish accent, badly, which made The Lawyer grateful for her presence and her efforts to put him at ease, and at the same time regretful he had brought her for what she intruded upon a situation that was irrevocably his.

But in the lounge, the Irish-American psychiatrist told them that Rachel had refused his visit. They had not driven over-long to reach her—only to the North Shore suburbs—and the day was still young; they could go out and do something on their own now, like newlyweds, like a childless couple. Yet it would be a month before The Lawyer had another opportunity to see his daughter, and anxiety rose in him sharp as bile. He had not been in the same room with her since they took her from the courtroom like a stranger, a stranger who had killed a man—a boy really—to avenge him, yet now would not speak to him still. There was so much he had wanted to ask. Even the story of *how* she’d shot Justin precisely. The prosecuting counsel had argued that he’d given her the gun freely; that she’d tricked him by pretending to be thrilled he had tried to kill her father for her, and that she wanted to be like Bonnie and Clyde and said he would have to teach her to shoot a gun.

This was not a young girl afraid for her life, the prosecutor had specified. This is a calculating young woman who used her sexual charms to lie and manipulate her way into a revenge killing—who stood, once Justin Wildgoose had given her the gun and, maybe still laughing, spun around and fired point blank into his head, killing him instantly.

Had his friend Alex Fox not run from the scene in time, it is probable that the defendant would have killed him too.

But no: it seemed *improbable*—something out of a Quentin Tarantino film to The Lawyer—yet all defense counsel had managed in response was that this was a girl who had already lost her mother and infant sister, that the loss of her father, too, had caused her to “snap.” *Her father did not die, the*

prosecutor reminded the judge. *He is right here in this courtroom, none the worse for wear. The defendant knew that, or could have known it if she had gone to see him in the hospital instead of going out like a vigilante to enact her own justice. Her father could identify his shooters and would live to do so, and even as we speak Alex Fox has been incarcerated—but Justin Wildgoose paid with his life.* The Lawyer had felt light-headed then; he was, despite the prosecution's arguments, a bit the worse for wear. If not for that, Rachel might have been tried as an adult—he might be walking through a metal detector at a prison instead of waiting in a mauve “visiting day” chair here at a private hospital. There were still so many questions he had for Rachel, and now she would not see him, and it would be a month before he had the chance to try again.

Yet if he truly wanted to ask the questions, why had he brought Margaret here? Wasn't she the buffer? Could Rachel know Margaret had come, the same way she knew—somehow—where Justin and Alex had been hiding?

It felt increasingly and increasingly like something out of Kafka. His daughter had become a psychic anticipating his next move, a Queen never letting her pawns move far enough on the board for him to reach her. Was she protecting him, or protecting herself from him, or merely punishing him still?

Margaret put her hand on his shoulder and said, “She’s been through so much. It’s shame, you know—she’s humiliated to face you after what she’s done. She’ll come around. You have to let her go at her own pace, it’s the only way to help her now.”

Which Margaret said this, though? It’s all right: take your pick.

After the camcorder stopped filming, his young lover had fallen asleep with her head on his lap. It had reminded The Lawyer all at once of riding a train with his mother. He was not sure where they’d been going, since in the childhood of his memory they rarely left their small apartment

cluttered with his mother's piano and his father's books, he and his brother venturing only as far as the street outside for games of kick the can and, later, "Mean Teacher," in which he and his brother played nuns and coerced the neighborhood girls to pull down their underwear for a paddling, since girls were rarely hit at school and didn't know the boys, when sent to the principal's office, kept their pants on. While his lover slept, The Lawyer had sat on the bloodstained carpet, leaning against the wall, with the *Chicago Reader* open on his other leg, the one not hot and moist from her pale, feverish face. He sat, his mind playing with memories of his own small head on his mother's leg—hers not bare as his own was but covered in one of her stiff, floral dresses—and playing, too, with things not yet happened which already bore the quality of memory: the way he would eventually throw caution (let's face it, good sense) aside and ask this sleeping girl to move in with him; the way they would both at first pretend that this could save her, as though he were qualified to save anyone; the way it would not work in some colossal manner that would burn everything out between them and make a civilized slip back towards a casual-if-kinky affair impossible; the way she would disappear in some way—suicide or Europe or marrying some safe man she did not love or disappearing into a youth drug culture where he could not follow—and how he would remain here, on the floor of his apartment, aging while she remained frozen in memory. He would believe afterwards that, with her, he had lived so utterly in the moment—but in truth he had spent many of the nights they shared thinking of what *had been* with his mother and what was *to come* with this self-destructive girl nothing like his mother. When his lover woke amidst weak sunlight, the *Reader* was turned to exactly the same page as four hours earlier, "News of the Weird," and she had smiled at him through the pain of her scabbing welts because she needed to think of him as a man who would read the paper impassively after beating a woman bloody in his living room, and while at times he was that kind of man, he was not where this particular woman was concerned, and that was why it was all so destined to go awry, to swing so out of control.

His daughter, that long-ago evening, was still living part-time with her not-yet-dead mother, yes. Safely removed from everything. As his lover had nothing in common with his gentle mother, so his daughter seemed to him to have nothing in common with this doomed bird stretched out over his legs who needed him to hurt her so she would not have to hurt herself. (It was not victimization, whatever her lesbian sister later claimed: it had been collaboration, collusion, a taboo bond, perhaps, but a real and voluntary bond just the same.) Only later, after Rachel came to live with him, would he wonder obsessively whether he'd been wrong; whether what he had done to his by-then-gone lover and a smattering of other women over two decades would come back to haunt him through Rachel. Whether she would become a woman who craved pain simply by her proximity to a man who had made a minor career of doling it out. He had worried about this sometimes to the point of regretting everything, even and especially the night of the videotape itself—berating himself and watching his daughter cautiously, year after year, careful to, like the man his ex-wife chided him for being, never display any strong emotion in Rachel's presence: to seldom raise his voice; to always remain calm.

And look—look!—he had succeeded. His daughter had not become a victim of some predatory man like himself!

His daughter had become a killer.

Margaret's eyes turn now to the clock. It faces only her chair so that Rachel can never tell what time it is when she is in this office, this room she has visited so frequently she can barely remember any period in her life when it was not so. Margaret has been the only woman in her life for years now, since her mother died when she was twelve: her baby sister and grandmother are dead; her father, though she suspects he has mistresses (fuck-buddies, her friends would say), never brings anyone home. Her psychiatrist is the only woman Rachel ever even sees her father *talking* to.

Margaret is attractive in a middle-aged way, not stunning like Rachel's mother in a way that transcends age. Rachel herself is not beautiful like her parents, though she has the lovely power of youth and knows, when she chooses, how to use it. She will grow into a Margaret, not a Leigh, not a Mary like her maternal grandmother. She *hopes* to grow into a Margaret because it is among her superstitions that Leighs and Marys are rarely permitted to grow old at all.

"Why Daniel Pearl?" Margaret asks now, and Rachel is surprised. She had forgotten about Pearl, no longer understands the rationale behind her own reference. She blinks.

"You must have been . . ." Margaret counts on her fingers; therapists are no good at math . . . "yes, fifteen when he was killed, just like in this story. Why *that* year—why are politics a backdrop in this story anyway? What do they have to do with the video?"

"There is no videotape," Rachel reminds her.

"Yes, all right then," Margaret concurs. "Still, what does—um—secular humanism in the blue states have to do with any of this?"

Rachel doesn't know the answer—maybe doesn't even know the *this*. Lately she has been feigning Republicanism in order to tease her father, who thinks today's youth is derivatively conservative in a facile way because they have been handed every excess and freedom too easily. She explains, "My dad's been bitching and moaning about Bush's re-election . . . I guess—he talks politics a lot, even though he isn't very political. Most of the attorneys he works with are total conservatives, but he still likes to think of himself as a hippie. It's kind of quaint and retro—the way he really seems to believe it, you know, *matters*. You can tell he's from a pre-Nixon era, like no matter how cynical he acts, he hasn't figured out they're really *all* just crooks."

"So you're mocking him?" Margaret asks. "With Daniel Pearl? I'm not sure I understand."

"No," Rachel admits, "that's not it."

"Why that year, two years ago, when you were fifteen?"

Rachel chews a strand of dark brown hair, watching it turn black.

Margaret says, more loudly, “What are you going to miss when you get to Stanford, Rach? Is there anything here, or are you glad to leave it all behind?”

“It’s not gladness,” Rachel tells her. “I’ll miss my dad. You know he won’t really come visit me much. He’ll think I need my freedom, blah blah blah. I won’t come home either because I won’t want to bother him.” She looks urgently at Margaret, narrows her eyes. “You’ve known me for five years,” she prods. “It’s just a story—you’re the one who told me to write a story about my family. You do realize, right, that I”—she sputters—“I didn’t *kill* anyone!”

“Of course,” Margaret says quietly now. “Yes, honey, I know.”

“I was reading that book—that novel, *Disgrace*—my dad hasn’t read it, he doesn’t read novels. The lesbian girl, from *my* story I mean, she used to be my babysitter when I was little. My dad went out with her sister for a while. I had a crush on the lesbian sister in my pseudo bi phase when lesbianism was all the rage.” She laughs. “She was the only lesbian I knew! And you remember Justin. From my stupid-boys-were-all-the-rage phase.”

“Oh.” Margaret brightens a bit. “I see.” Talking almost to herself.

Rachel stands. She is too tall for this office now. She will have to avoid coming home at winter break and summer—she won’t fit into this room anymore.

They hug. That sort of thing is permitted, now that the sexual abuse scares of the early nineties have mainly passed and instead people are afraid of bigger things: of terrorism and the Patriot Act and the death of Irony and small pox and Donald Rumsfeld. What comes around goes around. People are allowed to hug their shrinks again.

As Rachel turns to leave, Margaret calls out, “I know the videotape is real, Rach. I know you found it—I know that part of the story is true. Believe me, hon, I know better than anyone what a

sharp cookie you are, but you're only seventeen. There are things you just *couldn't* . . . I won't tell your father. I realize you don't want him to know."

Rachel stands, frozen in the moment. In the narrow, shadowy opening of Margaret's doorway, she sees so many things at once. The way her mother's red curls fell over her face like a curtain that never lifted long enough, then fell permanently: dark. Her father sitting monk-like on the floor with a stack of legal briefs, the apartment silent because she is no longer there to urge him to a chair, remind him of his bad back. The women who will fuck him on their couch in her absence, until he is too old for that to happen much or at all, but Rachel will still be gone. The Pacific, not far from Stanford: the first ocean she will see without her father beside her, its vast expanse rendering her life for the first time comfortingly small. A tidal wave of hair, pale yellow, roaring across her father's lover's skinny back as she turned her head sharply back and forth—one long, solitary strand dragging along wet skin so that when it returned to the camera's focus, falling over the girl's face, the edge was tinged bright red with blood. Rachel's heart pounds: an ocean of blood inside her, trying to get out. She closes her eyes in a momentary magical panic: maybe she can disappear, too, like the girl from the video. Then thinks about what she *should* say, how she should deny it, and what it will mean about her life if the videotape is real. What choices will be left her: to be another woman in her father's body count, or to become a predator somehow, too. How it will mean she cannot come home over college breaks, because he is bad and will hurt her, even though she loves him and he never has. How her feet feel bolted to the earth fighting this tide even as her head screams *Run!*

She manages to open her eyes, but she says nothing. She does not even close the door.

MY PARASITE

(an earlier version of this story appeared in *The Rumpus*, January 26, 2013)

First, they did things the usual way. Rita and Lila met other conjoined twins at the conventions and dated them rigorously. Most were unattractive and clumsy, but Rita and Lila were determined, or rather Rita was determined so Lila had to get her game face on. The high point on Rita's list was when they dated the Cole twins for nearly a year. Toph and Russ Cole did not even share a liver; it was common knowledge in the community that they could have been successfully detached. At one time, law had mandated such things, but since the two-child policies had gone into effect, conjoining provided a potential loophole. Mrs. Cole, however, had no other child. When people asked why she had never pursued separation for her boys, she smiled numbly and said, "They could never run in opposite directions this way." It had to be a joke, Lila thought, though Mrs. Cole didn't seem the joking kind.

The Cole brothers possessed considerably more mobility than most in the community, and when Lila and Rita dated them, they were able to have what Rita proudly extolled as "normal sex." At first, Toph and Russ took turns, but Rita said that was creepy; she didn't like looking up at Toph patiently waiting his turn while Russ breaknecked through his climax. "Everybody has to be simultaneously involved," she said patiently, like an ambassador from the outside world. "The way singletons do it." It had been at Rita's suggestion that Toph "visit the back door" so that each penis could be occupied. When Lila protested, Rita laughed at her. "But you don't even *feel* anything down there! I'm the one who feels like I'm giving birth out of my ass, and you don't see me having a sniveling fit about it." Lila couldn't argue—still, since Toph took to fucking their ass so eagerly that Lila rarely saw the face of her own boyfriend anymore, she couldn't help but feel that somehow Rita and Russ were on a romantic date, involving vaginas and regular date-things, whereas she was

getting ass-raped by an invisible stranger. At first Toph had been sweet and attentive, Russ the wilder of the Cole boys and hence a natural pairing for Rita, but by the end Russ and Toph were both Rita's boyfriends and would just push Lila's torso to the side during sex, sometimes pinching her nipples hard and chortling, and other times not even bothering to undress her above the waist. While Rita bellowed, "Yes, harder," Lila sobbed unabashedly into the Cole brothers' greasy boy-pillowcases or crumb-ridden carpets.

Eventually, of course, Russ and Toph pronounced her a "downer" and moved on—last Lila and Rita had heard, they were dating a woman in a wheelchair who, Rita said, probably couldn't feel it either when they screwed her, but wasn't such a baby about it.

Soon after, Lila began to fantasize about how wonderful it would be not to have feeling in *any* of the parts of her body she shared with Rita. If she were unable to control their left leg, for example, Rita would be crippled: permanently bound to the inanimate albatross of Lila's dead leg. She thought of the non-conjoined multiples she met at conventions: quadruplets, even octuplets, and how they could choose to *part* for the afternoon to attend different panels or to meet friends or lovers apart from their siblings. Lila could only speculate on what it might be like to talk with a friend without Rita being present, or to hide her journal somewhere no one would see her put it. Some conjoined twins seemed truly like one person, which might be almost as sweet as being able to hide a diary or go on a date alone with a boy. But Rita was a whirlwind of passions and angers, Lila forever sucked into her dangerous vortex. When the doctor said Lila had a weak heart, it surprised her not at all, since living attached to Rita was like running a perpetual marathon. Needless to say, of course, Rita's own heart was unflawed.

Clyde just came right up to Rita one day in the Food-o-Rama, sauntering past the people in their actual line, and said, “I been watching you for awhile now. You’re as pretty as a real girl. How come you two don’t look nothing alike? You got it rough, honey—I know no girl as pretty as you’d be standing next to this dog on purpose.”

Rita and Lila looked so much alike as children that their parents had written down which side each girl occupied, and taped the chart around various rooms of their house for the convenience of guests, arrows pointing at the appropriate head heralding “LILA!” and “RITA!” Hence, at first even Lila laughed, mistaking Clyde for a wit; the man whose groceries the girls were bagging chuckled too. Clyde edged further into the space the grocery-buying-man occupied, a grin hanging loopy on his face. He looked like a cross between Howdy Doody and an outlaw, and the combination pleased Rita, even as it slowly dawned on her that he didn’t get the joke they all believed he had made. For some reason this made her laugh all the harder and she said, “Wanna take me out after my shift later?”

“Well, what’re we supposed to do with *her*?” Clyde asked, pointing at Lila.

“Brilliant,” Lila muttered under her breath. “You’ve snagged a real quantum physicist this time, Reet. Oh, don’t mind me—we’ll just unzip this costume and I’ll step on out . . .”

“She’s such a pain in my ass,” Rita drawled. “She has to come too, but you don’t have to buy her anything to eat.”

“Oh, do I ever wish it was *your* ass,” Lila said.

“Christ,” Clyde said, “does Ugly over here always talk so much?”

Rita shrugged her delicate shoulders, but still they banged into Lila’s on the way down. “Well,” she suggested, dropping her voice. “We can always go to your place. Then we can just gag her and tie her up and she won’t bother anybody.”

“You two,” the grocery-buying-man said happily. He was one of their best customers—and they had *many* regulars who came in several times a week just to be stunned by how much more quickly (twice, actually) four arms can accomplish a task than two. “You’re so funny! The way you talk to each other. I just love it!”

Clyde, however, just winked at Rita as he sauntered away. “Deal.”

Rita was on fire, and it was all Clyde’s fault. No matter what else she was doing—bagging at Food-o-Rama, showering, screen-surfing with their parents—all she could think of was the next time she and Clyde would be able to do it. That, and of course The Problem Of Lila.

When they were little, the frenzy of newly passed laws had encouraged everyone to act as though Rita and Lila were only one person. This hadn’t troubled the girls, exactly, or at least it hadn’t Rita, since they had not realized, precisely, that there was any other way in which they might be treated. They were what their Conjoinment Coach referred to as “wholly symbiotic.” Coach told them the parable of Adam and Eve discovering shame and covering up with fig leaves, and explained that all multiples—especially conjoined twins—were often “delayed” in their discovery of shame, and that shame was *the* crucial ingredient in humanity. This had been pivotal in the case decreeing conjoined twins to count only as one person on the census, allowing their parents to pursue a further pregnancy, although it had since been proven that the missing ingredient of shame was acquired by adulthood, and so each twin was still permitted a separate vote and could marry separate spouses. Until discovering shame, however, one could not be truly regarded as human. As they approached adolescence, Rita watched with fascination and horror as Lila began exhibiting burgeoning signs of her humanity: trying to keep a diary and insisting Rita not read it (which was of course futile) and, when they had diarrhea and stank up the bathroom, seeming pained to have Rita present, though the shit belonged to both of them. Lila had even protested at first that it was “perverted” for poor Toph

Cole to go up her shirt and touch her boobs because Rita and Russ were watching! When Lila spoke to their Conjoinment Coach about these things, Rita had to pretend that Lila's issues were rational. She would nod and say, "I know, I know, but we don't have a choice—we have to make the best of what we've been given, don't we? It isn't as though we can do things any other way!" Coach had to grant them this, and as soon as their eighteenth birthday passed and their parents could no longer force the issue, Rita refused to attend sessions, afraid she might slip up and reveal that shame was not in her repertoire.

Even though surgical separation was no longer mandatory, it was still the norm, and the courts were known to step in when disagreements arose. There had been that case of Maisy B., out in the Oaklands. Maisy B. petitioned the Supreme Court for the right to euthanize her sister, presenting evidence of her own intellectual superiority and More Meaningful Goals, and arguing for the importance of prioritizing her survival above that of her "parasitic twin," as the media said, despite the fact that both women were in their twenties and bore no resemblance to the correct medical usage of the term. Still, those sisters shared a heart; they had already exceeded their life expectancy and a choice *had* to be made. Once Maisy B. was granted her own body, she dropped out of med school and was now leading an Altogether Less Meaningful life as a reality screen actress, which hurt the case as a precedent for petitions by other conjoined twins. Still, Rita sometimes had nightmares of being targeted, Lila presenting Rita's lack of shame as evidence for putting her down like a dog.

