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## Adrift

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ADRIFT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

by

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B.A. University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2000

August, 2006

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*Para Diego, mi ancla*

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## Abstract

*Adrift* is a novel about Telemaka Miller, a beautiful young woman who cannot say no to men as a result of her father's abandoning her when she was young. Loosely based on Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* (in which Odysseus' son, Telemakos, sets out to look for his lost father), the novel traces Telemaka's search for her father through an endless string of lovers. The novel opens in 2005, when Telemaka is in her late twenties, and works its way backward through her twenties, teens, and adolescence to the moment in her childhood when her father left the family.

It could not lift the heavy agonies I felt  
For the fatherless wanderings of my own sons  
But some sorrows are like stones,  
And they never melt.

-*Omeros*, Derek Walcott

## Book I



January 2005, twenty-seven years old

i.

*You are beautiful. People look at you in shopping malls, on subway station escalators, on the corner of Seventh and West 4<sup>th</sup>. Men catch your eye and hold it, as if lasers could reach from pupil to pupil across the room and radiate a message: come home with me, or, sometimes: let me love you. Women never look you in the eye; they look you up and down, a two-second glance during which they drink in your suede boots or pointy-toed flats, your smart pant-suit, size 4, or little black dress and cashmere cardigan, your hair pulled back and clipped, emphasizing high cheekbones that have the faintest color of a late summer sunset, or hair down, framing your face with dirty blond wisps. Their eyes are not lasers, but quick explosions of envy, comparing and competing, like a camera's white flash in the dark.*

*You are beautiful. You have been told this for as long as you can remember, even on the third day of your life, when you sat in your mother's sad arms in the hospital lobby for your father to pick you both up, late as usual. An old woman leaned over and told your mother that you were beautiful, a beautiful baby with eyes the color of blueberries. You were told every birthday, when you had a bowl-cut and bigger, blue-green eyes and wore the dresses Grammy made you, with knee socks and mary-janes, and opened presents, feigning surprise that you were good enough to deserve so many. You were told every Thanksgiving, especially the one in D.C. when you wore the long black dress and heels and people who saw pictures of it later told Nance, your D.C. grandmother, you were gorgeous, a beautiful genetic extension of her. You were told every Christmas, even the one when you had your head shaved, hoping to finally be anonymous, ugly, hoping to*

*avoid that word – beautiful – but people still called you it, said only you could pull off a shaved head with that face.*

*This is not about pity. You are not trying to earn anyone's sympathy. You know that people don't care to hear it, have learned from experience that when you say: I don't feel beautiful; I feel average and normal; I feel me, just me, like anybody else on the street, a person, they don't believe you. They tilt their chins down, eyes fixed on you, saying: give me a fucking break. So you do, because you don't know how to make them see you are telling the truth: that you don't see anything special in your face. You don't see beautiful or ugly. You just see the face of the girl you have always been and who usually still feels like the twelve-year-old version of you, knock-kneed; breasts only a fantasy, years away; scores of lovers yet to touch your body, feel it from the inside; your big green eyes nearly popping out of your head; all blond hair and confusion and tears and curiosity. This is mostly what you see when you look in the mirror.*

*But how do you say that to people? How do you make them see you don't want sympathy? You just want them to know that Beautiful, whatever that is, is a camera flash. It's nothing. It's like beautiful is all you are, all you get to be, over and over again; some carousel that seems fun at first and then makes you throw up all over your party dress, a child who can't even control herself.*

I meet Patrick on a Saturday at Caro's housewarming party. Caro has just moved to Roosevelt Island where she has an amazing view of the skyline. The first thing every guest does when he or she arrives – me included – is shuffle over to the balcony sliding glass door and ooh and ah over the way lighted-up, nighttime New York is right there, at her window. Someone says, "The skyline without the twin towers is like a whore with no tits." I look over and see that the guy who made the comment is a handsome, pale, blond-blue-eyed Irish type staring out the window. A few people laugh nervously, and no one responds until Mark asks Caro, "Where's the beer?" and this seems to break the silence and get people moving towards the kitchen.

I head off to Caro's room and bring the bag with her housewarming gift in it inside the bedroom, because I need to sign the card first. The room smells of new paint, the walls a clean, toothy color. I sit down on her bed, which is made, a veritable miracle, and sign the card. I'm good at coming up with meaningful and heartfelt cards in a very short period of time. It only takes me a minute to think of: *C, Well my little tart, now you have the best view in the city. Hope you plan to show it off to more of your Wall Street "friends." Hee hee. In all seriousness, I'm so happy you found a place you love. We will share years more of memories here, and I hope lots of pints of Cherry Garcia. Love you, babe. Xoxo, Tellie.* I blow gently on the ink so it won't smudge, then slip it in the envelope and lick its sticky edge. I love that taste. I write *Carolina Espinosa Robles* on the outside, our little joke. She insists she has two last names, not one, because her parents are Spanish, and she refuses to hyphenate the two last names, even though having two unhyphenated last names in the U.S. is a pain in the ass and causes her no end of

trouble on official documents and in doctors' waiting rooms. She's proud like that. I drop the card in the bag.

Caro has taken care to put up all the wall hangings and bookshelves with little hand-blown glass vases and her framed photographs on the bureau. I love her photographs. They are the kind of photographs that appear on bureaus in magazines like *Architectural Digest*, but Caro's are real. The first – my favorite – is an old, grainy black-and-white of her father. He was an actual bullfighter in Spain in the 70s, and the picture shows him in his suit, sitting atop the shoulders of two other bullfighters, surrounded by a crowd of people. He is looking away from the camera and smiling, and something about his grin strikes me as so sincere that it makes me smile every time I see it. He holds what looks like two wallet-sized patches of black carpet in each raised, triumphant hand, but they are not carpet. They are bulls' ears, his prize for fighting well. "Sick," I said to Caro when she first told me. She just shrugged.

"It's Spain," she replied, as if this explanation made the two cut-off ears less disgusting.

The picture of Caro's now-retired bullfighting father stands front and center on the bureau, and I know that this is because – while she loves her mother – she adores her father.

The photograph just behind and off to the right shows a beautiful woman in a hibiscus-red Spanish dress with polka dots and ruffles, and a fringed shawl – Caro's mom. I once told Caro that I wanted her to buy me a dress like that, a Flamenco dress, on one of her summer trips to Spain, but she interrupted me. "It's a *Sevillanas* dress."

"OK, whatever. I want one."

“It’s, like, totally different than Flamenco. Flamenco is for gypsies.”

“Well, then I want a *Sevillanas* dress.”

“That one,” Caro said, tilting her head toward the photograph of her mother in hibiscus red, “cost two thousand dollars.”

Her mother, an older version of Caro, stands with her hands on her hips, stern and sexy, her long, brown hair greased and pulled back tight, and offers a red-lipped pout for the photographer.

The last picture is a strip of four black-and-white photographs from a photo booth. The pictures stand white and crisp against the black velvet inside of the frame. In the first picture, seven-year-old Caro, with ribbons in her hair, presses her cheek against her mother’s, the two of them rolling their eyes and making silly faces. In the picture just below, Caro sits between her parents with an arm hoisted up around each one. In the third, Caro’s father kisses her mother on the neck. His eyes are closed, dark lashes against skin, and her mother’s mouth opens in a laugh. In the last square, Caro sits on her father’s lap, smiling a front-toothless smile as he looks down at her with an expression of total paternal love. This picture is the sweetest of all, and I flood with envy every time I see it. I can’t help but hate Caro a little bit for her relationship with her dad. Something like bile creeps up my esophagus when I think of my own father, who – in an early midlife crisis years ago – bought a sailboat and left us. Just like that, never looked back. I go years without hearing from him as he sails from port to port around the world. It’s like I’m an old friend he sees when he gets the notion, not a daughter at all. I hope Caro knows how lucky she is.

Outside of Caro's room, the party sounds swell, and someone has put in Tribe Called Quest, which reminds me of college, and I am suddenly dying for a beer and some company.

I pull the cactus plant – as big as a small child, wrapped in cellophane with a chartreuse bow cinching the middle – from the bag and deposit it on Carolina's kitchen counter. I prop the card against the plant's hand-painted Mexican pot.

"What in the hell is that?" I turn and see him, an apparition in black chinos and a black V-neck sweater, the same blue-eyed Irish type who made the twin-tower comment earlier. With one hand on the open door of the fridge, he stares at me, his blue eyes running through me like a sword.