"Twins have ESP, right?" Clyde said when Rita confided this fear, weepy and post-coital. "Probably she really is cooking that shit up behind your back and you can read her mind so you're on to her." This didn't seem like something Lila would do, but Clyde argued that you never knew about people. At school, Lila had always scored higher than Rita on tests, and she still liked to read,

not caring if her screen light kept Rita awake at night. Maybe Lila *would* convince some panel of judges that she, too, could be a doctor instead of a grocery-bagging freak show at the Food-o-Rama. Clyde mostly said these things after they'd sedated Lila with three Klonopin and fucked fast as jackrabbits, because sooner or later, even though the girls had different stomachs and intestines, the Klonopin would cross over into Rita's blood too and she would pass out, usually on the drive home. They'd tried *everything* before the Klonopins: putting pillowcases over Lila's head and covering her with blankets to pretend she wasn't there, and once even wrapping an Ace bandage all the way around her arms and torso to keep her utterly still before gagging her with a facecloth—still, Clyde couldn't forget her presence, and sometimes he'd go soft thinking about “her ugliness” and the yuck-factor of her existence. Lila fought them before dates, and Clyde would have to bring his truck round the back of the Food-o-Rama so they could smack Lila around until they could wrangle her upper half into the back seat, where Rita would roll on top of her and press her flat so she couldn't scream for help out the windows.

This was grueling work. Rita and Clyde sometimes ended up so exhausted by the time they'd subdued Lila that they were scarcely in the mood for intercourse anymore. Rita's muscles ached the next day, and Clyde said, “It's too much to ask of a man, baby, just too much.” “Just ignore her,” Rita begged. She grabbed herself between the legs, smacking Lila's hands away as she thrashed, blindfolded and gagged, beside them. “This is *mine*—I'm the one who can give consent! She can't stop me from having a life!”

“Easy for you to say,” Clyde said. “She may not be able to send your ass to prison without going herself, but what if she charges me with kidnapping or some shit?”

The Klonopin was Rita's idea of compromise. Clyde had been skeptical, but amazingly Lila acquiesced without protest, holding out her hand and swallowing the moment they got in the truck.

“We could give her anything,” Clyde whispered incredulously, Lila’s mouth gaping with sleep, his soft cock just beginning to slide out of Rita’s vagina. Rita glowed. When Lila was sedated, their cunt truly, truly felt like hers alone. Rita had never had her own toys. Lila always put her fingers and mouth on everything, curious and longing. Their vagina felt like a plush teddy bear she didn’t have to share. She and Clyde shaved her pubic hair retro, like Clyde said all the women in black market pornography did. Those actresses were all wrinkly or dead by now, but Rita’s plump, youthful vagina looked fresh and pink like a hairless mouse. Lila screamed when she saw it, but by then they were home on the toilet and there was nothing she could do.

“We could give her arsenic,” Clyde said, his fingers circling Rita’s furthest-from-Lila breast. “We could give her battery acid.”

“You’re an idiot,” Rita said. “I’d die then too. What’s the matter with you?”

“We could cut off her head,” Clyde said. “I could steal an ax.”

Rita repeated song lyrics in her head to drown him out. She was aware of the fact that being a slave to the penis of a man who thought that stealing—rather than purchasing—an ax would be the perfect way to cover up a crime involving: a) copious amounts of blood and b) a decapitated, headless torso attached to the body of his girlfriend, would not bode well for her should Lila attempt to petition for Rita’s extinction. She might be proven not only shameless but mentally challenged.

“She’s harmless, really,” Rita said, though she didn’t believe it. Lila’s unhappiness was a virus, a gaping maw of need. “We’ve already got a great solution that makes everyone happy. Lila’s always been an insomniac, and now she gets great sleep!”

“Man,” Clyde said, “this is bullshit. We never even get to go bowling or nothing.”

He was heading down the same escape route as the Brothers Cole, and there was nothing Rita could say to assuage him. Lila ruined *everything*. Rita began to cry, and Clyde kissed her face, his

whiskers making her feel she had bugs crawling over her skin. “Don’t worry,” he cajoled. “We’ll figure out a way to get rid of her.”

“I’m trapped,” Rita whimpered. “Save yourself, Clyde, I won’t hold it against you.”

But he didn’t let go of her. “Baby,” he promised, and Rita’s brain sparked back to life.

“Baby.”

Lila kept waking to bruises on her legs. Clyde went a little crazy when he came, Rita said, shrugging her off. He liked to slap Rita’s thighs and ass at the moment of climax, and sometimes he didn’t aim right and hit Lila instead.

“This doesn’t look like a slap,” Lila said, inspecting the latest bruise, purple outside and yellow inside, like a plum.

“Okay, Maisy B.,” Rita scoffed. “I didn’t realize you were some kind of doctor who specialized in distinguishing different kinds of bruises.”

“You’d better tell me what that oaf is doing to my legs,” Lila said. “Or I’m not taking the Klonopin. I’ll tell the media all the stuff Clyde’s done to me. I’ll tell Dad, too.”

“Oooh,” Rita said, smacking her in the head. “Dad. I’m scared.”

“You’re the one who felt it when he’d spank us,” Lila mocked. “Wah, wah, Daddy stop please I’ll be good, wah wah!”

“Yeah, well, I’m a little big to spank now.”

“Don’t count on it,” Lila warned. Then she flicked on her Read-It again and ignored Rita, even when Rita whacked her again. She read the words aloud, and Rita had to put the pillow over her head to fall asleep.

The pregnancy made every hour of the news circuits. Toph and Russ Cole, who had lived in Thailand ever since relocating to star in the reality show, Siam, even heard about it and instantly signed Rita. Rita typed the symbols for *Where are you?* and the Cole brothers texted back with real words: On location. *Gr8 porn wrk here, u shld cum. Bring baby.*

“Who is that?” Lila asked, pawing at the Messenger in Lila’s hands. “If we get one more reporter over here I’m going to kill you, I swear to god.”

“It’s no one,” Rita said, snapping the Messenger shut. “I thought you were always the one who wanted some fucking privacy.”

“That’s all over now.” Lila rubbed their stomach. “If you think I’m ever leaving you alone with this baby, you’ve got another thing coming. You’d probably leave it on the ground to get humped and peed on by stray dogs.”

“I’m the mother,” Rita said. “I’m the one who gave consent. I’m the one who did fertility treatments. The court will rule in my favor. A baby has a right to one mother. I’m going to marry Clyde and have a normal family. They’re going to cut you off me like a wart.”

“Go ahead, keep dreaming.” Lila continued crocheting their baby’s blanket, humming a lullaby that Rita eerily didn’t recognize.

The last time the girls saw Clyde, they got into his truck without any protest from Lila. Their stomach was getting too big to fit comfortably in the cab anymore, and Rita struggled to keep the annoyance off her face, knowing Lila would put her hands over their stomach to shield the baby from bumps in the road, so she didn’t have to. Clyde prattled on, but it was painful to listen. Pregnancy had made Rita hornier than ever, but the doctors classified them as high risk for a miscarriage and had them on “pelvic rest,” which precluded sex and walking too quickly up or down stairs. Clyde wanted his cock sucked constantly, and suddenly Rita was envious that Lila just got to

sit there reading or signing while she did all the work. When she and Lila were little, they'd had an elaborate code involving men's names, to communicate without their parents' understanding. Clyde's penis was what they had once called "Wendel," which denoted something pale, watery and repulsive. *Wendel* could refer to humans, animals, even food under the right circumstances. Redheads like Clyde were notoriously Wendel. How was it that Rita had never noticed Clyde's essential Wendel-ness before?

"I heard you can make a bundle if you sign up with one of them breast-milk co-ops," Clyde was saying, squeezing Rita's knee. They had to sit with Lila in the middle, of course, but he reached right over Lila, his arm smacking the protrusion of their belly like it was nothing. "People are paying a good buck for that tittie yogurt and tittie ice cream. He squeezed Rita's left breast. "Moo! Moo!"

Rita forced herself to laugh.

"His DNA is bound to be recessive," Lila said, turning her face from Clyde. "All the laws of evolution would point in that direction. I think the baby is reasonably safe."

"Quiet down, Dead Man Walking." Clyde chortled. "That verdict's coming in any day now."

Rita involuntarily straightened her torso, inching it closer to Lila's. Lila said nothing, but her hand slipped off their stomach, brushing away the invisible imprint of Clyde's meat paw on Rita's knee.

For a short while, their story inspired a rash of rape accusations from others in the conjoined community. Their story, it seemed, was not so unique, only just unique enough to be marketable. Rita's memoir, *A Vagina of My Own*, became a Read-It bestseller. It told the harrowing story of one conjoined twin's gradual acquisition of shame, resulting—unfortunately after years of helping men rape her sister—in her painful emergence into full Humanity. With Lila's help, Rita was granted amnesty after testifying against Clyde, who got three years at a Rape Farm for his crimes. The Cole

brothers, of course, could have stood trial too, along with several others, but Russ and Toph had some sweet gigs lined up for Rita and Lila in Southeast Asia as soon as the baby was born, and Lila had always wanted to travel. Their tickets were already purchased when one morning, Rita woke feeling clammy and weak, to find Lila dead beside her on the bed they'd shared since girlhood. Lila's heart, the doctors said, had finally given way under the strain of pregnancy. Rita was barely alive by the time they got her to the operating theater and performed surgery, too quickly even for the cameras to arrive before Lila's corpse was separated from Rita's body, their daughter removed in an emergency C-section. The baby was a slightly underweight three pounder, though nothing to worry about compared with Rita and Lila's own low birth weight twenty-two years before.

Their old Conjoinment Coach had retired, but Rita's new Coach said it was normal that Rita was having a hard time going into stores and restaurants alone. At home, her daughter gave her someone to talk to, although she found Baby Lila strangely alien, unable to understand elemental things like the nature of *Wendel*. Her daughter's mannerisms struck her as too polite, formal, nothing like the no-boundaries banter Rita had enjoyed with the Real Lila. Talking with her twin had been, she now realized, more like looking into a mirror and hearing all your own self-loathing thoughts vocalized aloud, and having a target upon which to redirect them. What a comfort that had been. Privacy, it seemed, meant little more than having to keep your ugly thoughts a secret, which was a horrible chore, tiring and hard to acclimate to. For Baby Lila's sake, Rita tried. The Cole brothers couldn't find her very lucrative work now that she was a singleton with a strange, deformed curve in her spine, but she and Baby Lila did visit them twice in Thailand, and Rita's vagina and anus were infinitely easier to access without Real Lila in the way, which was a couple week's worth of flimsy consolation. Once, Clyde wrote from prison, *You stupid bitch I will kill you when I get out of here and take that baby away from your freak show ass*, and Rita knew she should notify the authorities but she didn't

bother, merely added a clause to her will in which she made sure to name her parents Baby Lila's legal guardians should any harm befall her.

She waited. Alone with her own perilously strong heart, she waited night after night for the voice in her head to summon her home.

CAFÉ DE FLORE

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Her senses were different now, since the baby. Things jolted her. She heard crying that was not there. Sometimes, she felt the baby's weight on her chest, heavy against her heart and breasts, and woke up gasping only to find the baby asleep in her own dresser drawer across the bedroom.

Rebecca's hands had acquired a permanent shake, the kind she remembered her grandmother having. She knew it was from carrying the baby constantly while also trying to do things for Leo, who never let her alone when his father was at work. He followed her and the baby, jabbering, asking, wanting. She had ignored him at first, but then he took Daniel's electric razor and shaved down the middle of his head; then he buttered the dog, even its small pink anus and the insides of its ears. Now she sometimes tied Leo to the defunct radiator when she couldn't tend to him, when the baby was screaming. A normal child would cry at this, she knew, but Leo didn't seem offended by being tethered like a horse. It didn't shut him up either, but if she closed the door she didn't hear him much over the baby's screaming.

The car horn out front had been blaring for some time by the time Rebecca heard it. This made her proud of herself in an imprecise way. The constant noise-level in Greenwich Village existed at a pitch that would seem jarring in most places—certainly on Long Island!—but had come, instead, to sound merely like background static from a radio program to Rebecca. She rolled over, thinking Daniel would be asleep—he rarely responded to stimuli of any kind these days once evening hit and he had his shot. Instead, seeing his shadowed, bearded form already upright, she realized it was actually Daniel who'd *woken* her, not the noise itself. He was prodding her arm saying, “Baby, it's wild, you've gotta see this, it's a six-ring circus outside, come on.” She rose, senseless

from the bed, hands trembling while the baby slept on for once (and how dare Daniel wake her while the baby was actually *sleeping*?) Still she went to the window to see.

In front of the apartment, across from the park, a man had fallen asleep—passed out—in his car. His head had fallen on the steering wheel, somehow with sufficient force to activate his horn. Either the man was very heavy—Rebecca couldn't tell from here—or the horn was busted, because it just kept going like someone was blowing into it with all the air in the world. On the pavement, neighbors had started trickling out of their apartments, spilling loosely into the street to see what was causing the racket. Two men in motorcycle leather—they must have come from the park—had procured (or already came equipped with) black sticks like the kind police carried and were beating the car window, shouting at the man, who was dead to the world, to get out.

Next to Rebecca, Daniel threw back his head in laughter, the bulge of his Adam's apple so vulnerable that she had to look away.

She was already pregnant when they had moved in. Greenwich Village, Rebecca had boasted to her few friends still speaking to her since Daniel—and though they said she was crazy, she believed they were impressed too. Someday, this would be like telling people you used to hang around Café de Flore when Simone de Beauvoir was just at the next table scribbling in her notebooks. Greenwich Village was rundown, sure, but full of artists, bohemians, *thinkers* like Daniel. Unheard of things happened here. In their first few weeks in the neighborhood, Rebecca would drag Daniel through Washington Square Park on weekends, delighting like a child when a grown man decked out in a pink chiffon dress buzzed by on roller skates. *He's called the Peach Fairy*, she wrote to her best friend from high school, now majoring in Education at Syracuse. Everyone in the neighborhood called him that—you only had to be in earshot to know—but still Rebecca imagined the way her letters made her sound like an insider to some hidden, glamorous world beyond the ken

of would-be-teachers at Syracuse. Weekends, she and Daniel would stroll past the swings and sandbox hand-in-hand, and Rebecca would say, *Here's where I'll be spending my time once the baby comes*, until Daniel showed her that the sandbox was mainly used as a latrine by the drunks, bums and junkies in the park—until she realized that if she went walking alone, without Daniel, men hissed at her constantly asking if she wanted to pick up some dope even though she was starting to show. Clearly it would be impossible to bring a baby here. Clearly, if her friends were impressed at all, it was from a distance. No one would ever, ever visit.

They were not married. Her parents had wanted them to get married, and so they had not: it was as simple as that. By that time, Daniel's parents had already mainly stopped speaking to him anyway. They kept in sporadic touch because of Leo, but as it became more and more apparent that the boy wasn't quite right, their interest waned. They had already given up on Daniel before Rebecca ever met him. Back, Rebecca supposed, when Leo's mother had become pregnant, and Daniel hadn't married her either, and then she took off and left him with Leo when Leo was only three. Who knew where that girl was now? Daniel had never tried to find her, he said; he was glad she'd split. She was a whiner, and getting fat, and couldn't handle her drugs, and her brains were shit and that was why Leo was "off." Good riddance to her. Daniel made little money as a philosophy grad student, so supported Leo by working as a mover too; the boy stayed with an old woman down the hall from the apartment Daniel had rented when Rebecca first met him. That babysitter was the one who gave Rebecca the idea about the radiator—it had terrified her at the time, that Daniel would leave his son with a person like that—but now she saw the wisdom in the old woman's advice. The old woman had used a dog leash, but Rebecca used gauzy, colorful scarves.

Rebecca had been nineteen when she let Daniel make her come with his fingers under the table of the campus bar where he hung out with the other TAs. She had been to a bar only once before, with her older cousin Jacob. She didn't like the taste of beer, but liked the way Daniel's dark

hair curled into the collars of his shirts like a twisting vine slowly unfurling its dominance over a building until it overtook everything civilized and man-made—often, while Daniel spoke in class, Rebecca imagined him naked, his hair gone wild and snaking long around his limbs. She was having some troubles in the course—with concentration, with Hegel—and so Daniel had invited her for a drink after class to discuss how he could help. Once his hand had already rubbed its rough heel against her pubic hair, she let him show her the first chapter of his novel at his apartment, and by morning even let him make love to her without using protection because she was starting to spot, so she couldn't get pregnant. There wasn't much blood yet, but Daniel had whispered to her, "It's sacred. I'd bathe in it if I could. I'd drink it up." That frightened her a little, and she was glad it was only his penis touching the blood, which was old and used-up and dirty in the eyes of God and her parents and every sane person on the planet earth. A penis was more impersonal than a mouth, and she didn't want his mouth touching her there right then. She wondered if maybe he was crazy. It turned her on too.

Soon she had grown nauseous and fat, and she expected Daniel to leave her once she told him, but he didn't. At first she couldn't believe the worldly, adult turn her life had taken. Suddenly, she and Daniel were hand-in-hand in the park, their long hair flowing, her belly beginning to bulge. Rebecca loved the way anyone over forty eyed them with suspicion or distaste—loved the way others in their long-haired, unmarried tribe came right up to them in public and spoke as if they were longtime friends. In college, she had been a member of a Jewish sorority, and now she saw that Daniel's life was a sorority or fraternity of sorts, too, but larger, on the verge of an explosion—a dangerous, exotic fraternity veering out of control. There were marches, protests, arrests—she never stayed long enough to get arrested since she was pregnant, of course, but the nearness of it all felt like constant foreplay. But then it turned out that Daniel used smack much more frequently than the once a month he'd told Rebecca. Then it turned out that Daniel got fired twice in one month and

now they could not afford a phone. Soon he was shooting up every night, and because she didn't see him during the day when he was working, who could say how much more often? They moved into an even cheaper apartment, but at least it was a two-bedroom so Leo no longer had to sleep in the living room. When the baby was older, they could move it in with Leo, if Leo could be trusted by then not to step on it or smother it in its sleep. They made their plans in their dark bed, Rebecca struggling to get comfortable inside the bulk of her body, Daniel nodding, going off on tangents, sometimes starting to snore open-mouthed while she was in the middle of a sentence. She turned twenty in her seventh month. Old enough, her mothers friends would say, to know better.

“What’s going on, Dad?” Leo squeaked. He came into the room without knocking, and instead of waiting for an answer the way Rebecca had always imagined children would be, streamed right into, “Who’re those guys, how come they’re hitting our car, what’s that old man doing in the car how’d he get in there dad are you gonna go down there and stop them before they break the window what’s going on?”

Rebecca tried not to hear him. Outside, the nightsticks couldn’t seem to shatter that car’s windshield. She marveled. Who knew that an ordinary car, for an ordinary person, would be equipped with nearly shatterproof glass?

Daniel screamed, “Holy shit!” Then: “Baby, that’s *our* fucking car!”

Rebecca stared. Daniel had owned the same car when she met him that they did now. She did not know how to drive, but sat in the passenger’s seat anytime they left the city, which wasn’t often now that her parents weren’t speaking to her. Still, even now that Leo had pointed it out and Daniel was screaming and running for the stairwell—even as she narrowed her eyes and stared hard—she found she recognized it not at all.