"It's a cactus," I say, smiling too wide. "For my friend Caro." I can't believe she has been hiding this specimen from me. Who is he?

"Huh," he replies, as if the fact that it is a cactus has stumped him.

"Are you a friend of Carolina's?" I am friendly, pushing up my sleeves, slipping my purse into the shelf behind the counter, and moving towards him and the fridge. I stand on the other side of the door, a foot and a half from him. He smells like clean laundry.

"Where'dya get that in the city?" he asks nodding towards the cactus.

"You're going to let all the penguins out."

"What?"

"Of the fridge. You've had the fridge door open for like an hour. Would you get me a beer or, whatever you're having?" I make myself sweet, blonde, and maple syrup nice.

“Sure,” he clips, pulls out a gallon of milk, and shuts the door. He opens a cabinet, closes it, opens another, closes it, opens another and pulls down two tumblers and places them on the counter with a satisfying glass thump. He flicks the milk top off and pours two glasses. I watch his neck, the golden blond hairs that end in a finely shaven point and a muscle as taught as a cello string that tenses as he lifts the jug. He is short for a guy, about my height, but I can see under his snug black sweater that he works out. I can live with short; flats are in this season anyway.

He recaps the jug and hands me a glass, cold as snow, without the slightest flicker of emotion on his face. I notice his jaw line, book-spine straight from chin to jaw, then turning up at a dogleg.

“Thanks.” I drink a gulp, and it goes right to the roots of my teeth.

“No problem.” He holds out his glass so I can clink mine against it, a toast, and I know, despite his expressionless blue eyes, that we are going to sleep together.

Later, I am delightfully drunk off the mimosas that Caro insisted on making everyone at four in the morning when the beer ran out. Champagne does something to me that makes me more charming and bold. I am on the sofa wedged between Caro and Roxanne, our friend from college, and the three of us are laughing our little heads off about the time we got lost in Alphabet City when we were all new to New York six years ago and we freaked out and Rox called the cops from her cell phone so that they would come help us because we were sure that some junkies in a doorway were going to rape us or stick us with their needles to try to infect us with AIDS. And now it is just a big joke, and Caro tells it with the best flair while I laugh and catch Blue Eyes’ eyes from across the room,

since he's talking to a redhead I don't know whose face I can't see, and suddenly I remember both that Elton John song, "Blue Eyes," from when I was a kid and how my dad would sing it to my mom, and also how my grandmother Nance loves Frank Sinatra, and there is something taurine and masculine and cold about Blue Eyes, and I narrow my gaze on him, hoping to make him see with my own green-blue eyes how very much I want him. How I feel like stripping off his black shirt and licking my champagne-tongue all over his chest. He gives me the slightest nod of acknowledgement from across the room and a sliver of a smile, which sends the warmest, cravingest feeling through me, and I answer back with a smile that could melt butter, and I tip my near-empty mimosa glass in his direction.

"Caro, I have been meaning to ask you all night; *who* is that?" Caro, who has taken a break from telling the story to three drunk guys from her office, turns her head to Blue Eyes.

"That's Janine. She's a friend of Rox's."

"No, not the redhead. *Him*."

"Oh. That's some friend of Andy's." Caro grabs Rox by the arm and shakes her free from an intimate chat with her boyfriend, Andy, who is sitting on the sofa armrest, one hand over Rox's bare knee. "Rox, who's the guy with Janine? Tellie's interested."

"I am not," I blurt, but I am grinning like an idiot who has had too much champagne. "OK, I'm interested. He's gorgeous."

"A bit short," Caro says.

"Yes, but still gorgeous," I am quick to reply. "So who is he, Rox?"



“Andy’s friend from soccer. Patrick. He’s definitely single; want me to introduce you?” Andy’s hand is creeping up Rox’s thigh, which is typical. She swats at his hand absent-mindedly, as if scratching an itch.

“No, I got it covered.” And I do. I feel gold and bubbly, and this feeling mixes with the way Patrick looks – golden blond and freckled – and I am warm all over and just dying to have him tonight.

“Maybe he’ll take your mind off Tucker,” Caro whispers without looking at me, and my golden, bubbly feeling fizzles flat.

“Tucker is not on my mind tonight, OK?” An edge splinters my voice, a warning for Caro.

“OK, sorry. I just meant,” her voice sweet, trying to woo me back, “that if anyone can brighten your mood, it is *him*. I’ll even let you use my new bed.” She bumps her shoulder against mine. I drain the rest of my glass so I have an excuse to get up and on my way to a refill go talk to Patrick.

Caro is the sister I never had. I love her the way I imagine sisters love one another: she is like a part of me and usually knows me better than I know myself, even if I don’t want her to. No one can irk me more, either. From what people tell me, that’s like a sister.

I am an only child, which, when I was younger, made me sick with loneliness. I used to beg my parents to have more children. We had this huge Victorian house on a street lined with maples in Needham, Massachusetts, the kind of house and neighborhood that begged for siblings: little blond toddlers trailing older, caramel-haired siblings down Adams Street’s clean, concrete-slab sidewalks. I watched them with envy. All my friends

had annoying, scabby younger siblings or mean older siblings that would insult us, call us snotty, disgusting babies (if they were girls) and throw twigs and sometimes even rocks at us (if they were boys). I loved this. There seemed some game-like quality to the abuse heaped upon the younger sibling by the older one. When I was four, Courtney Fox's older sister and her friends used to pretend to want to play with us, invited us inside her room, only to tie us up and pull our hair until we cried. And we fell for it every time. And Tucker's older brother used to slam a hard fist into Tucker's chest or his upper arm when we followed them to their secret hideout in the woods, behind the creek. "Get outta here, you little shits," Seth would say over the smack of his fist; Tuck always took the hits for both of us. "Go back home and play your baby games." Seth always gave one punch just a bit too hard, sending Tuck in the direction of the house, sniffing back tears, me following solemnly behind. But we never learned.

In truth, I loved it. There was something riotously funny about the ferocity with which siblings fought. When I was twelve, Lizzie Myers and her sister, Alison, who was just one year younger, would get into shrieking, scratching, object-throwing arguments in their bedroom. I would watch from the demilitarized zone of my sleeping bag, on the floor, my hand over my mouth, stifling laughter. I couldn't help it, and thank god Lizzie never got angry with me. It just seemed so funny that two sisters could be as passionate and territorial as animals, willing to draw blood over Alison's refusal to remove her stinky shoes from Lizzie's side of the room, or Lizzie's defaming Alison's favorite pinup of Chris O'Donnell by drawing a penis on his forehead.

I would have traded all the solitary hours with my parents, all the individual attention, all the photo albums filled with only pictures of me for a brother or a sister. But

for reasons I never understood as a child, the last thing on my parents' minds was having another. So my pleas fell on deaf ears, and dinners at 48 Adams Street consisted of two adults and one daughter, maintaining adult-like conversation about a piece my mother heard on NPR or a student that my father caught cheating, copying whole passages of Foucault; Christmases entailed a stack of presents under the tree, nearly all with my name on them, as my parents sat on opposite ends of the couch, sipping tea in their bathrobes and smiling periodically at my excitement; weekend trips to Rockport involved my parents in the front of the car, listening to talk radio or chatting between them civilly, me in the back, my hair wind strewn and whipping against my neck, carsick by myself.

Tucker was the brother I never had. Despite what has happened between us, I still feel like he is family. Caro may be a sister to me, the adult sister I get to grow up and get along great with (just like Lizzie and Alison now), but Tuck is truly family. He lived through it all with me, knows things no one else does. A part of me curls up and shrinks in on itself whenever I think about him now, because I am not sure we will ever have that back. I think maybe, as if he had died, I have lost Tuck forever.

"How's your milk?" I ask, clutching my empty glass and inserting myself conversationally between Patrick and the redhead. She gives a tight smile, but up close, I see she can't stand a chance. Not much of a looker, as my aunt Annie would say.

"It's good," he replies, and absolutely no emotion flickers on his face. He is like a statue, giving nothing away. I want in; I want to tap inside and get my hands deep into the clay underneath the bronze.

"So, you play soccer with Andy?" I ask casually, trying to match his stoicism.

“You’ve done your homework.”

“No,” I lie. “My friend Caro was asking about you, and Andy’s girlfriend told us that he knew you from soccer.”

“Yep,” he says. His eyes are satin-handbag-blue, and freckles splatter the skin under them. “That’s right.”