For some reason, there was still a vestige of the nice Jewish boy in Daniel, and perhaps that was why he slammed the door behind him instead of letting it flap open wide in the night, so that any neighbor could gawk at his wife's veinous, milk-filled tits through her thin nightgown; so that his hyperactive, possibly mentally ill son could run amok out into the hall. He closed the door against the prying eyes of others like themselves, down on their luck or never acquainted with luck in the first place, from eyes like Cargill's, who had already seen more of Daniel's wife than her milky tits. The door slammed, louder due to its proximity than the beating of the nightsticks against the windshield downstairs. Leo, yelling, "Dad, can I come with you?" jumped.

That was when the baby began to cry.

When they first met Cargill, Daniel thought he was a cool guy. Cargill was about the age of their fathers, but his old lady was Rebecca's age and a real live Indian, with smooth black hair all the way down to her ass. Neither Daniel nor Rebecca had ever met an Indian before, but the fact that Cargill lived and consorted with one made him seem worldly and hip to them in a way they could not articulate, even to one another. Rebecca was already starting to show by then, and Cargill's lover's lithe body reminded her of her former self, of her college days which already seemed eons ago and all the sexy, tight-skinned, long-limbed girls who sauntered around the quad in filmy shirts and short skirts letting the sun brown their invincible skin. Already Rebecca felt old and dowdy next to Cargill's woman, but because she still hoped to return to that former self once the baby came out of her, she thought it would be good to befriend this girl, whose name was Kima—though Cargill called her "Tonto," a fact that both scandalized and titillated Rebecca and Daniel—so that once she looked like her normal self again, she would already have a beautiful, young girlfriend with whom to pal around. Though she knew it didn't make her seem very attractive, she found herself, after a few glasses of wine, complaining to Cargill and Kima about her horrible morning sickness, how it hadn't

faded after the first trimester like people said it would, and wasn't just in the morning either but twenty-four hours per day. All she had to do was clean hair from a brush or touch a piece of raw broccoli or smell an unwashed bath towel and she was on her knees retching. That was when Cargill suggested that maybe she should drop by his clinic.

He owned the building. Daniel had said, "Be real sweet to him when you go over there. We gotta befriend them, baby. We'll have 'em over again, get them high again, shoot the breeze some more, and maybe pretty soon they'll give us a break on the rent. He doesn't need the money. He's a *doctor*, he must be loaded."

Rebecca knew that it made no sense to think Cargill had money. No one with money would possibly live *here*. But the smack had gone to Daniel's brain now. He didn't write his novel anymore, or recite poetry to her, or rant about Heidegger, or rail at the television about Vietnam, or even the radio now that they didn't have a television. He didn't care about anything, and his erection rarely stuck around for long, and he was losing his looks. But Rebecca was growing big and was too sick to work and her parents had written her off so totally and seemingly without remorse that she would have let herself be covered with molasses and buried in an anthill before going back to them with her hand out. She was trapped.

So even though she knew Cargill was no kind of real doctor like stupid Daniel thought he was, he was still her best hope.

Outside, Daniel burst onto the street, all thrashing limbs and guttural railing. Rebecca recognized Leo in him, and all at once realized the terror Daniel's ex-old lady must have felt when she saw the two men she was stuck with: how strangely and irrevocably damaged they both were, and how she would have to play nursemaid to them both forever. It was enough, really, to make any

girl run. Daniel had picked up an umbrella from next to the door and he was swinging it like a weapon, shouting at the bikers, “Get the fuck away from my car!”

The bikers didn’t register him at first. They were intent on breaking the windshield, and while Rebecca could see cracks in it, small circular cave-ins that, from this distance, resembled intricate spiders webs, the glass refused to shatter so they could push it aside and reach in to pull the old drunk out and kick him senseless. It occurred to Rebecca for the first time—really, it should have been abundantly clear from the first—that the old man, despite the bikers’ efforts to abuse him—must already be dead and hence long past their desire to beat him senseless.

Daniel could have, at any time up to a certain point, turned around and come back into the building. The bikers did not care about him. Though he was hollering at the top of his lungs about it being his car, no one seemed interested in this fact or—probably—even believed him. There were a lot of crazies in the neighborhood, and right now, with his undershirt and boxer shorts and junkie’s pallor and spit-flying rage, Daniel looked very much the part of one of them. He could have come back inside and put his head onto Rebecca’s lap and said, Baby there were two of them and they had sticks and I just had this useless umbrella, I’m sorry there was nothing I could do, and Rebecca would have comforted him even if insincerely, because what little work he still procured paid their bills, and because she didn’t care about the car she couldn’t drive and they barely used, and because Daniel could still elicit pity from her out of the ashes of what had once felt like love, and because, as she realized daily, she had nowhere else to go.

Instead, he kept shouting. Until he, too, had become part of the static, the background noise it took awhile to register, and eventually the neighbors and the bikers turned to face him, and he came at the two men with his waving umbrella, and in the bedroom the baby was screaming so loudly that Rebecca could no longer hear what was being said on the street below.

Cargill's "office" was really just one of the apartments. Not the one he lived in with Kima, but an unfinished one with nothing but an examining table and an old sofa with the stuffing leaking out one end, and a straight-back chair in front of a folding table. These pieces of furniture were shoved into one room; the kitchen and bedroom were empty, the floors and walls bare. Rebecca could see a thin film of dust on the floor of the kitchen, as though Cargill—or whoever cleaned in here—had only ever tended to the small patch of apartment where the furniture dwelled. When she went to the bathroom (she constantly had to pee), a roach ran from the toilet paper roll and up the wall.

Back near the cluster of furniture, Cargill had her lie down on the examining table. He felt her abdomen, which made her self-conscious, and pulled her shirt up to listen to her heart with a stethoscope—the materialization of which, from his pocket reassured her. None of Rebecca's bras fit well anymore, but she had put one on for the occasion, so that Cargill wouldn't think she was trying to flaunt her inflated body before him, to seduce him in exchange for the lower rent she knew Daniel would eventually hit him up for. After he had listened to her heart, though, Cargill handed her a hospital gown—a real hospital gown—and told her to go into the bathroom to change so he could do a pelvic exam.

A sick, numb feeling had started to spread over Rebecca's limbs, making them heavy and ineffectual. She imagined telling Cargill indignantly that she had no intention of getting undressed and realized how absurd she would sound. She was pregnant for God's sake—everything *about* her medical state had to do with her pelvis! And though he did not have a medical degree that she knew of, his practice was real—she had lived in the apartment long enough to know that he had many patients, most of them female and about her age. Kima's friends, she assumed. Surely Kima wouldn't refer her friends if her old man were a quack or a pervert. Cargill had said "women's troubles" were his specialty. As she disrobed in the bathroom, she reminded herself of her parents,

full of mistrust for anyone without the proper degree or societal stamp of approval. Labels were all they cared about. Certainly they didn't care about *her*, their knocked-up daughter who had betrayed all they stood for by loving Daniel. She imagined what Daniel would think if he saw her here shirking in the bathroom like some square virgin who thought the world was dying for a glimpse of her precious snatch. Rebecca slipped on the robe and opened the door.

She had never had a pelvic exam before, but it comforted her that Cargill did not seem excited by touching her. His fingers felt cold and thick and hurt a bit, but she was pregnant, and everything hurt these days. Soon enough he withdrew them. Then he asked her to sit, and when she did he untied the gown from behind her neck and took it off entirely. He squeezed her breast, asking if her milk had come in yet. Before she could answer, he squeezed the other, saying, "No."

Then he crossed the room to the straight-backed chair and sat in it. The hospital gown was still in his lap, so Rebecca sat nude on the table while he began to talk. She was reminded, abruptly, of *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a painting she had studied in an art history class. Unlike at a normal doctor's office, there was no sheet on the table, either paper or real. The faux-leather felt cold.

"You'd be surprised how many girls have your exact problem," Cargill said cheerfully, waving her gown a bit for emphasis. "You don't eat a lot of garlic, do you?"

"Garlic?" Rebecca asked, folding her hands (primly, stupidly) over her thatch of pubic hair.

"Yeah. Cook with it, brew it as a tea, that sort of thing?"

"Oh. Uhh." Lately, she and Daniel ate cereal or toast for just about every meal. Daniel was a vegetarian, but he didn't seem to actually like *vegetables*, and now with her nausea . . . "No."

"That's what I thought. Your body is full of bacteria and yeast. Garlic is a natural anti-fungal, a natural bacteria fighter. You've let your system get all, like, depleted, which is even worse now that you're pregnant. It's still early, though—you're what, eighteen, nineteen weeks in? It probably hasn't hurt the baby yet."

Rebecca's heart skipped. She wanted to call Daniel, but it was impossible to reach him when he was working, and besides, Cargill's office did not seem to have a phone.

"Lucky for you it's easy to fix." Cargill absently put down her gown and began running his fingers through his long gray hair, as if with agitation at her stupidity. He looked around tersely for something, making choppy movements around the card table before finding a rubber band and pulling his hair back into a ponytail. Strands immediately fell out and back around his skinny face. "Garlic suppositories are more effective than any medication on the market. You take these, you'll swear by them. You'll never let one of those quacks prescribe antibiotics for you again!" He pounded the card table, and one of its legs buckled a little.

He did not cover her with the gown during the procedure. She lay on her back with her knees bent up towards her chest, bumping against the protrusion of her belly as he inserted the first clove, massaging it inside her anus "for maximum absorbency." She felt pressure against her uterus and her bladder and wondered mutely if he was poking the baby. She kept her face impassive despite the feeling that she might urinate—for a reason she couldn't place, it had become extremely important that she tell herself she *believed* Cargill was genuinely trying to help her. When she thought of jumping up and shouting *Get your fucking hands off me, old man!*, the image humiliated her so much she forced it from her mind, asking Cargill innocuously whether Kima had a job and listening as he described the cafe she worked at, Sutter's, where all the writers who would "be anything" in the seventies now hung out. Here on the table, with this man her father's age massaging her rectum, she told herself she was merely a patient—hip and sophisticated and unperturbed and open to unorthodox medical practices. On the other side of that persona, screaming *pervert*, Rebecca saw a naïve Jewish girl, dumb enough to walk right into the lion's den and take off her clothes—a girl not fit for life on her own. If she were *that* girl, then her parents were right, and everything she had done up until now was a mistake, and the baby was coming, and she would never dig her way out.

After she dressed in the bathroom and emerged, Cargill waved to her from his card table where he sat scribbling. He held the paper aloft, affably calling out, “Your chart, so we can keep track of your treatments!” She mumbled back, “Cool,” and staggered towards the door, tossing the \$20 fee onto a dingy windowsill and running up the two flights of stairs to her own apartment. There, Leo was tied to the radiator with a box of crackers in case he got hungry. As soon as she came near to untie him he said, “Eeww! You stink!”

When she collapsed next to him, sobbing, he shook her shoulder over and over until it felt like her teeth would dislodge saying, “Stepmom, Stepmom,” even though she had told him three hundred times not to call her that; even though it was not accurate anyway. Shouting, “Stepmom! Hey! What’s the matter what’s the matter what’s wrong?”

The baby howled so much her little face was purple. She had come out upset about something and still seemed angry or sick or grief-stricken now a week later, but St. Vincent’s had sent Rebecca home, Daniel said because they couldn’t afford the bill. There was nothing seriously wrong with the baby, the doctor insisted. Sometimes the lungs just took a little longer to fully mature. It was summer, so it was all right to take the baby outside, but Rebecca hadn’t been out, not since their return home. She was still bleeding and her breasts were engorged like melons that spilled warm juice everywhere, sweet-smelling, over-ripe juice that fouled everything it touched. The baby didn’t want to eat the rotting melon; she would not grip on right. Sometimes when she was asleep she would latch properly and Rebecca would feel the pull like water rushing down a drain, like the baby was sucking her juices out through a long, sinewy straw, and the relief was exquisite and revolting at once and she could not wait to get the small feral thing off her body, but as soon as the baby had released her, her breasts began to fill again and Rebecca craved her back. If possible, the girl was lighter now than when she’d come out, and even then she’d been barely five pounds.

Rebecca leaned against the window frame, dizzy, pulling her breast out unsteadily, careful to face the baby perpendicular to the window so she would not topple out as she writhed, refusing the breast at first then grasping it with thin, fishy lips. Rebecca saw herself shoving her breast almost violently at the baby; its hugeness seemed an unnatural pillow, capable of smothering.

On the street below, sirens approached.

Daniel's kneecap had exploded by the time the police descended. He was on the ground howling, and the windshield had finally been smashed, the old man dragged out and tossed against the curb. Rebecca was not sure how this had been achieved, but the horn no longer blared. Daniel was cursing, and one of the bikers kept shaking the stick in his direction, making false jerks forward as a cruel owner might to taunt a dog. But Daniel was not, Rebecca realized, as smart as a dog. He didn't cower or retreat, merely increased the volume of his insults, dragging himself along the hot asphalt, trying to hop onto his one good leg but unable to gain his balance.

Cargill and Kima were out on the street now with the other neighbors, cans of beer in their hands. When the cops began to drag Daniel off towards the paddy wagon, Cargill called out, "Hey, man, that ain't fair, it's his car!" but the police appeared not to even hear him. Daniel was too busy shouting out slogans from Civil Rights marches to point out to the beefy cop lifting him by the armpits that he was the owner of the now-trashed vehicle. He did not look up to their window even once before being driven away into the fledgling rays of sunlight.

Leo had wandered away from the window and was rushing at their dachshund shouting, "GetthefuckawayfrommycaryousonofabitchingNazifucks!," delivering sharp, clumsy kicks in the dog's direction, though it scuttled away too fast for more than one jab to hit it, hiding under Rebecca and Daniel's bed. It had learned, from the buttering incident. The animal behaved like a

shell-shocked vet. Sometimes Rebecca thought she should shoot it with some of Daniel's smack and put it out of its misery.

"Where'd they take Dad?" Leo screamed. "If Dad's going to jail you'd better find my mom—no way I'm staying here with you!"

Rebecca jumped, jarring the baby awake again. Her throat constricted with irrational tears. She did not know how this could be possible, but she had never realized until that moment that Leo did not like her.

After they came home from the hospital, Kima had been her only visitor. She brought a small doll for the baby, and Rebecca made cups of coffee with water run hot from the tap because the stove wasn't working. Kima asked what the little girl's name was, holding the baby on her lap in a natural way that frightened Rebecca; she knew she did not look as at home holding her own child, and wondered if she ever would. Rebecca admitted that she and Daniel hadn't agreed on a name yet. Rebecca wanted Susan, after her sister who had died young of a breathing problem. Her sister had been eleven and Rebecca seven, but after Susan was gone neither of her parents ever spoke of her anymore, and the only photograph remaining was one in her parents' bedroom where Rebecca was not allowed. For years she had still talked to Susan in the quiet of her head, in her bedroom when it was dark. She thought if she called the baby Susan, she might feel closer to the child, like this alien, feral baby in its inexplicable loudness was really her older sister watching over her so that she was not alone. But Daniel wanted Lisa. He thought Susan was an old-fashioned, stodgy name. Rebecca tried to tell him that Susan B. Anthony had been a rebel, but then Daniel countered with Emma, an anarchist's name. As if Emma weren't as old-fashioned and stodgy as you could get. Rebecca wanted to tell Kima that lately, Daniel seemed to say things just to oppose her, and now their baby didn't have a name, and wouldn't take the breast properly, and screamed all through the night. But Kima's

beauty and unencumbered youth made her nervous, and she hated her a little now because of Cargill and the garlic incident, and instead she drank her coffee in a stilted silence, thinking the doll, which was made of cheap porcelain, was a poor choice in gifts. It would be years before her daughter could play with it.

“So,” she managed, when she and Kima had smoked two cigarettes apiece and the coffee was gone and still Kima didn’t seem to want to leave, “are you going to have babies? You and Cargill?”

Kima snorted. She twisted her long black hair into a knot around her hand, so tight Rebecca saw the tips of her fingers turning white. “Well,” she said with a measured drawl, “maybe if he stops sticking his fingers up other girls’ asses for a living, I’ll consider it.” Then she smiled. “Of course, that’ll never happen as long as there are a line of you willing to pay him for the privilege, will it?”

Rebecca crossed her legs at the ankles. “No,” she said. “I guess not.”

Kima shrugged as though the problem were not terribly relevant. “I’d love a baby, though. Yours is so cute!” She stuck her nose to the baby’s and rubbed. “If you ever need a sitter, you know I only work at Sutter’s part-time, I’d come take care of her. You don’t have to pay me—I mean, like, if it’s only once in a while. Or I could do it for money if you wanted to get a job or something.”

“We don’t have any money,” Rebecca said.

“Yeah, well, that’s, like, why you’d get the job, right?”

“Oh,” Rebecca said. “Yeah. Right.”

“What did you do before this?” Kima asked.

“I was in college. I was going to major in Art History.”

“Oh. Wow. Huh.” Kima narrowed her eyes. “You’re Jewish, right?”

Rebecca’s back stiffened. In her experience, this question never led to anything good. Once, a man at a party had asked how she hid her horns. “Yes.”

“You’re lucky,” Kima said. “You people all go to college and stuff, right?”

“Um.” Rebecca shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, I guess a lot of us do, but not everyone. My parents didn’t go to college. But everyone I know from growing up on Long Island did.”

“Cool,” Kima said. “John went to college too.” It took Rebecca a moment to realize Kima must mean Cargill. “He’s real smart. Even if he’s a total fucking lunatic.” She laughed throatily, her hair unwhirling around her fingers swift as a whip.

“Daniel has a Ph.D.,” Rebecca offered. “Well, he’s supposed to have it, but he can’t finish his dissertation because he was too busy writing a novel, and now he can’t finish that either.”

“Why don’t your parents give you some money?” Kima said. “They must be rich if you went to college. Now that you have a baby and all. You could probably move out of here and move in with them.” She looked around the room as though someone might be listening—and, indeed, Leo might have been, but he was quiet and Rebecca didn’t dare tempt fate to check. “You wouldn’t have to bring Daniel. He wouldn’t go if he couldn’t bring his dope. So you and the baby could go. You’d see him when you wanted to. It’d be better than this.”

Rebecca sat silently, considering. Kima had one thin brown leg tucked up under her taut behind on the chair—Rebecca could see the triangle of her underwear through the gap in her legs, the short skirt stretched tight across her lap. Her panties were white. This surprised Rebecca. She found she didn’t want Kima to leave. She didn’t really enjoy her company, but as long as she was here, she would probably keep holding the baby. For some reason, she thought of the time she’d called her mother at 11 p.m., sobbing because she had received an F on her first philosophy paper—Daniel, who it turned out had graded the paper, had written, *facile, yet remarkably incoherent for something so simple-minded*. Rebecca had wept to her mother, reading the comment aloud, but her mother cut her off mid-stream. “Unless you are dying,” her mother said, in a voice like the one she used on waiters and the housekeeper, “do not ever interrupt our sleep in the middle of the night again.” The

dial tone had rung out like a disaster siren in Rebecca's ear. All the next day, she kept expecting her mother—or maybe Dad instead—to call and apologize, to ask about the paper and how she was doing in her other classes. No call came, and when she spoke to them the following Sunday, at their customary phone time, no mention of the incident was made.

She said to Kima, "My parents are dead."

Leo was back asleep by 7am. Rebecca sat at the window smoking, waiting for Daniel to appear around a corner, heading (she imagined him on crutches, somehow procured) towards their apartment. Already she had bundled up all his smack, run out while the baby dozed on the couch, and stuffed it into the first trashcan she saw in Washington Square Park. She knew he would be enraged when he found out. She pictured him punching her, though until that morning she had never seen Daniel hit anyone. She had tossed a couple of maternity dresses—her old clothes didn't even close to fit her anymore—into a bag along with the porcelain doll Kima had given the baby, and had it propped by the door. Inside were the baby's five outfits and her already-discolored diapers that she washed by hand. As soon as she got to her parents' house, she would start giving the baby formula. Her mother would be astonished anyway to see Rebecca breast-feeding when formula was what all the smart, modern women chose. Breast-feeding was for poor women in foreign countries, in *National Geographic* photos. Not for anyone they knew.

When she glimpsed him, though, Daniel was not on crutches. He was hobbling, holding onto the concrete walls of buildings like a blind man feeling his way. He moved slowly, but within five or ten minutes, he would reach her: she would hear him on the stairs, approaching, coming back to their airless nest, their small, chaotic imitation of a family. He would be here, with Leo whom he had never abandoned, though Rebecca knew many men in his place would have run. She pictured herself arriving in the dead of night on her parents' doorstep (in reality, it would take only an hour to

get there), and the looks on their faces as they surveyed her screaming, underweight, tainted baby. As they looked at her, forever ruined now: an unmarriageable burden. Her father had said he knew a man who could make the pregnancy disappear, that it was not like back-alley coat hanger operations but a real doctor, a Jewish doctor, who would make Rebecca back into the normal girl she was before. Rebecca had raged at him, had called him *Fascist!* with the same force Daniel's voice bore when she most admired it, had run from the house with her hair streaming wild. She had been a fool.

Daniel was almost at their street now. From their fifth floor walk-up, she would lose sight of him soon as he got too near. It would be too late. The baby slept in her drawer, Leo in his room. There was no one to bear witness. She would tell her parents the baby had been stillborn. Her father would be shamed by her grief, by the continued fullness of her breasts aching for the small mouth they would never know. Her mother would weep with her for the child none of them had wanted. She could feel it now, her mother's cool, bony fingers stroking her hair, absent-mindedly tugging loose any knots.

Daniel had never looked for Leo's mother. He merely found a new woman—there were always new women these days, in places like this. Maybe Kima would be the one. She wanted a baby, and if Daniel could give up the smack, he would be better than Cargill. He almost had a Ph.D..

There was no time to unpack. Any moment now, she would hear Daniel's feet on the stairs, their elevator broken now these past three months. She had to get to the back entrance before he got to the front—before they might encounter one another in the hall. She groped inside her bag, grasping the porcelain doll by the hair and tossing it onto the floor with a louder thud than she intended—she thought she heard a crack. But there was no time now, no time to check, to see if her parting second-hand gift remained intact. Her feet were already racing down the stairs by the time the baby, its ears always unnaturally attuned to sound, heard the slam of the door and began to howl.

YOUR MOVE

(earlier versions of this story appeared in as “Blood” in *American Literary Review: A National Journal of Poems and Stories* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 113-127; *Men Undressed: Women Writers and the Male Sexual Experience*, edited by Cris Mazza, Stacy Bierlan, and Kat Meads, 89-104. Chicago: Other Voices Books, 2011; and *Necessary Fiction: Writers in Residence*, November 7, 2010)

Saturday, 10 July, 2:13 p.m.

“Let’s play the memory game.”

Michael didn’t look, but out of the corner of his eye he could see Rachel turning towards him, white Keds still propped up on the dashboard, legs extended straight. “What game?” he said.

“You *know*, the one me and Mom play. Like I say A is for ant and then you say A is for ant and B is for bug, and then I do A, B, and C. Remember we used to play it on the way to Michigan?”

He didn’t. They had always been doing something in the car, Rachel and Leigh. Singing usually, and then afterwards Leigh would start an argument over the fact that he had not joined in. He said, “Mom and I. It’s not Mom and me, it’s Mom and I.”

“God, Dad, I know that. But I’m not in school right now. I don’t have to think.”

He said, “If we play that game, you’d better think enough to come up with more interesting words than ant and bug or I’ll fall asleep at the wheel with boredom and get us both killed.”

She started laughing. “Yeah, then Mom would really be mad.”

“Okay,” he said. “A.” Thought, *Anus, aberrations*. Said, “A is for Attila.”

“You mean like Attila the Hun?”

“Mmm. So all that money I pay to send you to Latin School actually has some purpose. Or does your mother give you history lessons on the side to fool me?”

“Yeah, she keeps me up studying for hours every night.” He thought there was a note of smugness in her voice, due either to her recognition of barbaric dictators or to her newfound ability to (sometimes) enter into the sparring he invited. But then she paused.

“Come on, no stalling.” *B is for beatings, bulimia, bingeing, bruises.* “Your move.”

“My *turn*, you mean, it’s not chess. Okay, wait, I’ve got one. A is for Attila, and B is for Baryshnikov.”

“A is for Attila, B is for Baryshnikov, and C is for (*cunt, cuts, crying*) calligraphy.”

“What’s calligraphy?”

“It’s that fancy writing your mother does on invitations.”

“Oh.”

“Do you want me to pick one you’ve heard of?”

She put her feet down on the floor of the jeep, straightened her back. “No, that’s okay, I can remember it.” Looked out the window and repeated the list. “D is for . . .”

Death-wish, defecation, degradation, destructive relationship.

She indicated a passing truck. “Diesel.”

“Those damned things should be outlawed,” he said.

Her lipstick had been the exact same color as her blood. Really it was so uncanny that at first he thought she must have planned it that way, had somehow managed to take in a sample when buying her makeup and matched the shades directly. But of course that was absurd; something he might do. Most likely she didn’t even know the name of her own lipstick shade, had bought it randomly at Walgreens for three dollars so she could get change for the bus or something. Still he felt a subtle disappointment on the evenings when she wore a different color: the one that was more purplish-black than red, or the pale pink she sometimes wore with her retro sixties clothes. That one made her look like a ghost.

The first time he'd made her bleed, she was wearing the blood lipstick, though. The matching of the colors was so striking that he'd wanted to reach his fingers into the tracks running down her neck and smear it right next to her lips to show her. But they had only been sleeping together a few weeks, and she might have thought that strange. When he thought of it later, by the time she would have expected something like that from him, he preferred to keep it a secret, something she didn't know he had observed in her. She watched him to see what he was watching, to know how to play him. And after a certain point, he didn't want her to know.

Saturday, 10 July, 9:08 p.m.

Rachel wanted to put the tent up herself. She claimed to have learned to do this at camp, and shooed Michael away, leaving him to sit on the hood of the jeep watching while she struggled with poles that were taller than she was. It impressed him that she got anywhere at all, but when she failed to get the whole thing assembled, she grew upset and wouldn't help him finish the job because she "didn't know how."

He had to undo some of her damage, which took awhile. When she had put on half a container of Cutters, and they were both inside the tent, she said, "Mom said when you used to go camping, you always brought a flashlight so you could stay up all night reading and that she could never sleep with the light in her face. I'm supposed to tell you you aren't allowed to do that."

"I guess she'd rather me wander around in the woods and get eaten by something or fall down a steep hill in the dark."

"She would not!"

"Rachel, I was only kidding." He looked at her: a skinny fetus, knees drawn to her chest, arms wrapped around them tight. "You can put the airplane eye mask on, you won't see a thing."

"You *brought* it?" She widened her already-big, brown eyes. "Why don't you just try to sleep like a normal person, Dad?"

“You sound more like your mother everyday.”

She scowled and didn’t say anything else.

It was already dark, and Rachel was exhausted from the ride. Neither of them was hungry either. They’d stopped at a diner on the way up since Rachel had acquired her mother’s fascination with all things “quaint” and wanted to eat in the middle of nowhere and get stared at by the locals. Michael had no appetite, though, hadn’t for weeks, and was vaguely worried that he was losing weight. He suspected that he couldn’t afford to get any thinner without looking like one of those ex-hippies who dropped so much acid in the sixties that they lost the brain cells required to remember to eat. But his appreciation of food was sporadic; in times of stress he always lost weight. Only during his marriage had his body ever really filled out, looked *solid*. When he’d gone out to dinner with Leigh, he finished his food. With Kendra he picked at her dinners and ignored his. Since she had gone, it was worse.

Now he wished they hadn’t stopped, that they could make a fire and cook something, anything to postpone having to go to bed. Rachel was rummaging through his brown leather overnight bag looking for the mask and finally produced it and stuck it over her face. It was black and said ‘Virgin’ across the front in white letters. He’d picked it up on an international flight on Virgin Airlines six or seven years ago because the idea of blindfolding his wife with a mask that said ‘Virgin’ struck him as amusing. Although Rachel had been wearing the mask for years at his apartment, the sight of her there now, blindfolded on the ground bearing a label that proclaimed her untapped sexuality was suddenly disturbing.

As if she’d read his mind, she removed the mask and sat up. “Mom said to ask if you ever take those pills she gave you?”

“Her voodoo pills? No, I certainly did not.”

“Melatonin, Dad.” Slow and pseudo-annoyed, a higher pitched version of Leigh. “They’re hom-e-o-path-ic.”

“They’re synthetic hormones. Don’t worry about me, okay?”

She pulled the Virgin eye shield back down and settled into her bag. He felt like telling her to take it off, didn’t think he could stand to look at her all night wearing it, some joke waiting to be told. Like when he was standing on a platform waiting for the El and could envision jumping—one sudden movement—onto the tracks and to his death. The impulse was so powerful that he had to touch a pole or a sign, anything to steady himself, though in truth he knew he would never do such a thing. That *had* to be the way it was with this too: her stalk-thin arms, no definition to her waist under three layers of sweats, breasts mere timid, half-inverted buds. Nothing but the power of suggestion: meaningless, harmless. Anything but erotic. What possible reason to run and jump before the oncoming train?

No that wasn’t the first time at all. Not the night he finally got the nerve to bite her hard enough to break the skin. The first time was earlier, accidental almost. Back when the windows of his apartment were covered with frost. Inside he was naked, his heart racing from having fucked her so hard, from the fear of having done some permanent damage. By then he had untied her, and she lay in a ball on his bed, long, pale hair spilling over her face, knees pressed flat against her chest. She looked like she was trying not to cry.

He said, Get up and walk.

She glanced up at him. Go to hell.

He backed away, moved to the other side of the room, surveying her there alone. Get up and walk to me, he repeated.

A curious look came across her face, like she wanted to know what he thought would happen if she did. He could see the process behind her eyes, the wondering. Then she unwound her body and slid to the edge of the bed. But

the minute she stood her legs buckled. Air came rustling out of her asshole with a crude sound, and she sank to the floor. He watched her, refused to smile or do anything, just waited for the humiliation to register on her face, for the tears. A tightening in his stomach. Not even breathing.

But she started to laugh. Started and couldn't stop. Choked, Okay, Michael, did you know that was going to happen? Is this some test you put all your new lovers through? and fell onto the rug. He smiled, felt it on his lips before he could stop it. Lied, I guessed. She said, So how about 'guessing' how many times it will take before I can walk after? He tried to keep the surprise off his face. Only once more. She stared at him. Come inside me there again and it'll be the last time you see me. He said immediately, I won't do it again.

He had to press the backs of his legs into the wall to keep from moving. The urge to go across the room and take her in his arms was that strong.

Sunday, 11 July, 3:49 a.m.

He felt trapped while Rachel slept. Even with his discman spinning the usual dark refuge of Mahler, the tent was like being stuck in a cubicle for observation. Outside too there would be nothing but blackness all around—he wouldn't even be able to see the stars for all the trees. He wanted to get in the jeep and drive, wanted it so badly he could feel it in his skin, the longing to get up and leave. To go to an open meadow and look up, feel something big, bigger than him. The sky held a promise of something else, not the punitive God of his childhood who, if He existed, could not forgive what was unrepented. The ambiguity, the uncertainty of nature. Something huge.

Rachel breathed evenly only feet away. Maddening, yet he dared not moved too far beyond the sound for fear he would snap and not come back. He tried to stay with this image, his daughter's air-flow an invisible chord securing him to reason, to life. Too soon, though, she turned, the mask falling askew, slipping over her nose so that the "Virgin" was off to one side. He could see only

“Virg.” Michael switched off the flashlight. Stood up fast, the unexpectedness of the motion rendering his legs momentarily unsteady. By the time he got outside the tent, he felt himself breathing in gulps. Breath like fire now, begging him to enter, to burn. To accept that which he clearly could not—did not want to—change.

Kendra choking from trying to swallow her own tears, gasping for air. Marks from his belt rising upon already-layered welts on her ass.

What would it take to embrace this perversion, the broken part of his soul? His hands moving over himself, slow at first, automatic. *Their* hands were the same size, he had noticed earlier, watching Rachel grasp the poles of the tent, knuckles whitening as she shoved the sharp end into the dirt. Kendra’s were paler, of course, blue-tinged fingernails as opposed to his daughter’s healthy tan. White, the flutter of her pulse weak beneath the skin. Growing faster under his touch.

She’d have woken with a start, no need of a mask or label to prove her innocence. A whisper in the dark, Daddy, what are you doing here? Henry’s voice: Don’t worry, princess, don’t be afraid. Hissing, Don’t tell your mother, before he tore her apart.

The orgasm left him drained but not calm. Wiping himself off with his t-shirt, his back itching as if from a healing burn, eaten alive by mosquitoes he hadn’t noticed until now. He moved back towards the tent, but even this, the gnawing of his skin, could not make him step inside once he heard the sound. The sound of Rachel’s breathing, needing. Closer. Mixing with the half-stifled sobs still ringing in his ears.

Monday, 13 July, 12:16 p.m.

It was easier when they *did* things. Sunday had been lazy hours just sitting in a canoe with fishing poles, Rachel reading one of her damned romance novels and sunning herself while he thought, pretended to read too. Time consuming to let her try and build a fire like she’d learned in

Brownies and at camp, though he'd let his mind wander and hadn't jumped in to help her until she was already in tears. He worried at how easily frustrated she was, how quick to scream or cry like a much younger child—different than she was at home, where she usually seemed calm, more even-keeled than he. Made him wonder if she sensed something and felt ill at ease being alone with him. But that night she'd eaten two hamburgers and a hot dog, wanted to make s'mores, rattled on about her best friend having invited some other girl to sleep over and asked what he thought she should do to win her back. He had discarded the damned airline mask. Let her think she'd misplaced it, and then he finally slept some too. Hard. Close to four hours.

But today there was no sun. So instead they hiked, not wanting to be out on the water in case a storm hit. Rachel was full of camp stories; Michael was sure she embellished most of them to make them more exciting. Being lost in the woods overnight, an encounter with a black bear, falling down a mud hill and needing stitches. He was pretty close to positive that if any of these things had been as catastrophic as she made them sound, Leigh would never have let her leave the house, much less go camping again. It was reassuring though, her wanting to impress and entertain him. At first he found it hard to concentrate, kept drifting off and heading in some opposite direction than the way she was walking, didn't answer questions when he asked. But they picnicked for lunch, and he felt more alert after actually eating something. Let himself believe her, get drawn into her tales.

"I never set foot in a woods when I was your age," he said, so she'd feel more capable, not dwell on her failed tent construction and fire starting. "We had no money for camp. My brother and I used to play in the alleys. I didn't even know how to swim until college."

She fell into silence, as if waiting for him to say more. He knew she was fascinated by his side of the family, an inaccessible web of estranged men, perpetually cloaked in the gauzy strands of anger that followed his mother's slowly deteriorating, cancerous death. But Michael didn't feel like weaving soap operas out of his past, letting her construct Harlequin fantasies about things that had

been only unfortunate at the time, rather dull in their aftermath. So he too did not speak, and they walked on awhile oblivious to each other. Almost, for a moment, happy.

“Mom said you must’ve had a fight with your girlfriend,” Rachel said, and it was a sudden weakness in his knees, the rocks beneath his feet markedly larger. Then breathing. Then nothing.

“Why would she say that?”

A shrug. Poking the ground with a long stick she fancied glamorous to walk with. “Cause you wanted to go away for a week with me, I guess.”

Stupid, vengeful . . . “I’m sure your mother didn’t mean that.”

“Mom said that’s why I haven’t seen you for three weeks. Because you were in a love bubble and not thinking with your head. But that now you probably dumped her cause you always get sick of people after awhile and then you felt guilty for not calling me. That’s what she said.”

He felt his teeth clench. “Rachel, I don’t think your mother intends for you to repeat things like that to me. And frankly, I’d rather not know. She is wrong, though. I didn’t see you for a few weeks because Ke—because my girlfriend has been sick. I was worried about her.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

He touched her shoulder, but she kept walking, didn’t look back at him. “Sweetie, I’m sorry I haven’t been around much. I wasn’t in much shape to go out, even with you. You could have called me, though. Sometimes I get distracted, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t want to hear from you.”

“Mom says *you’ll* call people if you want to talk to them.”

“For Chrissakes, can you please stop quoting your mother before I lose my mind? You know she and I had a disagreement recently. She’s just very angry at me right now.”

“After you slept over.”

Heat in his legs at the thought that she might, that she *must*, know full well what that meant.

“Yes. Since then.”

“How come? What did you do bad?”

“Not ‘bad,’” he said. “Wrong.”

“*Whatever*. Can you stop correcting everything I say? I thought since you stayed over, you and Mom might be making up. I thought you’d get back together, not be more mad.”

“Sometimes it doesn’t work like that.”

“So is that why you broke up with your girlfriend? Because you slept with Mom?”

Slept with. Leigh drunkenly, obliviously running her fingers over the deep scratches on his back while he pushed into her in some half-formed hope that he could disappear into the familiar safety of her body. Then staring at him in shock the next morning once the alcohol wore off. *For God’s sake, you look like you’ve been sliced open with a serrated knife. Who the hell did this?* Him, *Look, one fuck does not mean I suddenly owe you explanations*. Her, so loud he envisioned Rachel bolting up in her canapé bed, *You manipulative bastard. Get out!*

“I told you, Rachel, the woman I’ve been seeing is just sick. We did *not* break up.” His hand reaching out to flip her dark hair, get rid of a bee circling her head. She jumped. He dropped his hand, kept walking on ahead. It was not until he heard her footsteps following him that he called over his shoulder, “Now let’s just drop it, okay?”

Summer in Chicago, the heat oppressive and heavy. After five years as an attorney, it still did not seem right to him, wearing a suit in such weather. He could not help but feel foolish in his stiffness, especially there in Henry’s car, driving with the windows rolled up as if the air conditioning was necessary to keep them both from touching anything real, from breathing in the living world. She was there on the sidewalk head bent down like a heavy flower on a broken stalk, tracing some imaginary vision with her fingers. She wore a skirt the color of dead grass. It extended to

her ankles, but she had pulled it up to sun her calves, each of which displayed the taut, ball-like muscles of a dancer when she arched her feet. Henry said, Good Lord, would you look at her, she acts like she was raised in the gutter. Michael smiled. He was fully erect before he even realized it, stared at her harder and longer than he'd have dared if he thought anyone would ever guess what was on his mind. She didn't even see them pull up. Henry had to honk twice before she rose, scooping up her shoes and running barefoot to the car.