I can feel the heat between us. If it had a sound, it would zing like the electric wires over train tracks when the trains approach. Redhead can feel it, too. “I’m going to the bathroom,” she says slowly, as if inviting Patrick to protest.

“Kay,” he replies. Redhead smiles a fake smile and heads off down the hallway.

“I’m Tellie,” I say, because it didn’t come up before. “Do you always drink milk at parties?”

“What kind of a name is that?”

“It’s short for Telemaka.”

“And what the heck kind of name is Telemaka?” Patrick’s voice is curious, not mean.

“Oh, it was my dad’s idea. It’s from the *Odyssey*. Odysseus’ son is Telemakos. It’s a variation of that.” I wonder if he can hear the fatigue that fills me every time I have to explain this. At the DMV. In job interviews. First dates.

“Right.” I can tell he has never read the *Odyssey* or heard of Telemakos. Most people haven’t. I had it read to me in the womb, such is my father’s love for Greek epic poetry.

“So, do you just not drink, or are you really into strong bones?”

“And why did they name you after some guy’s son? Why not after his daughter?”

“Because he didn’t have a daughter.”

“Huh,” he says, as if stumped by the fact that Odysseus only had one child.

“Patrick,” I say, summoning the golden, bubbly reserves inside of me, “Let’s go somewhere.” I take a hold of his hand and lead him down the hall – the opposite way the redhead went – to Caro’s new bedroom.

My name is one of the most annoying things in my life. It’s like a big nose: it’s out there, in front of me, for people to see and comment on, to “wow,” to “what an interesting name,” and to “how exotic. I love Mykonos.” It’s like a curse – something Grecian and ancient – to go through life explaining my name on a near-daily basis, informing the world about Homer’s epic. Especially when I just wanted to be a Jennifer or a Sarah like everyone else I knew growing up.

I did change it for a brief spell in third grade. I was tired of having such a strange name. The only comrade I had in the bad-name department was Eir Gladwell, an English girl moved by her parents to America, a girl as significant as a falling leaf. Her name was pronounced “air,” and she embodied this quite well with her wispy blond hair and limp, pale limbs. It was as if the wind blew right through her. I did not like being associated with Eir Gladwell, did not like being sisters suffering the same fate.

So, one day I asked Ms. Wykowski if I could make an announcement to the class. I stood up, right under the diaphanous American flag that hung over the blackboard, and announced to my twenty-two peers that I no longer wanted to be called Telemaka. From then on, I wanted to be called Missy. Missy was a distant older cousin of mine, my mother’s cousin’s oldest girl. She was twelve and claimed to have let a boy stuck his

tongue in her mouth. When I had last seen her the Thanksgiving before, she had shown off her deodorant and the bulky pads she used for her new periods. I ached to be grown up like her and adored her all the more because my mother disliked her. My mother said she was going to be trouble with a capital T. So “Missy” seemed like a good choice.

“Oh-kay, then, sweetie,” Mrs. Wykowski said, wringing her hands and smiling her near-retirement smile. And for the rest of that academic year I became Missy. But my parents refused to call me anything else – of all things, Missy – and once summer came, the name Missy fell by the wayside. I wasn’t too dismayed by then, anyway, since Tucker’s brother, Seth, had taken to calling me “Pissy.” I hadn’t anticipated that.

If Missy could see me now. Last I heard, she has three kids and is living back in Worcester at her mom’s. And I am here, sitting on Caro’s new bed, watching Patrick unzip the fly of my favorite jeans. I give myself a mental thank god for having chosen the sexy underwear over the comfy, cotton ones.

Patrick’s pale, freckled fingertips radiate heat. They work their way over the copper button of my jeans, pushing it through the frayed slit with just his thumb and forefinger. He moves like a machine – not cold and mechanical, but warm and powerful, like a sports car – his fingers finding their way up my spine, unsnapping my bra, freeing me from it, my shirt, jeans, black mesh thongs with the violet ribbon on the cusp. Naked, and he is still fully clothed.

I lie back, January air seeping through the frame of Caro’s window, the one bursting with New York lights, and I cover my chest with my arms.

“Now you,” I whisper. But he doesn’t comply. Instead he reaches over and gently pulls my arms from my chest, lays them by my side. He wants to look. They always want to look. Like some male curiosity about the female body that never quite got satisfied with nudie mags or first loves.