Inside Henry's BMW, Kendra reclined on the back seat and rested her feet out the open window. Henry told her to put them back in, but she ignored him. Michael asked her a question, anything to turn around and see her there, on her back on the leather seat. Her hair was much too long and hung in her face. He had never thought her as classically pretty as her mother; both she and her twin sister had inherited some of Henry's less-chiseled features, rougher angles. But looking at her now . . .

She bolted upright when he spoke. Almost as if she had only just realized that he was in the car (which was impossible.) She pushed her hair from her face, and he caught sight of a small, blue vein pulsing in her neck. The movement was slight, but enough for him to see. She answered him, something about her dance school, and it did it again, twice. He wanted to reach out and wrap his fingers around her throat, to feel the steady throbbing of the blood-flow that kept her alive. The scent of her: dust from the dance studio, mint , and carefully masked cigarettes made him dizzy. Henry started talking, and Michael felt as though there was some understanding between them, like she knew what he was thinking and had somehow orchestrated it. Absurd, like the numb pain making rounds through his body: his cock, his stomach, mostly his head. More likely she thought he was old as the hills, asexual, couldn't keep it up for more than three minutes (if she even thought about such things.) For God's sake, she was only fifteen.

Wednesday, 14 July, 3:47 p.m.

The water was flat. Flat and disappointing as the option of running away from the firm he'd been at for ten years, of alternately remaining a silent co-conspirator with his partner and mentor, the man whose daughter he'd fucked, whose trust he'd betrayed. Yet even his betrayal was flimsy,

incomplete: he'd still avoided confronting Henry with the truth. For what in the end? There *was* no going back—to either of them. He would tell no one his plans or why he was leaving, though in all likelihood they would not find that strange coming from him. His resignation would be unexpected, of course, and hard for the firm. But they had always thought him unpredictable. It could never occur to them that the reason for his departure was Kendra.

The canoe swayed lightly, jarring him, though Rachel didn't even open her eyes. She reclined, stretched out before him like another possibility. Another reality just on the edge of the knife he felt there in his stomach, twisting every time he looked at his daughter, every time he let himself think. A reality in which he could go into the office and beat Henry to a pulp, maybe kill him, and it would have been the thing to do. If this was a movie, after all, that would be the only resolution any director worth his weight would choose. Then the actor playing him would sit a vigil outside Kendra's hospital room until she talked to him, would buy her flowers and promise never to hurt her again. She would make him sweat but then accept, and they would join some therapy group . . . but no, that would be another movie. In the film where he would kill Henry, he never would have done those things to Kendra in the first place. The men who avenge women are never the same ones who abuse them in the movies.

The boat was rocking before he saw her. Rachel suddenly standing, her arms spread out as she gaped down. The stain on her peach-colored shorts looked to Michael like a lethal wound between her legs. He leaned forward to steady her, then recoiled in a split second, could not touch her. The canoe tipped, water rushing fast into his ears. The sound of his daughter yelling, "Dad." Then no noise but a slow throbbing. A cold, soothing numbness. Something like, *Stay*.

But he did not. At the surface of the lake, Rachel was flailing her arms frantically. Crying, not so much with fear as with frustration, trying to grab their cooler and her book which were floating out of reach. She struggled in vain to catch them, her lifejacket keeping her afloat despite her

random movements. Michael made himself touch her arm. It was slippery and cold. “Sweetie, let them go.” Her movements ceased. She clung to his shoulder. It was all he could do not to pry her off. Even in the chill of the water, her touch burned.

For the moment, though, it was safer there, like that. The red of her invisible beneath the rippled surface of the water. He closed his eyes against the image of a lake filled with her untouched blood. A sacrificial virgin, her dark hair stuck to her face in strands. Someone in the woods that lined the lake was calling to them, “Hey, do you need any help?” A strong impulse to do nothing, just drift. But Rachel was sniffing, “Dad, make him go away, I’m bleeding all over the place.” Michael called back, “It’s okay, we’re fine,” but the man didn’t listen. He was already wading into the water to give assistance, a woman in the background on the shore. Rachel began to bawl, uncontrollable, the closer the man grew. The woman on dry ground was shouting to her, “Honey, it’s okay, you’ll be all right,” like Rachel was afraid of drowning with a life jacket on and three adults around. Michael tried to concentrate on how to avoid hitting the unwanted do-gooder once he reached them, from yelling back at his (wife, girlfriend?), *Shut up, you stupid bitch*. He took hold of the canoe, hissed at Rachel, “For God’s sake, stop crying.” She grabbed onto the edge of the boat as he moved with it towards the shore.

Once on land, they had no choice but to get back in the boat and paddle to the dock where they’d rented it. Rachel sat with her arms wrapped around her torso, pressing her legs together like a child who had to pee. The water had calmed the angry blood stain between her legs, and amidst their heroism, neither the man or woman seemed to notice her plight. They were gone now, but Rachel’s face was still pink. From the sun, her tears, or embarrassment Michael couldn’t tell. He was trying to think of what Leigh would do if she was here. Hug Rachel, pet her hair. But Michael couldn’t. Hard to believe she was the same daughter he’d mock-wrestled with just weeks ago, had boosted into trees, had sat on his lap and smelled her hair. Her body, her blood seemed poisonous. He sat in his

corner of the boat. Could not move, could not speak. If the sound, the muffled sniffing, did not stop soon, he was going to scream.

When they finally reached the dock and climbed out of the boat, Rachel immediately bolted up the hill that led to the parking lot. The two frat-types who ran the canoe rental turned their eyes curiously towards her as she ran. Michael stayed to get his deposit back, did not see her until he was halfway up the hill. She was standing by a tree, not crying as hard but looking accusatory, as though what had just transpired was all his fault. He did not meet her eyes as they got in the jeep and drove to a gas station with a minimart.

“*You* go in and get them,” she pleaded, when he reached for his wallet.

He said, “I’m not exactly a connoisseur of these things. Should I just get the same tampons I used to buy for your mother?”

“No way!” she just about shouted. “I’m not using a tampon. Gross.”

He imagined himself saying that he failed to see how a tampon could be more gross than sitting in a quasi-diaper of your own blood. He kept quiet.

“Just get *anything*,” she mumbled. “Please, Dad, hurry.”

He got her curved Kotex regulars. He remembered having seen them in the bathroom of a woman judge at a party, and they’d stuck in his mind because the idea of a judge getting her period seemed funny. When he gave them to Rachel, she scurried to the rest room around back. He sat in the jeep waiting. After she came out, he felt strange, like he had walked into somebody’s house while they were having sex, then had to wait in the living room while they got dressed. She had combed her hair and looked more together, but he was painfully aware of the fact that he knew what she’d been doing. She kept looking down. Finally, halfway back to the campsite, she said, “I guess we have to go home now, huh?”

The impulse rose up in his throat to say, *Yes, immediately*. Instead he said, “Why?”

She stared at him with something close to hatred. “I can’t believe you’d even ask that! Like I’m going to stay here when I’m all bloody and disgusting.”

Something in her tone made him react, the way a girl who does not want to be seen naked brings out a man’s impulse to compliment her body more than it deserves. “What’s so disgusting about it?”

“Stop it! I don’t want to talk about it!”

He glanced at her to see if she was hamming it up, just saying what she thought was expected. But she was curled up in the passenger’s seat looking beaten and ashamed. “Listen,” he said evenly, “every woman in the world gets her period. You should be excited to be entering a whole new phase in your life. A lot of cultures view a girl’s first menstruation as her transition into womanhood.”

She looked at him in surprise, then something closer to disgust spread across her face. “It’s not my *first*. That was right after Christmas.”

His voice moving around the lump in his throat, the horrible need to say, *Why didn’t anyone tell me?* Instead he managed, “So what’s the big deal then?” But he already knew, didn’t have to hear the rest—*Only happened once . . . didn’t think it was coming back . . . so embarrassed . . . the whole world saw!* He sat looking at the steering wheel, then up, straight ahead at a thin blond girl of eighteen or so sitting on the hood of a beat up car, shoeless, smiling at a long-haired man who handed her a bottle of water. He moved his eyes away. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed of, it’s perfectly natural for women to—”

She whined, “I don’t want to be a woman. Boys don’t have anything awful like this happen to them.”

He had to bite down on his tongue to keep himself from arguing with her further. Felt like calling Leigh and saying, *I hope you know that you’ve taught our daughter to be ashamed of her own body.*

Except that she would probably laugh in his face. Would tell all her friends how her asshole ex-husband, the one who'd screwed around throughout their marriage, was now upset that his daughter had negative ideas about being a woman. And what else might they have hidden from him, Rachel and Leigh, long before this, before he'd even suspected anything was off? He felt like hitting something, like punching holes through a wall the way he'd done after his father remarried—some terrible release. But now before he could even relish the feeling, it was gone, the familiar check of his impulse kicking in. The uncontrollable-if-artificial calm.

“We can leave in the morning if you still want to,” he said.

“I want to go right now! Why are you making me stay? Please, don't make me sleep here like this, please.”

“All right, fine, stop whining, we will leave tonight. Can you tolerate at least going back to the campsite first or do you expect us to abandon all of our belongings because you can't stand being out in public with your period for one second longer?”

She burst into tears. “Why are you being so mean to me? You hate me!”

A cold jolt to his spine, sharper than the water an hour before. “Rachel, please. Of course I don't hate you. Calm down.”

“I want to see Mom! I don't want to be here anymore!”

He forced himself to pat her hand. But the minute his flesh made contact with hers, she pulled away. He moved his hand slowly back to the steering wheel. Tighter, his lower back beginning to ache from the tension. She was still sobbing, Christ, how long could she keep this up, didn't she ever get tired, just have to relax? He pulled into the campsite, and she bolted out of the jeep. It was a long time, though, before he could move. Before he could get out and gather up his things, admitting with every motion that this whole damned trip had been a failure. That from here on out, he could only do everything wrong.

There was something suddenly old in the way he stood. Michael moved aside to let him in, but Henry immediately took hold of his arm as though he might collapse. Started talking, words that bounced around and made no sense: binge, ruptured stomach, hospital, sepsis. And her name, over and over again, like some point of common reference. Kendra. Kendra. Necessary in order for either of them to believe that it was real.

Henry said, I thought it would be better if I came into work. She won't see her mother and me, they say she's in shock. But I can't stay here. I have to leave. Michael did not react. Had to force himself to nod, heard his voice saying, That's understandable, as if through a tunnel. Held onto her father's arm, the father he already suspected had molested her, and said something like, If there's anything I can do. It just hadn't seemed the time to say, By the way, we're lovers. I've been screwing her three times a night for the past two and half months. Henry was chalk white, a nightmare vision of what lay ahead, only eight years separating them. Eight years between now and gray, now and losing his hair, now and a soft paunch, a defeated slouch in his walk. Horrifying, her lying in a hospital bed and him standing there with another man who'd fucked her, maybe beaten her too. Standing there thinking, Eight years before I start to die.

But after Henry left, he went into the bathroom and threw up. It struck him as funny, even, as a kind of sympathetic barfing. The thought of her there, too weak to resist anything, rendered mute, unnatural. As if he saw her now, all the nights he'd watched her not finish dinners, joked about her excessive thinness, would instantly be revealed as obscene. Moments she'd dared lay her head on his chest, when he hadn't wanted to ruin the mood or act like her father, hadn't said, Why are you disappearing before my eyes? The thought that there might have been some other course of action, another possibility, made his chest feel like he was going to cry. Except that he had not cried since he was seventeen, since the day his mother died. Rather, leaning there against the cold, white dampness of the toilet, he couldn't stop himself from laughing at the irony of it. At the irony of his own puke.

Wednesday, 16 July, 7:21 p.m.

Rachel stirred next to him. Michael checked his speed and slowed down a bit, afraid that the rough motion of the jeep would wake her. It had been a long time since he'd driven outside the city, driven anything but the Porsche he'd bought after his first year at the firm. It wasn't in the best shape anymore, but was still too small, too close to the ground to rattle this way, no matter how fast he drove. He hated to have to compromise on speed for smoothness, thought that the jeep was as incongruous to him as Rachel herself, one intertwined with the other. The kind of automobile to take your kid out in. The kind of man to have a kid at all. Rachel scratched her leg in her sleep, her cheek pressed up against the window pane. Michael's bladder was full, but he didn't want to stop the car and risk waking her. He needed the silence, the respite from her tears and hostility, more than he could need anything concerning the body. Or at least more than to piss.

She was awake now, though. Staring at him from under sleepy eyelids, the sun an orangish blur, the kind of light that makes everything seem out of a road flick, hazy and cast in a cheap looking but oddly beautiful glow. She glanced between her legs, and he felt himself look too, automatic. But nothing. She cleared her throat, and he knew he should speak first, let her know he wasn't mad, but he couldn't. The awkwardness in her voice hurt, filled him with disbelief that he hadn't managed to make some joke, tell her some story that would have made everything normal again. Now it was only this, her body, a traitor in every way, undignified, unladylike. Like it was enough to make her cry, just saying, "I . . . I have to pee."

"We can stop at the next rest stop."

"How close is it?"

He had not been paying attention, could only assume he hadn't taken some wrong turn so that they'd end up in fucking Iowa or something. "I'm not sure."

She checked between her legs again. “You don’t think it’s far, do you? I have to make sure everything is . . . you know. Okay.”

Something stirring in him. Sad and compelling, her desperation, and even more the shame that accompanied it. It made him want to pull over to the side of the road right then and send her off behind a tree—whether to get it over with or to heighten the baseness of the situation he couldn’t be sure. But he imagined her there, squatting behind a tree changing her pad, pissing into the dirt. The image came before any recognition of it, overlapping with the memory of Kendra the last night he’d seen her, the string of her tampon hanging between her legs when he bent her over his desk and fastened his belt tight around her thighs. Her first period in the months they’d been fucking. Too thin, she was too damned thin to menstruate. Though eleven years older than Rachel, her body was less of a woman’s than his own daughter’s.

“Aren’t there any signs, Dad? I *really* have to go.”

Pain in his groin. The pressure in his own stomach was mounting, but overtaken now. Growing, pushing against the denim of his jeans, and he needed to adjust himself but didn’t dare. She was crossing her legs, face contorted in a complete surrender to body, agony mixed with the anticipation of relief. Harder, rubbing. She said, “Dad.” He pulled over to the shoulder.

“Why are you stopping?”

Opening the driver’s side door. Stepping out and leaning against the hot metal of the hood. He breathed in, then out. Felt his fingers run through his hair. Could see her, plain as day. Kendra, on the camping trip they *should* have taken. Pissing in a hole dug in the dirt while he watched, lying across his lap while he bathed her welts with Vitamin E. Then on her knees in the leaves and twigs, the sound of approaching hikers growing closer. Whispering, *Hurry*, though of course he’d have taken his time, let them get caught at least once. Only his zipper would be undone but she’d be fully naked, ass in the air. Exposed.

“Where are you going?”

Unrepentant, in thought and deed. A small, frail body in a hospital bed. Then Rachel, thin, tanned legs pressing against each other to hold back her womanhood, to keep the dawn of her sexuality at bay. He felt his legs moving from the car and into the tall grass. Bile rising in his throat, throbbing between his legs. The sound of his daughter beginning to cry, and he wondered for a moment if she’d wet herself before she’d get out of the jeep to run to the ditch just beyond the shoulder of the highway. Sank down into the grass, the smell of warm earth, still musky from a storm. Crying for him, crippled with indecision, Rachel alone outside the jeep wailing. Not a survivor, not tough like Kendra, who’d have tossed her head and pulled down her jeans right behind the parked jeep, who’d laugh herself sick if she could see him now. Who’d eaten so much food after spending a night with him, getting fucked and beat by him, that she’d split her stomach in two.

Footsteps approaching in the grass. Crying, her hand grasping his shoulder. “Daddy, please. What’s wrong? Aren’t you coming back?”

He stared up at her. Grabbed her arm and pulled her down to him, against his chest, held onto her so tight he felt the fine bones of her ribs pressed right up flat against him, grating against his flesh. She clung to him, silent now, her face buried in his chest. She was trembling, or maybe it was him, and her thighs were wet from when she must have squat and leaked on herself. Darkness taking over the orange film-set sun, her arms weak, the smell of her sweaty and dirty from water, heat, and blood. The sound of nothing, of loss, pounding in his ears, and he couldn’t let go, even when she started to squirm, to say, “Ow.” Something like relief and something like the fever of illness, of drug. He whispered, “I’m sorry, baby,” and she murmured, “It’s okay.” A woman already, comforting him for his own inadequacy. Itching grass, the buzz of crickets. A faint trace of much-needed wind.

CANNIBALS

The Mabel Phenomenon started in middle school. The core of our Mabel group was originally entirely female, whereas later, in high school, we picked up Chad, who later married Miguel, and Ally married Craig, with whom Tajal had gone to grad school, and Francesca had a string of live-in-lovers the latest of whom was Simon, while Anne remained vigilantly single, and Tajal was divorced by the time she was twenty-eight and seemed to call it a day. Those six girls who had attended middle school together all took, sometime in ninth grade, to calling each other “Mabel.” One of our six would call another on the phone and say, “Hey, Mabel,” and later, before hanging up, both would say things like, “Okay, Mabel, later,” and “See you in French, Mabel.” This led to theatric hallway shouting, wherein we shrieked “Mabel!” back and forth at one another at school, embracing as though reunited after a separation caused by Siberian exile rather than different Algebra classes. We were known, by the time we left middle school for high school, as The Mabels: we even had matching jackets to that effect, like The Pink Ladies in *Grease*.

Somehow, however, in the summer between middle school and high school, it happened that everyone slipped back to using each other’s given names, except for one. She became our long term Mabel: the one who hated her given name with a passion that exceeded the rest of ours; who was perpetually angry at her mother, to whom she referred as The Narcissist. The Narcissist had remarried too quickly after Mabel’s beloved father succumbed to Huntington’s Disease—we suspected an illicit affair, conducted while Mabel’s father languished in his nursing home, ranting nonsensically and trying to bite people. This backstory was more dramatic than the rest of our stories, which involved, at best, relocation from Vancouver to the suburbs of Chicago, or a vitriolic parental divorce. And so we ceded *Mabel* to the one among us who needed it the most. We called her house and said in our brassy high school girl voices, “I’d like to speak to Mabel,” daring The

Narcissist to turn us away. Mabel, with her tragically dead father and potentially fucked up genetic marker, was our mascot of sorts. She had a soft white scar on the inside of her left arm, from when she was only eleven, a year after her father's death, to illustrate the gravity of her Situation. And so, what had started as a joke became, in a surprisingly short amount of time, a badge of honor—a purple heart of pain. Later, when visiting Mabel at college before she dropped out, or at her office where she got coffee and made travel arrangements for men whose lives revolved around window purchasing, it was always a shock bordering on heresy to hear her called anything else.

Nobody knows what to do about Grady. He was a latecomer to the group, having only been with Mabel for nine or ten months *before*. Now he has been grandfathered in by Death, and we are stuck with him, although we suspect he doesn't even like us. He is adrift, and we are the island on whose shore he has washed up, with no choice but to explore and try to build his home, although rumor has it that we are cannibals.

At first, it had not occurred to us that he would not disappear with Mabel. But at the wake, while Mabel was busy being dead in the open casket The Narcissist insisted on, and we were drinking gin in Francesca's car because Francesca "couldn't deal," so Simon came to find us to do shots with her until her courage could be summoned (though we suspected Francesca also wanted to make an entrance), suddenly, as the bottle was being passed around, there was Grady's hand reaching to take it; there was his mouth taking a swig, though we were not acclimated to drinking after him and Francesca had to inconspicuously wipe the Bombay's lip on her overlong sleeves before raising it to her own red mouth.

"How did you get here?" Ally asked. She was the Blunt One—the one who, once when we had been seated next to Tom Jones at an all night diner, and he kept backing his chair up into hers accidentally, had shouted at him, "I'm not going to have my seat bumped all night by a has been!"

Grady didn't answer. He could be that way: prone to awkward silences and significant glances wherein the recipient failed to mutually understand what, precisely, was significant, and which therefore usually just seemed creepy. He had been drinking almost continually since Mabel's death and it was unclear whether he was just too far gone by now to speak.

"I *just* saw him inside, arguing with Mabel's mum," Simon said in his own defense, but Francesca nudged him with her knee and commanded "Shhh."

The Narcissist wore an enormous lavender hat, like her daughter's wake was the Kentucky Derby. She came up to each of us in turn and said, "I'm so sorry for your loss," flamboyantly, as though being filmed.

It was nearly a month later that Simon's band played the Empty Bottle. Out of a sense of belated solidarity, we had not celebrated New Year's Eve, a holiday Mabel (usually kissless at midnight in all the pre-Grady years) particularly hated, many of us having at one time or another gotten into tiffs with her about our "capitalist consumerism" when we succumbed to paying extra for a special New Year's Eve menu or tried to drag her out to a party over the years. For Simon's band, however, we all turned up at the Bottle: a show of support for Francesca, who had had an abortion the week before, despite Simon's wishes. This was the second such occurrence in as many years, though it was unclear whether Simon knew that we all knew. Francesca stood against the wall near the entrance with an unlit cigarette between her long fingers, eyes glazed in a way befitting of the lead singer's girlfriend, which she had always seemed to be even before becoming the actual Thing, and we clustered around her, being supportive by not complaining about the January cold that leaked in through the door.

“Mabel wanted a baby so much,” Grady said, and we all turned around quickly, because no one had seen him come in.

“That’s not precisely true,” Ally countered. “Mabel wanted to experience pregnancy, but not to raise a child.”

“No,” Francesca corrected, “she just couldn’t *afford* to raise a child, but when Chad and Miguel asked her to be their gestational surrogate, she said she couldn’t really imagine giving up a baby that had grown inside her, and that whole experience really did a number on her.”

“But Mabel *had* an abortion,” Anne said. “You all know about that, don’t you? I’m not the only one who knows?”

Francesca sighed, almost as though she were actually exhaling her cigarette smoke. “Mabel had *two* abortions, Anne. Two is the number to beat, here, people.”

“Why are you even talking about babies?” Tajal demanded. “Grady, why would you just walk in here saying Mabel wanted a baby? Doesn’t that just seem intentionally depressing. It’s not like *we* were talking about babies.”

Grady wore a hat with flaps over the ears, and had not yet removed it. His eyes watched Francesca’s fingers, waving her unlit cigarette slowly, back and forth. He caught her hand in his, in a way that reminded us of Obama catching that fly for Barbara Walters, and traced the edges of a poison ring Mabel had given Francesca, back when they were still roommates, when Francesca and Simon were only having an affair—back when Francesca was having those issues about Ambien making her eat in the middle of the night and Mabel would have to lock her in her bedroom, and if Francesca had to get up to use the toilet she would call Mabel’s cell phone and Mabel would have to get up and unlock the door. We had all always wondered what Francesca kept inside the ring, but when Grady prodded it open, the poison nest was empty.

“Mabel had excellent taste,” Grady said. “This ring is very erotic.”

“Ewww,” said Ally, point blank.

Tajal folded her arms across her chest and raised an eyebrow, but before she could say anything, she started swiping at her eyes and had to turn away. Mabel *had* possessed excellent taste. *She* would never have worn a Kentucky Derby hat to her nonexistent daughter’s December funeral.

“It was good of you to come,” Francesca said magnanimously, her fingers still in Grady’s grasp. “I guess you and Simon both could use someone to talk to.”

For a while we had been too busy for *Game of Thrones* night, but after Mabel’s death, we decided to start it up again. Ally and Craig just brought their boys along, the youngest in his car carrier, invariably asleep. Simon made a big show of not liking the program and wouldn’t attend, saying he couldn’t believe we all wanted to watch such “rape festival rubbish,” but we knew that he was probably cheating on Francesca in retaliation, maybe with another bartender just as she had been once, and so might be glad to have his freedom every Sunday night. Chad and Miguel had recently moved in to one of the Addams Family vibed historic mansions lining Wicker Park, so we all arrived dressed to the hilt, as was befitting of our new digs. Maybe it was the perversity of *Game of Thrones* (Simon did seem embarrassingly right, now that it had been pointed out) but the gathering possessed a reactionary giddiness born of pop-cultural shame, repressed grief and excessive alcohol, with the atmosphere growing progressively more outrageous every time glasses were raised to Mabel. At one point, Tajal and Ally made out a little while Craig took photos with his iPhone, and afterwards we could remember only that this had originated as a dare, but nobody could recall the context. Francesca’s fishnets were torn, as they had been since 1985, but suddenly everyone was yelling, “Rip, rip!” and pounding on the table while she shredded them more widely, her translucent skin displaying the intricate pattern of blue veins inside her like a Russian stacking doll of fishnets.

On the way out, Craig said fairly loudly, “I don’t mean to be a dick, but I’m really glad Grady wasn’t here,” and Ally nudged him and whispered, “He’ll hear you,” and everybody laughed.

It was only when Chad posted pictures on Facebook the next morning that we saw Grady there among us, after all. In several of the photos, he was giving massages to various women, the way Mabel often did at gatherings, back when she was studying to be a massage therapist, before she just stopped going to the classes, as she had with college, with bartending school, with her brief stint as an Aveda aesthetician. We were confused to see Grady, who had never to our knowledge even *been* to the new Addams Family Mansion, and said to one another at first that Chad must be punking us with some elaborate photoshop trick, but then Anne woke from her hangover and started calling around saying, “Can you believe Grady threw a piece of ice down my bra last night?” and we realized he must have been there after all, just blocked out by our vigilant mirth. In the text stream about the get-together, in the days leading up to the event, there was his phone number, bracketed by commas like the rest of ours, though no one could remember having added him.

“What if he actually *murdered* Mabel?” Anne said on the phone, though everyone understood that she was just upset at having been sexually harassed in front of her oldest friends and no one bothering to remember it. There was some talk of Anne having made a scene early in the party, but those who could remember anything about it thought she had been pissed that Craig threw a cork across the living room at her and it had gone down her shirt, and everyone who had been paying attention thought she was overreacting. “What if Grady was the one who put the bag over her head?” she asked us now.

“I see what Anne is saying,” Francesca admitted later. “That guy always did seem like a sociopath. But we all know it’s just wishful thinking.”

After Grady materialized at Craig's surprise fortieth birthday party, despite everyone denying having invited him, we commenced with an unspoken surrender. While we all slid in to forty, one after the other, everyone just began volitionally including Grady at all group events. This sense of purpose was preferable to the sense that we were being stalked: Grady somehow ascertaining our whereabouts and showing up, which seemed hard to comprehend unless he had a Judas on the inside. Some of us suspected Simon, who was becoming more and more peripheral to the group, although he and Francesca still lived together because neither could afford to move out. Often they companionably lamented about the need to bleach their walls, to remove all the tobacco discoloring, before they could ask the landlord to return their security deposit. Others had, more covertly, started suspecting Francesca herself as the Grady culprit, because of the way Grady fetishized and worshipped her, just as Mabel always had.

Grady, it was obvious to everyone, was trying to take on Mabel's role in the group: a delicate balance between Den Mother and Resident Basket Case. Mabel had always been the first one to show up at every party to help you set up, and the last to leave to help you clean. She had carried a Tide stick and needle and thread in her handbag. But Grady adequately fulfilled none of these roles, only matching Mabel's tendency to cry when too much booze was involved, though what Grady wept was Mabel's name, once throwing himself to the floor and thrashing as he shouted, "My lovely Mabel, what have they done to you?" freaking us out not only because we were not prone to overt displays of negative emotion, but because we were not entirely sure whether we were the *they* in his sentence. Mabel's self-appointed role as our group masseuse had always loaned our gatherings a decadent, *Ice Storm* kind of air, but Grady, not being a tall, busty blond, looked entirely different skulking around trying to poke at our tense shoulders. Mabel had been our elaborate dessert maker at baby showers, showing up with decadent English Trifles in deep glass dishes when other people brought cupcakes in cheap supermarket packaging, but Grady only ever brought vodka. If Mabel

had had a tag line, it would have been, *I'm a nurturer*, something she said about herself almost continually, and it had been true, if not quite so simple. Mabel *had* been the one we all called if our children needed last minute sitters or if we needed someone to drive with us to the ER. She was the friend who would lock you in your bedroom to enable your anorexia, lest you ingest food while in a stupor of Ambien. She was a help-you-bury-the-body kind of friend, whereas Grady was merely someone who seemed to know how to enter a room without making a sound. "Where's the Ninja," Craig might say, and Grady would answer, "Who's the Ninja?" obligating us to make up anecdotes about a friend from the nineties who had taken to wearing a black scarf everywhere he went.

It was difficult to pin down exactly what it was about Grady that was so toxic to a reasonable quality of life. Tajal suggested that he was a "close talker," like on *Seinfeld*, and it was true, but that didn't get to the root of how anxious and disturbed we became in his presence. Craig reasoned that his grief over Mabel made us uncomfortable—that he couldn't move on and it was painful to witness—and surely we could recognize the validity of this, intellectually. However, it became more widely accepted that Grady was *usurping* everyone else's grief, although we had mostly known Mabel for more than twenty years, and he for less than one. "He is the proprietor of our grief," Anne took to saying—"he acts as though he owns all rights to mourn Mabel, and we are just his witnesses." *Did* Grady act this way? It was hard to ascertain. His lips were too thin and there was something about the way a few wisps of chest hair were always visible above his highest shirt button, and how everything became a double entendre in his mouth, but none of these factors alone could explain our antipathy. We kept recollecting aloud the way he and Mabel had stuck their tongues down each other's throats at gas stations and music shows, as though they were not almost forty, as though they were not of only average attractiveness, as though anybody "wanted to see that," as Miguel—who was beautiful but private and aloof as a cat—pointed out. The year we all turned forty, Grady swept through our parties like a bad smell nobody could shake no matter how many windows we opened,

and finally, when Miguel, who had been double promoted, had his birthday in December, one year after Mabel's death, we fell back onto our beds gasping with collective relief that the year of parties was over and we were free to slide obscurely into a Grady-free middle age.

It wasn't, however, until we got together for our annual Christmas tea at the Drake Hotel—something we had forsaken the year of Mabel's death and which none of the men except Chad ever attended—to find Grady sitting at our reserved table near the enormous Christmas tree, that genuine despair began to set in. After the round of phone calls afterwards demanding of each other, “Look, are you fucking with us, are *you* the one who invited him?” everyone slipped into a taciturn stalemate, and the remainder of the winter passed without further attempts to congregate. For a time, it seemed that a critical mass was necessary for Grady to materialize, but when Francesca and Anne went thrift store shopping alone together and found him holding their bags outside the fitting room after trying on dresses, it became tacitly understood that the only way to eliminate Grady was to avoid each other entirely.

Truth be told, maybe this had been a while coming anyway. Two of the couples had children now, and Anne was in the process of adopting from Ethiopia on her own. Work was increasingly busy. Francesca's legs were getting worse, but really we were *all* getting a bit old for Bottle shows, where there was never any seating. At first we texted vigorously, but Grady always ended up on the strain, chiming in with “I'm listening to Mabel's favorite song” and then naming some Hold Steady bullshit no one had ever heard of when we all knew her favorite was just “Love Shack” by the B-52s. “Why does he even *call* her Mabel?” Tajal asked once, on the phone, which was the only way to avoid Grady's intercession. “Doesn't he get that it was just a *joke*? She wasn't *his* Mabel anyway! Why can't he call her by her real name?”

After this conversation, Grady began calling each of us Mabel when he called, even the men, none of whom had been in on the original Mabel joke or had even known us in junior high. Things

felt increasingly like one of those horror movies where we were supposed to get the fuck out of the house before it got any worse, but there was no *house* to leave. “I am Neegan,” we all started saying to each other after Grady took to calling us *Mabel* ensemble, but only once did this seem truly hilarious, triggering all kinds of other howled sentences that had once been significant—“Whatever you do, use the word salve in a sentence!” and “Is there rice involved?”—that left us convulsive with laughter, and Francesca had to get off the phone because she was losing control of her bladder. After that, the laughter dried up entirely and a pervasive chill encroached.

It was around this time that we decided to go and see *The Narcissist*—who of course had known Mabel by her given name. She accepted us graciously, and although at first we were constantly looking over our shoulders for Grady to materialize, the pristine white living room bore no signs of him.

“Despair is the ultimate sin,” Mabel’s mother told us solemnly over iced tea. “But it would be arrogant of us to presume ourselves more compassionate than God. God understands our reasons and shows mercy.”

“Mabel can’t go to Hell,” Miguel said. “She was an atheist.”

Mabel’s mother didn’t laugh, but nodded slowly, a half smile tightening the muscles on her face for so long that they seemed to twitch.

“Does her fiancé keep in touch with you?”

“Her fiancé?” Mabel’s mother asked.

“You know,” Ally said. “The guy who didn’t want the open casket, who you fought with constantly the week of the funeral until you got your way.”

“Oh,” Mabel’s mother said. “I don’t remember anything like that.”

“I told you,” Francesca mouthed behind Mabel’s mother’s head. “She’s crazy.”

Without her Kentucky Derby hat, The Narcissist's hair was thin, but she still bore a certain wounded glamour much like Mabel's. Mabel had possessed, all the males among us agreed, a certain quality that made men want to hurt her just because they knew they could, whereas The Narcissist had buried two husbands, both of whom she had, according to Mabel, cheated on with shameless aplomb. Their uncanny resemblance therefore seemed like some kind of long con to which we mutually objected on legally impermissible grounds.

"Sometimes I think it's a comfort," Miguel said, and we all twitched a little that he was speaking to The Narcissist at all, "that she went on her own terms instead of waiting to succumb slowly. After what you dealt with your first husband's decline, I hope you take some comfort in that too."

The Narcissist looked confused, though it was hard to ascertain whether she was confused or was wearing a face of practiced confusion for obscure purposes. We had all distrusted her since before our first menstruation. She shook her head though, saying, "I suppose I can take comfort in the fact that my daughter committed a mortal sin in her own apartment rather than blowing her brains out in the study like her father did, if that's what you mean." Miguel yelped slightly and Chad put a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

"I thought," said Francesca, who had known Mabel the longest, "that he died in a nursing home."

"A nursing home?" The Narcissist said. "A nursing home for jealous lunatics? I wish I'd known where to find one of those when he was threatening to kill me and the children because I wanted a divorce."

"They call it Assisted Living now," Tajal said helplessly.

“The Huntington’s Disease must have been brutal,” Francesca went on, undeterred, smooth enough that we suddenly all understood why she had been the rock star’s girlfriend and we had not. “To make him carry on that way.”

Mabel’s mother shook her head. “You kids,” she told us, turning her teapot completely upside down in hopes of more water that was not to be found. “Whenever you all got together, I never understood a word you had to say.”

Out in front of Mabel’s childhood home, we all looked at each other helplessly. We knew, of course, that now that Mabel’s mother was not among us, Grady would soon pop out from around a bush or pull up in the car he and Mabel used to drive, asking us if we needed a ride, and everyone felt frantic, clutching each other’s hands and embracing fast and hard before it could occur. The sun was dropping faster than seemed reasonable and we had no time to process what we each thought we had inferred from The Narcissist’s words. Instead, we scattered to our cars, everyone careful to have driven separately. Craig and Ally had even taken two cars, although Chad and Miguel kept insisting, “It doesn’t apply to *couples*.” Before we left Francesca standing alone, she said, “Maybe I really should get back together with Simon then—he was the only person who knew and loved Mabel who I can be around anymore, I guess.” Some of us attempted to affirm how, yes, we had always liked Simon, and Ally even said, “You really blew that one,” but nobody stuck around long enough to see how her words had landed, because the sun had shifted into past tense, and it was clear that we were getting cocky, that we had pressed our luck and already waited too long.

After we received a text saying, *Sorry i wasn’t able to make it to Mabel’s mother’s house but that woman presses 2 many of my buttons*, utter silence ensued. No one discussed it; we just started staying away. Rumor had it that Ally and Craig had even separated, though Chad and Miguel insisted

brazenly via text that this went beyond caution, to the verge of hysteria. Still, shortly after that, Tajal was the first to change her phone number and everyone else quickly followed suit.

It became clear, as soon as enough hindsight separated our lives from Mabel's, that it had been years since our daily lives organically overlapped anyway. Nobody worked in the same industry as anyone else. We disappeared from each other's radars, but in reality the absence made barely a scheduling blip. It was easy enough to imagine Ally teaching kindergarten as she always had, and Anne working for her psycho immigration attorney about whom she had regaled us for years while our eyes glazed, and Craig still overseeing HR for a bank, and Chad and Miguel steadily becoming real estate moguls, all their lives full to bursting with intricate details and other bodies cluttering their scenes. The respective progeny of our group progressed from toddlerhood to elementary school, but no one lived in the same neighborhood as anyone else and the next generation's paths never crossed.

If there was no one in the room to say that Mabel's father had never had Huntington's Disease, then maybe he still had it, in the same closed box where Schrodinger's Cat might still be alive. If there was no text stream to say, *Holy motherfucking fuck, if she didn't kill herself over genetic test results then why did she?*, then a new reason was not a requirement in order for us to put our shoes on in the morning and go about the business of living. If we were not all together anymore, then there wasn't an Us to whom she had lied for a quarter century, and it was therefore not necessary to explain *why* such a lie had ever seemed necessary to our last remaining Mabel, who was not Mabel at all of course, any more than we were—who was not, it turned out, anything we had understood.

It wasn't until The Women's March, more than five years after Mabel's death, that our members converged again quite by accident. When Tajal and Ally ran into each other at Buckingham Fountain and decided not to avert their eyes and to instead link arms and walk together in the unseasonably warm air (neither mentioning Mabel, who was never very political anyway other than the way New Year's Eve made a Communist Anarchist of her), both knew it was only a matter of

time before someone else from the group showed up too. “I knew I would see you,” we said to one another afterwards. It seemed to us that, since parting company, the world had more or less gone to shit, and our reunion was constituted of more sobbing and body flinging than Mabel’s wake had been, when we mostly had just gotten drunk in the car and made fun of her poor mother’s hat—when we had not yet realized Mabel was our only commonality, thrown over us ensemble like a dirty blanket of need. It was only when Francesca squealed wildly, waving her long, skinny arm our way, her voice strangely recognizable despite the overwhelming din of the event, that we turned and noticed Grady there, pushing her wheelchair. They were having a hard time getting through the crowd even though the March had made a big show of being inclusive and intersectional. Francesca and Grady had dogged smiles on their faces, and we all thought of the way Mabel had always chirped, “Fake it ’til you make it!” with her megawatt party smile, and how then she had simply checked out the moment her genetic test—had it even existed?—allegedly came back positive, while here we still were in the wreckage, soldiering on.

Maybe, everyone wondered upon seeing Grady and Francesca together this way, it had *not* been Mabel’s fear of a mortality we all faced eventually, but a tragic betrayal by Grady that caused her irrevocable turn towards despair? Nobody had heard from Simon in more than four years, but suddenly it seemed even that maybe Francesca’s fetus had been Grady’s instead, and this affair between Mabel’s fiancé and the woman she’d worshipped since girlhood might have been what prompted Mabel to take those pills, tying the bag over her head for good, grisly measure. Maybe Francesca had been just like *The Narcissist* after all, lining up one man before relinquishing the other. This thought seemed so poetically full-circle, such a salve to our confusion, that we forgot to even hate Francesca, who was in a chair for her MS even though we had previously all mutually believed her diagnosis an affectation for attention. Because we were not even yet forty when Mabel checked out, it had seemed to us then that illness was an exotic and unlikely thing; it had seemed

preposterous that *two* of our numbers should be so cursed, one having the gene for Huntington's Disease and the other a diagnosis of MS, and so we concluded that one of these two things must be Fake. Such logic seemed murky to us now, closer to fifty as we all were than to thirty-nine...so murky that although one illness *had* proven an affectation, the preposterousness of Mabel's lie now seemed less feasible, entirely less in line with Occam's razor, than the plausibility of random genetic accidents—of age. There in the January air, so long on our feet, our backs and hips and necks hurt; Anne had only one breast remaining under her parka. And so we forgot to judge Francesca for her possible *Scarlet Letter* treachery and only remembered—with blinding, cruel clarity—how much we had all hated Grady for the way he'd looked at Mabel with that expression of raw, naked devotion: a slack-jawed desire beyond decorum or social convention. We did not think of The Narcissist, and whether she had been lying to us or telling a long-buried truth—we thought only of the way Grady had backed Mabel into cars and tables to kiss her in the public world, at almost forty—*almost forty!* The faintly recollected echo of his unadulterated love enraged and offended us, still. What a surprise it was, to realize it now.

People need their old friends during apocalyptic times, we agreed, bobbing our pussy hats in synchronicity. Francesca invited us all to dinner, reminding us that Grady was an excellent cook, as though vodka were a thing he had regularly whipped up from scratch for us long ago—still, we fell over ourselves to agree, to set a date, to plug it into our respective calendars and begin a text stream right there confirming, Grady's number typed in second among ours.

"Poor Mabel," we said, after a long, languid dinner chez Francesca-and-Grady. "I guess he never really loved her." We welled with the magnanimity of the well fed, forgiving Grady for his longtime affair with Francesca, forgiving him his betrayal of Mabel that had come, we now decided with abundant catharsis, at the cost of her life. We forgave him *everything*, feeling something of the world clicking back into place, willfully forgetting the way decay was coming for each of us too, and

the way its prospect must have been so unbearable to Mabel that she had abandoned us to go it alone, making Grady's grief our problem for good measure. We forgave the way she had broadcast, like a vulgar middle school joke, how *she*, young and beautiful in her open casket, had avoided what each of us must inevitably face. Had we hated her for leaving? Had we fled one another for fear that eventually one of our number would break down as Grady so often had, shouting at the blank, tobacco-stained ceiling *Why—why did you leave us here alone?*

And so, you understand, given the missing piece of the puzzle that Francesca's femme fatale role so cathartically plugged into, that it is beyond my capability to promise you that we cared anymore about what was real, when we were old enough to understand now that Real was only ever quicksand. It is impossible for me to reassure you that we forgave Grady for any of the right reasons, or that we forgave Mabel at *all*, given we had never fully acknowledged her possible treason or interrogated whether we were worthy of anything more. There had been her story, and we had *become* her story, and to try to prove or disprove any of it now seemed too much, the world being what it was, we being what we were. And so we set upon the course of opening another bottle of vodka, of pinning Grady and Francesca to their transgressions like dead butterflies onto a yellowed page, because this was easier, infinitely easier, than forgiving the unfathomable crime of love.

TRUCK STOP

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I like working on the hotline because it helps me figure out what other people say. Since I started therapy myself, I am constantly plagued with the fear of doing something wrong, of not going about my *recovery* in the right way. It is hard to know what to do when you go into someone's office and he expects you to talk the whole time. I have never before had difficulty thinking of what to say, but now, with just a strange man sitting across from me waiting, it is hard to recall anything significant, hard to keep from lying without even realizing I am doing it.

I like working on the hotline because the women there are raw. They call up crying, and talk so fast they don't have the time to lie. They say, "I still love him, God, I do, I know he's done some bad things in the past but we have three kids and I think he's going to change now cause last time when he hit me he stopped before he really hurt me, you know?" And I imagine what the hell kind of drug I would have to be on to say such things to a stranger, to make myself sound that weak. But after I have been working on the hotline for three weeks (and in therapy for seven), I say to my therapist, "I wish I could be more honest like the women who call me. I have a hard time expressing my feelings. It bugs me. Like I'm probably wasting both my sister's money and your time."

"I think your even being at the point where you can say that indicates that you are not doing either of those things," my therapist says. I smile, spontaneous but not real. Say, "Yeah, like what else were you supposed to tell me? Go home then? But that's okay. Nice try."

He is a man in his late fifties, my therapist. I am preoccupied with wondering whether or not he is gay. He doesn't have any stereotypically gay traits or anything—no posters of Liza Minelli on the wall, no conspicuous obsession with show tunes—but I just have never known any heterosexual

men who would *do* this, would sit and listen to people's problems all day and try to help them. He wears a gold band on the fourth finger of his left hand, though. He does not tell me anything about his life. I guess they aren't supposed to. But sometimes, it might be nice.

"Are you straight or gay?" I ask him once. He does not laugh. Does not answer. Says, "Why is it important to you to know that?" I say, "I don't know. I'm always preoccupied with other people's sex lives. Isn't everyone?" But he still doesn't laugh. He says, "I'm interested to know why you came to see a male therapist to begin with. Considering that you came in here to talk about your father and about what you see as unhealthy patterns with men, why didn't you choose a woman instead?" I say, "Do you often take the tactic of making people think you're trying to get rid of them?" Finally he cracks a smile. Says, "That is not why I asked the question." I say, "Yeah, I know. Well, I'm kind of afraid of women. Women always think everything that other women do is wrong. Men are safer. Men are easy." He says, "If men are so easy then why are you here?" I fidget in my chair at that, draw my knees up to my chest and smooth my long skirt down around my calves. "Okay, you have me there," I say. He says, "I'm not trying to 'have' you anywhere." I say, "Well I don't *know* the answer. But I'm not afraid of men like I am of women. Maybe that's my problem." He says, "Were you never afraid of your father? Of any of your boyfriends?" There is a long pause in which I cannot remember how to think. He does not stare at me, I figure because he is a politically correct kind of guy and has been told that staring intimidates women, but really staring is what I'm used to and I wish he would do it more. Then I might know how to act. Finally, I hear myself say, "Anyone would be scared of someone twice their size who hit them and called them a whore," my voice more defensive than I have trained it to be, painfully revealing. Add weakly, "But it was a different kind of fear than I have of women. I don't know, it just wasn't the same." He says, "Can you tell me more about that?" I am dutiful, nothing to lose. "With women I am afraid they

won't like me. With men, I guess I'm afraid of *something*, but never that. Men always like me if I want them to. At least it seems like they do."

But then later I think, *God, he must think I'm totally conceited*, and I am sorry that I told him what was really on my mind. And then I think, *No, actually he probably thinks I am incredibly insecure and need male approval and am some walking victim*. And then later I think, *Actually, what I would think if I were him is that the reason women make me nervous is because I feel guilty for fucking my father and not telling my mother, so I imagine all the other women in the world condemning me for it*. And finally it is, *Jesus, he must think I'm just whacked*.

I like working at the hotline because it is easy. There, I am in control. I am a voice on the other end of the telephone line, someone who can say, "It's not your fault," and, "You don't deserve that kind of treatment," if that is what the caller needs to hear, or who can say, "Do you have someplace safe to stay tonight?" or even, "Well, it doesn't sound to me like you're ready to make a change and I think you'd better figure out what you want," if I'm feeling kinda bitchy or impatient. I have learned phrases in my training class, things along the lines of, *It sounds to me like*, and, *What I'm hearing is*. I raised my hand on the day we first rehearsed these ways of speaking and listening, said, "Jesus, we sound like idiots, they'll hang right up on us," but the counselor smiled and said, "I know you feel obvious, but believe me, they won't notice." And even though that counselor has an annoying, permanent smile and wants to hug me every time she sees me, I have to admit that she was right. They don't.

My therapist is named Phil, but I rarely call him by his name if I can avoid it. The name seems too informal and young for him; his hair is almost white and he has a soft looking stomach like he doesn't exercise or eats too much ice cream. He is so benign looking, neither ugly nor attractive, that often I forget what he looks like until I walk into the office and see him again. In fact,

I worry sometimes that I might run into him on the street and not recognize him out of his office, out of his habitual chair. Then he would figure out how narcissistic I am, and I would have to stop going because really he would probably hate me then. Of course, worrying that your therapist will hate you is some kind of syndrome, they even have a name for it I think, and the idea is to get healthy enough so that you don't care about that kind of thing. Which is pretty funny since before I went to therapy, I can't remember ever giving a rat's ass about what anyone thought of me, so obviously this is a step in the wrong direction, or at least seems that way to me.

My sister Bee and her lover Amber, on the other hand, think it is the best thing that has ever happened in the history of the world, my being in therapy. They weren't too thrilled about my choosing to see a *man* (which, if I had been completely honest to Phil I would have admitted was one of the main reasons that I chose to do so), but they are getting over that part. Amber is pleased because she figures it is my desire to improve myself that prompted me to join the crisis hotline she manages, and they are understaffed and she is happy to be grateful to me, happy to owe me. Bee is happy too, because this takes the heat off her for all the fights we've had in the past about my refusal to see a shrink, makes it look like I've admitted she was right. Of course she will not acknowledge that, claims she is only happy that I finally have a place to talk about my "issues," but I know her, and she is as bad as me that way. This means she wins.

I did not want to lose either. Did not want to, but in the month before I picked up the Yellow Pages and circled Phil's office number, I was down to eating about one bagel a day and hovering near ninety-three pounds. I had started puking again too, not just after eating now but sometimes just from nerves. After only two weeks of therapy, after telling Phil about how I first stopped eating at thirteen, how I thought it would make my mother see that something was wrong, but how instead she just bragged to her friends about my lithe frame and starring roles in dance recitals, calling me her "finicky little ballerina," some of my appetite increased, and I went back to

managing a full meal per day. It was tempting to just leave then and consider the problem solved, but I didn't, I stayed. Told Phil I wanted to quit smoking too, though thus far I have had no luck on that front. Started filling him in on every bad habit I have ever had, from going home with guys in college and not letting them use condoms to cutting myself at least once a week for a whole year until I got distracted and started forgetting to schedule in my self-mutilation time. All of this seems like plenty of material to keep us busy even if I were to stay in therapy forever, so I have not yet told him about Michael.

Sometimes, though, he says, "What about your romantic relationships with men? Not just the one night stands, but *relationships*. Have you had significant relationships?" Then I sigh and wish he would let me smoke in his office. Say, "Yeah, sure, of course." But when I try to explain any of them, the boyfriend I lost my virginity to, the first man I lived with while I was a freshman in college, even my former fiancée whom I left because I couldn't stay faithful, I can never think of what to say. These men, most of whom I thought I loved, all blend together in my memory, overlapping and merging into each other like passing clouds. Only Michael could I talk about, describe in hideously intimate detail, remember the things he said verbatim, dialogue that still plays out—point, counterpoint—cluttering my brain.

But I do not tell him about Michael. I do not tell because if I did, he might try to take him away.

Denise calls every Monday night. It is frowned upon for callers to phone so much. They are encouraged to get real counseling if the need is that great. But that is mostly rhetorical since these women have no money and there *is* no long term individual counseling available at the clinic, only groups, which a lot of these women cannot go to because they have kids to take care of or boyfriends or husbands who won't allow it. Calling is dangerous enough.

It is also frowned upon for volunteers to take the same caller all the time, but the other girl who shares hotline duty with me on Mondays doesn't care, so I have ended up with Denise for three weeks running. The conversations last a long time since she has wild stories about her ex-husband and the ways he devised to torture her. By the third week she asks for me by name, and when the other woman tells her I am on the phone with someone else, she says she will call back.

Denise lives with her three children in a one-room apartment above a bar. She has to call me from a payphone because her ex-husband is still looking for her, still intent on killing her, which he's tried to do seven times already, and therefore she cannot have a phone. We make a lot of jokes about him when we talk because she says that making fun of him helps her remember that he's only a man and has no superhuman powers like he wanted her to believe. She tells me how he once tied her to the bed and threw lit sticks of dynamite at her head. We devise elaborate tales of how she could have blown up his dick, say it's too bad she never thought of doing the Lorena Bobbitt thing. She also has an ex-boyfriend who used to beat her up and took a lot of drugs. She left him last year, the husband three years ago. She is twenty-five, like me.

"Sometimes I feel really fucking old," she says on our third Monday. "Like there's already been so many men in and outta my life I just don't even wanna meet no more of them. My mother's gone her whole life with just my dad. But I'm like a fucking truck stop, men coming and going all the time. My mom thinks I'm crazy."

"Yeah," I say, and I wish that I could see her, know her. "I know just what you mean."

Once a week I have dinner with Bee and Amber so that they can ask me questions. Really, being a single person out with a couple is almost the same as being in therapy. You are assumed to have something lacking in you, to be miserable, to be in pain. They ask me about books I read, films I see, but it does not take us long to access that we do not have the same taste in either. They ask me

a million questions about my job, both of them trying admirably hard never to mention that it is only part-time. Like I have anything illuminating to say about teaching ballet to ten-year-olds, and like this would miraculously turn into a fulfilling career if I did it for more hours in the week. *Yeah, Jenny just can't keep her ass from sticking out in plié and Brianna's so bow-legged somebody should shoot her.* There is a basic truth that Bee never wanted to admit when she was busy getting on my case about my behavior with men: life without sex is dull. The only thing it leaves to talk about is the *pursuit* of sex, and since I am no longer pursuing it I cannot discuss that either.

Bee and Amber do not ask about therapy. Sometimes when Amber and I talk at the clinic, *she* asks. But Bee is more comfortable just knowing I am *going*, not having to touch it herself. She operates under an assumption of instant healing, believing that I have already been transformed into something she can deal with simply by virtue of having managed for two months to sit across from Phil one hour a week (though we often run overtime.) I have a vague resentment that she does not want to look at what I might actually be saying in there, that she wants me altered for her convenience at no personal risk. But even the anger I feel cannot be sustained. I don't want to talk about it with her either, and I am grateful really, grateful that she doesn't want to know.

There are two scars on my back that did not go away. I cannot figure out how, after so many beatings from Michael, it would be the *last* one that actually scarred me. It did not hurt any more than usual, didn't bleed any unreasonable amount, had absolutely nothing to do with our parting. The scars rest out of my sight and out of my reach, a gnawing irony, and I would like to tell somebody, say, *Do you see how funny the order of everything is*, but there is no one to tell, and really only Michael would get the joke anyway.

But it pleases me in a way, that he finally left some tangible history on me, two corresponding scars to compliment—or replace—the ones on my arm. My own handiwork is less

spectacular; the razor marks older, paler than those from his whip. Marks that might have been made by some accident long ago. Phil has seen them. He worries that I may want to cut myself again, but despite his urgings, I have refused Prozac. Since I have not told him about Michael, much less the tracks on my back, I cannot explain my lack of need to stamp myself further. Because Phil would only say, *You replaced one addiction with another*, or some such cliché that pisses me off and sounds too true. So I remain silent.

Under my clothes, the new scars are hidden. Though I no longer go to bars, men still talk to me, some ask me out, but for once the word *no* comes easily. I have no interest now, not even in a quick and casual lay. No interest in their bodies, only my own, still only hovering at around one hundred pounds, safely tucked away. There is a peace, something I never allowed myself before in my hypervigilant search for the ultimately redemptive fuck. Afterwards, the bodies to which the dicks were attached were only in my way, making me more edgy than ever, and as I am getting older, a sudden pragmatism sets in. I would rather be alone than with someone who just bugs me in the daylight. This seems simple, obvious, but for me it is an epiphany. New.

Denise's ex-boyfriend, Frankie, is out of rehab. "He came over last night and was really sweet to the kids," she says on the fourth Monday I speak to her. "He would never of been that way before."

"Yeah, well just because he's off drugs doesn't mean you should take him back," I say.

"But he only used to hit me when he was high," she says. "He was cool the rest of the time, you know. Like if you woulda seen him last night, you'd never of known this was the guy I'm always bitching about. He seemed really nice."

“Do you think you can forget the past just like that?” I say. “People have habits that are every bit as powerful as drugs. If the habit you two had was for him to beat the shit out of you, how are you ever going to be together without falling into that again?”

“Yeah, but he knows that was the drugs and he’s gotta stay away from them,” she says.

“So you don’t think that if he’s clean you’ll ever fight? Most couples *do* fight, right?”

“Yeah,” she says, “sure we’d fight, I guess, sometimes.”

“And what happens when you fight? If he started yelling, would you maybe think he was going to hit you? Or what if one of the kids made him mad? Would you trust him with them?”

She drops her voice a little. “I get kinda nervous about him being alone with the kids. I wish they’d act better. Bobby is so hyper, he’s a little spaz, and I’m worried it’ll get to be too much what with Frankie trying to quit, you know? Like he’s on edge anyway, right?”

“The kids aren’t going to change,” I say.

She inhales on her cigarette. It makes me want one, but I cannot smoke in the office. She says, “You think I shouldn’t be going back to him, right? Like I’m gonna fuck up my life again if I do. I can tell.”

I say, “You have to do what you want to do.” It is what they make us say. We are not allowed to say, *Yes, that’s right*.

“But you think he’s bad news. And that I’m stupid to even think about it. Right?”

I do not care about rules. Here the answer seems simple. “Right,” I say.

Two days later my therapist says, “Do you still have flashbacks? The kind you talked about having when you first started the cutting?” They like phrases like that: “flashbacks,” “the cutting.” Reductive phrases that reduce a rainbow of scenes and settings to one neat syndrome, robbing the

act of its power. “Did they exist only for a brief time, or have they been constant throughout your life?”

It is a hard question. It has been a long time since the memories of my father have taken such an overwhelmingly *physical* form. Six months, maybe even a year. But he is still with me everywhere. Although I have not seen him in two years, though I can barely remember his voice in my waking hours, I still *expect* him. The knowledge of him follows me into every area of my life. I have no reason not to believe it always will.

“No,” I say, “I don’t think about him much anymore.” Then, stupidly, “I guess I think more about my mother now. I miss her, but I know I can never see her again. That . . . that part is hard.”

He says, “Do you never think about telling her the truth?”

There is a certainty inside me that comes from nowhere. It is one of those rare moments when I think I know why I am doing this, that some magic takes place between this room and my brain. I look up and say with conviction, “She knows the truth. She’s known it for years. No matter what my sister says, I believe that.”

He says, “It must be hard to think that she would opt to stay with him then. That she would continue to sleep every night with the man who did that to you. You must feel very rejected.”

I keep staring at him, so hard that eventually he looks at me, right into my eyes. I would like to deny it, but there is no point. Something rises up in me, and though I know I am not about to start crying here in front of this stranger, the tears are there, if he knew how to push me, *wanted* to push me, they would come. But that is not the point of therapy, to break your clients, to see them cry. Strange for that not to be the point of something so raw. But I am relieved. I do not want to cry. I swallow once, twice, until the rising within me is gone.

“Yes,” I say. “Yes, I do.”

Later I almost call Michael at work. I am bleeding on my arm, I couldn't stop myself and used a serrated knife right there in the kitchen, reopened both scars over the white tile counter, even though I promised Phil I wouldn't. They are jagged and uneven now, louder and more horrible than *his* marks on my back. It hurts, it alarms me, the blood so out of context, and there is no one to call. Not Bee in her perfect household of fuzzy cats, lying watching TV with her pretty, smart, nice girlfriend who comes from a happy family and is intent on giving Bee all the security she never had growing up. Not the old friends I have been ignoring for months because all they will want to do is get drunk or high and pick up men, and even I have to agree with Phil that these things are not any better for me than cutting, not now, not while I can't handle anything. I am angry with myself for not having cultivated any relationships with more substance, for letting what friendships I had dissipate, but for a long time I couldn't stand to have anyone else around. Now when I want them, there is nobody left.

But they wouldn't have understood this anyway, not any better than poor Bee understood my blind, thrashing anger at our parents when we were growing up. I am *dying*, dying to talk to someone who will *get* it, get this gnawing, who will touch the scars and not look away, not act appalled, not tell me I'm sick, but who will still say, *Stop*. And my soft-stomached therapist doesn't fit the bill because let's face it he's paid to listen to me and I would never pick this man as a friend he has *no* fucking sense of humor. The craving in me to call Michael is as bad and deep as the craving to cut was a few moments ago, and I grab the phone with my less bloody hand and dial his office, but on the first ring I hang up. Most likely his machine would have picked it up anyway; he was always hard to reach at work. I can't cry anymore, I'm too embarrassed at having tried to call him, at having needed blood because I miss him, and I want to scream, I want him here, I can't stand it, but I have to, I have to so I do.

But for the rest of the day I wonder whether maybe he *was* in his office and whether he did pick up the phone just to hear the dial tone. And wonder if he'd even think by now that it was me.

The following Monday, Denise calls later than usual. She says, "Yeah, me and Frankie've been talking to this counselor at his rehab and we been talking about how we want to be a family, like he wants to be a father to my kids. We're gonna go for counseling, like marriage counseling. Cause Frankie knows if he's gonna be with me I won't take no more shit, he's gotta change."

What I say is, "It sounds to me like you're already taking shit. Like you're already back."

"No," she says, "I told him you gotta prove yourself to me or I'm not lettin' you come home and be around my kids. Like what you said before."

"Like *I* said? What did I say?"

"Like that the kids are gonna be kids and he can't be smacking them around no more for doing normal stuff."

"Is he doing that?" I say. I keep my voice steady, I do not know how I do it, I know that something is wrong with me for being able to do it. "Hitting the kids?"

She falters. "No."

I sigh. "What's the point of calling here if you don't tell the truth?"

She sighs back. "I *am* telling the truth. Just Bobby was right in Frankie's face the other day and screaming and whining about wanting all this shit we can't afford, and Frankie smacked him but not hard, just on his butt like you'd hit a kid normal, but I told him not to be touching my kids cause I know what's best and he's gotta prove himself before he can be a father to them."

I say, "Are you listening to yourself? This guy can't control his temper out of a paper bag. He's trying to win you back by smacking your kid? What's he likely to do when you're already married and used to each other, break their legs?"

She says, “Damn, girl, you don’t even know him, he wouldn’t never do nothing like that. He never hit the kids that bad even when he was hitting me. And I don’t have to be calling here just for you to get on my ass too just like my mother. You’re supposed to *help* me.”

“You can’t help someone who doesn’t want it,” I say.

“If I didn’t want it, why would I call you up all the time?”

I am silent. Cannot speak for fear of what will come out. I want to say, *I’m sorry*, but I’m too far gone. The other hotline worker glances over at me. Denise says, “Well?”

I say, “Beats the hell out of me.”

I do not show up for my session with Phil, so he calls me at home. I don’t answer the phone, of course, but listen to his message, to his voice reminding me, thinking I forgot. He sounds older on the phone, and too amiable, too earnest for me to bear. I hate him for not knowing me better after all this time I’ve supposedly been baring my soul. For not saying, *I know you’re there just pick up the phone and tell me why you’re afraid to come to my office*. But he *doesn’t* know me, because half the time I lie to him anyway, and he has to listen to thirty people just like me every week, and the things that mean more to me than anything in the world do not mean anything to him. They can’t. When I told him why I wanted a scar, he said, *I know you’re in a lot of pain and you must want a way to show that*, and I thought, *That sentence would be applicable to practically anything that came out of any client’s mouth*, and I thought, *I hate you, you fat fool*, and I said, “No, I wear long sleeves all the time,” and he looked at me like he was very disappointed at my superficial reading of his statement, and I knew it was a joke then, I should have trusted my impulses, I knew we’d never get anywhere at all.

When he hangs up, I erase the message instantly. I also call Amber at the hotline and tell her it isn’t working out. That I need to get a second job that actually *pays* and I don’t have time to sit around listening to people’s problems for free when I can’t even handle my own bills. I hang up

before she can sound disappointed but sympathetic, sit in my bed reading *Cosmopolitan* and thinking, *Shit, I think I have problems*, and get stoned so that I will be able to sleep. The burden of both therapy and the hotline lifted, I feel better. Better for the moment, but wondering if in the long run I'll feel worse.

That night I dream of Amber dressed in a black leather corset, her red curls falling over her face while she leans over sucking Michael. We are in Michael's apartment, in his daughter's three-day-a-week bedroom, her pink duvet soiled with browning blood. We sit on the bed and Amber remains with us, she will not go away. When we make love, she is still there, and no matter where I turn my face, she stays. Michael's tea kettle is whistling in the background; it is so loud I think that I will lose my mind, but the sound of it makes me come in my sleep. When I wake, I am wet with sweat and damp between my legs and the alarm clock has been ringing for some time. I go into the kitchen to make coffee, half expecting to find him there, naked and eating dry toast, collecting the maggots that migrate in from the rotting tree outside, scraping them with a paper plate and sticking them in the bin so I won't have to do it. I think, *He never slapped me, never punched me, never said so much as a cross word to me outside the boundaries of an orchestrated, controlled scene. It was sex, not abuse.* Try not to remember the way he looked at me towards the end, the way I knew he hated me for *wanting* what he wanted to do. The room is so empty. Think, *Frankie would not scrape bugs for her.* I look around the room as if I might find that part of Michael left behind like the scars on my back, the part that believed his belt, his cock could save me. But that is a joke too now, also filed away under the heading: Irony. Like everything else but the tears in my flesh, slipped back inside a deep, old hole.

People disappear. That Monday I call the hotline and ask the woman who always worked with me if Denise called. It is midnight, the end of what was briefly my shift. The woman yawns into the phone, says, "Nope, she didn't call tonight. Maybe she's finally getting her act together." I hang up and wonder if Denise is also thinking of me, wondering if I am there at the clinic worrying about

her. If it makes her happy to think I might feel guilty or concerned, might wonder if it's my fault she didn't call. But no, she would not be thinking of me. It is the rescuer who thinks of the one she failed to save. If anything, Phil is the one stewing, wondering what he did wrong where I'm concerned. It almost makes me feel sorry for him, makes me want to call him and explain. But I feel a betrayal of some kind is in order, and since Michael is not here, my therapist will have to do.

There is a question I'd like to ask Phil though, one that almost makes me wish I'd been straight from the onset, that I'd risked suffering through whatever preachy, New Age bullshit he might have dished out. Something about how, if a relationship doesn't last, is it kind of like it never happened, like both parties are failures and so by virtue of this overriding fact, all their intentions must have been off-base from day one? Something about whether I'll ever be anything resembling "cured" unless I wake one day filled with beams of light that suddenly make it crystal clear how much I never loved the man who made me tea and rubbed my feet at four a.m., who also made me howl like an animal, who filled every orifice while I screamed. Something about how it ended before I could figure out exactly what we were trying to kill, my past or his future, how it was over before I could put my finger on which one of us was the rescuer, which of us the saved. There is something in me that could rest if only I had the answer, no one would believe me but why should that matter, *I know, I'm sure.*

The phone wakes me at an hour when everybody with real employment is already busy. I have the habit of trying to perk up my voice when I say *hello*, even grogginess somehow too revealing. I cannot do it today, though. Don't know for sure how many days it's been that I've lain here watching skies go from light to dark, only that I'm not hungry anymore and that's not a good sign but is still a relief. Only that in all this time the phone has not rung once, and so even though when I first got into bed I did not plan on answering any calls, the truth of there having been none

to break up my light-to-dark solitude is so shattering that when the ringing actually cuts through the silence, I grab for the phone so hard I grow dizzy and have to sink my head back down. Amber, clipped and serious on the other end says, “We’ve just had a bomb threat. I thought you should know.”

I say, “You jest.”

“Oh, no, we get them now and then. Of course, there’s no *bomb* or anything. It’s just that this one must be from your little friend, Denise’s, lover-boy. It specifically referenced you.”

“*Me?* What did he say?”

“The usual. I’m gonna find the fucking bitch—insert your name here—who turned my woman against me, dyke whore blah blah blah, I’m going to blow up the joint and kill you all.”

Sit up again. “Shit. The usual. Wow.”

“Don’t worry. He doesn’t know your last name. You never *told* her did you? Or where you live?”

“Um, no.” Then, as if compelled to let her know this was not some calculated omission on my part brought on by the savvy knowledge that I would be stalked in the future, “I mean, we talked about *her*. It never came up.”

“Good. Well don’t worry then. But just be careful. I had to tell you, even though you’re probably not in any danger. We’ve called the police. They’ll pick him up. Still, keep your eyes open. They won’t hold him long.”

“Wouldn’t do to have your girlfriend’s sister whacked by some psycho, huh? It might keep Bee from putting out.”

“Um,” she says. “Among other drawbacks, yeah.” She tries to laugh. She knows me, knows this is how to relate to me, is more willing to enter the bantering game than Bee. But she is not good

at it, and her forced laughter causes a moment of hollow fear that pounds inside my stomach where there is too much empty space to fill.

“You woke me up,” I say. “I haven’t eaten yet. I have to go.”

“Why don’t you call Bee? You shouldn’t be alone, and besides, you haven’t called in ages and she’s been sulking. *Don’t*, whatever you do, tell her about the bomb threat. Just let her take you to dinner, it’ll—”

“Dinner? What time is it?”

“About four, I guess.” From the same forced-light place as her laughter: “Only an hour till I’m out of here too. If you think you can wait, we could all go.”

If you think you can wait. Right now, I’m not sure I can. Am not sure either if I can bear the implications of her knowing that, of the transparent hunger rising right from my belly into my voice. There is a book sitting on Amber’s desk—but it will be there tomorrow too, I remind myself, and the day after that—a reference list to female therapists who are willing to see low income clients on a sliding scale. These therapists responded to a questionnaire sent by the clinic; they have a self-professed interest in “women’s issues;” they are brave or foolish or both; they feel titillation under their skin at the small, impossible victory of a bomb threat. Bee will gloat. I can see her doing it already. Can imagine this kernel of smugness sustaining her while she buys me dinner later and patiently—with a kindness and grief that breaks my heart—restrains herself from asking when I last felt a breeze on my skin. When I last ate. Another item in the irony file, one even Michael wouldn’t laugh at: I could kill myself for what my killing myself has put her through.

“He referenced me by *name*, huh?”

“Don’t worry,” Amber says again, and the words are so contrary to whatever I am feeling that all I manage to do is promise not to and quickly hang up. The umbilical cord severed, I try to hold on to the impulse of a moment before to reach out to my sister and take her up on any number

of offers: a spare room, an aerobicized, wool-clad shoulder to cry on, at least a vegetarian meal. I cannot make myself pick up the phone. Maybe tomorrow. The impulse is gone.

But I know the bar Denise lives above. I have been in it, even—once in high school, to make a phone call, and some Mexican guys stared at me and yelled things to each other in Spanish that made my legs get hot and twitchy and made them all laugh. I could go to her house right now, pound on the door and tell her, *Come with me. Bring your kids and don't look back.* Or maybe she is already gone, and it is *his* eyes I would look into and he would see me: thin, weakened, hair stringy from time and sleep, eyes full of demons of my own, and he would say, maybe laughing too like those men below, *Oh, are you all?* But if I spoke, perhaps he would hear her voice in mine and kill me after all, because no matter what I look like, no matter if I passed out on his stairs from lack of food, no matter if he ripped my clothes off and saw my scars—all of them—she would still be gone.

Sometimes, against all odds, we *do* something. So help me. Sometimes we do.

I did this.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

From: **David Daley** <davedaley@gmail.com>
Date: Wed, Jul 14, 2021 at 4:35 AM
Subject: Re: Urgent Rights Issue re: old Five Chapters piece
To: Gina Frangello <gfrangello@yahoo.com>

To whom it may concern:

Please allow this to confirm the following:

On September 16, 2011, Five Chapters published an early version of one of Gina Frangello's short stories, "Café de Flore," on its website under a one-time grant of First Electronic Rights. Full rights reverted to the author after publication, and *Five Chapters* retains no rights to the story.

Sincerely,

David Daley
Editor, *Five Chapters*

APPENDIX B

Necessary Fiction
29 Empire Street
Quincy, MA 02169
editor@necessaryfiction.com
617/653-0406

July 12, 2021

To whom it may concern,

Please allow this to confirm the following:

On November 1, 2010, Necessary Fiction published the short story "Cafe de Flore" by Gina Frangello on its website under a grant of First Electronic Rights. On November 7, 2010, Necessary Fiction published the short story "Blood" by Gina Frangello on its website under a one-time grant of First Electronic Rights. On November 17, 2010, Necessary Fiction published the short story "Truck Stop" by Gina Frangello on its website under a one-time grant of First Electronic Rights.

Full rights to all three stories reverted to the author after these publications, and *Necessary Fiction* retains no rights to any of these stories.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'SH' followed by a stylized flourish and the name 'Himmer' written in smaller letters below.

Steve Himmer
Editor, *Necessary Fiction*

APPENDIX C

From: **Marisa Siegel** <marisa@therumpus.net>
Date: Wed, Jul 14, 2021 at 12:36 PM
Subject: Re: Urgent Rights Issue for Gina Frangello
To: Gina Frangello <gfrangello@yahoo.com>

To whom it may concern:

Please allow this to confirm the following:

On January 6, 2013, *The Rumpus* published an early version of one of Gina Frangello's short stories, "My Parasite," on its website under a one-time grant of First Electronic Rights. Full rights reverted to the author after publication, and *The Rumpus* retains no rights to the story.

Sincerely,
Marisa Siegel
Editor-in-Chief, *The Rumpus*

APPENDIX D

January 24, 2014

Dear Gina Frangello,

First, thank you for your past contribution(s) to MAKE. This year we are hoping to share more of our printed content on our website, makemag.com. We seek permission to publish your piece, "Vulcan Love," that was printed in *MAKE* 10, online.

In keeping with the collegial nature of MAKE and the relationships it enjoys with its contributors, we ask that you simply review this email and respond to us as instructed below. Please understand that so doing will operate as a binding contract between you, the contributor, and MAKE. We hope you'll find this email satisfactory to protect your rights to your work and allow us at MAKE to be secure in publishing that work with your express permission.

By accepting the terms of this email, you, Gina Frangello, are granting MAKE the right to publish your work, "Vulcan Love," on makemag.com. With this one-time publication, you will retain all future rights to your work.

If you agree to these terms, you're encouraged to send us an updated biography and include any links to your website and social media accounts. If any changes need to be made to the version we originally published, please let me know by January 31, 2014.

If we were able, we would pay you for your contribution with gold bars and rare pearls. Unfortunately, as a small not-for-profit we cannot offer you any financial compensation.

Thank you again for contributing your work and supporting our mission to publish innovative, high-quality prose, poetry, and visual art.

Please respond to this email with an updated bio (if necessary) and the sentence, "I agree to the terms in the January 24, 2014, email from MAKE Literary Productions" to acknowledge receipt of email and your understanding and acceptance of the terms described in this offer.

Kamilah Foreman
Fiction Editor, *MAKE Literary Magazine*
kamilah@makemag.com

VITA

NAME: Gina Frangello

EDUCATION: B.A., Psychology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1990.

M.A., Counseling/Psychology, Antioch University New England, Keene, New Hampshire, 1993.

M.A., English/Creative Writing, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 1996.

Ph.D., English/Creative Writing, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 2021.

TEACHING: Department of English, Lake Forest College, Chicago, Illinois: Advanced Fiction Workshop, Publishing & Editing, Introduction to Creative Writing, 2020-present.

Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, Visiting Lecturer: Language and the Body, Professional Writing, Editing & Publishing, Introduction to Fiction Writing, Technical Writing, Composition (First Year Writing Program), 2016-2019.

Department of Writing, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois: Women on the Verge (undergraduate version), Writing the Body, 2018-2019.

MFA Program in Creative Writing, Roosevelt University, Chicago, Illinois: Women on the Verge (graduate version), Writing from Life, 2016.

MFA Program in Creative Writing, University of California at Riverside, Palm Desert, California: Fiction (cross-genre); Non-Fiction (cross-genre), 2013-2015, annual guest faculty at residencies, 2010-2013.

School of Continuing Studies MFA Program, Northwestern University, Chicago, Illinois: Independent Study Advisor, Faculty Editor, *TriQuarterly Online*, Editing and Publishing, *TriQuarterly Online*, Reading and Writing Fiction (Advanced), Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction (Intro/Advanced), 2007-2010.

Department of Fiction Writing, Columbia College Chicago, Chicago, Illinois: Fiction Seminar (graduate/undergrad hybrid), Fiction Writers and Publishing, Critical Reading and Writing: Short Story Writers, 1999-2013.

Department of English, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois,
Teaching Assistantship: Multi-Ethnic Literatures in the United States,
Introduction to Fiction Writing, Understanding Literature: The Hysteries in
Literature, Introduction to Fiction Writing, Representations of Youth
Culture in Literature and Film, Introduction to Fiction Writing, Composition
(First Year Writing Program), 1995-1998.

HONORS: Ragdale Writer's Residency, February 2020; June 2019; December 2000.

Newcity Magazine, "Lit 50: Who Really Books In Chicago," Hall of Fame
Member as of 2020 following inclusion almost yearly since 2006.

Summer Literary Seminars (SLS) short fiction contest, 1st place winner for
"Café de Flore," judged by Mary Gaitskill, spring 2011.

Illinois Arts Council Literary Award, for "Attila the There," 2005.

Illinois Arts Council Individual Fellowship in Prose, 2002.

Charles Goodnow Memorial Prize, 1997.

Night Train, 1st runner up in short fiction contest judged by Steve Almond

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS: National Book Critics Circle (NBCC)

PUBLICATIONS (BOOKS): Frangello, Gina. *A Life in Men*. Algonquin Books, 2014.

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