“Beautiful,” he says staring at my bare, cold breasts.

I feign ignorance. “What?”

“You’re beautiful.” He looks up at me, right into my eyes. “You’re gorgeous.” I can tell he means it. “Fucking gorgeous.” He runs a dry palm up the length of my outer thigh. “It’s nice to touch something this beautiful.”

Normally I would smile, fill with giddy girliness, overflow with satisfaction. But something in me is tired. So, so, so tired of words and their hollow ring. I want to get off this ride. “Patrick,” I say, looking away for just a moment and catching a glimpse of Caro’s framed photographs. “Just fuck me.”

And he does. He fucks me wonderfully for an hour, hours maybe, on the bed, on the floor, against the closet door. His expression never shifts from calm and distant, but he is gentle, and his fingers feel like they could heal me as they wind their way all over and inside me. Patrick is experienced; he waits for me to come, twice, before doing so himself.

After, I crawl out of his arms – his skin and breath as hot as the steam from subway grates – grab a towel hanging on the closet door, wrap it around me, and make my way barefoot to the bathroom. There are only a few low voices now coming from the living room. Caro’s and some guy’s I don’t recognize. I slip into the bathroom unnoticed, Patrick’s warm semen running down the inside of my thigh.

I sit on the ice-cold, ceramic toilet and pee. The black-and-white floor tile is comforting; it reminds me of classic architecture, banks, and childhood. The peeling iron radiator against the wall smells of heat and old paint.

I wash my hands and face, check myself out in the mirror. Already I can see the regret in the way my mouth turns down at the corners. “Shit,” I mutter to no one but myself. “Shit, shit, shit.”

I never find what I am looking for. Why can’t I ever remember that?



iii.

*You are beautiful. You had nothing to do with this; it was your parents. They had sex on the right day at the right time and their genes paired up in such a way that you got blond hair and big, green-blue eyes, a symmetrical face, and something else that makes people both envy and desire you at the same time. Attitude. A certain look. A way that you tilt your head and laugh. You aren't sure. You never understood exactly what that kind of envy was all about.*

*Other kinds of envy, sure. You know all about that. The kind that tears a hole in your esophagus when you see a friend with her father. The envy that digs its dirty nails into you when you hear about another friend engaged, settled. The envy that camps out in your intestines like worms when your friends and colleagues come back from the holidays with photos and stories and leftover turkey for sandwiches and you don't want to admit that you didn't even spend two days at your mom's because you can't take it there for more than twenty-four hours.*

*Most days you don't remember that you are beautiful or that people envy you for this, so it's a fresh slap each time it comes. Like Margaret at work, the one who tells other colleagues that you dress inappropriately and that you are often late and that you never log out of the photocopier with your code, which is just a sign of incompetence. The secretaries like you and they tell you this, call Margaret a backstabber. A jealous backstabber. Margaret is young, about your age, dumpy, and has a constant crease between her eyebrows that is so deep you sometimes imagine putting a piece of paper in there. It isn't just the backstabbing; you can see it in the way she looks at you and the sarcastic way she speaks to you. As if you didn't get the Great Universal Joke that God*

*played on her. As if you couldn't see how the whole thing just smacks of irony that she has a master's in education and you just a B.A. in English, and yet you get to teach the junior A.P. class. In essence, you can smell it all over her that she thinks – she knows – that whatever you have gotten in life you've gotten for being beautiful.*

*And it burns you. It makes you want to scream and kick her in her fat shins. But you let it go. You try to remember that you graduated summa cum laude and that you were voted best teacher of the year your second and third year at Lipmore. You remind yourself daily that you didn't get hired by Alfred Jacques for being beautiful. He is, after all, gay.*

*But it gnaws at you because it reminds you of something you'd prefer to forget, something that was accidental and out of your control. It was just that day at that time. Perhaps it was a romantic dinner. Reconciliation after a bad fight in which a wine glass was thrown and broken. Celebrating a new job, a raise. Or maybe it was just a standard Sunday-afternoon lay that made cells cleave and divide until you grew into a fetus, a wailing newborn, a bratty four-year-old, a skinny teen, an audacious college student, an unmoored woman whose own beauty is chance, an irrelevance, a bodily function, like breathing: mostly forgotten but – now that you are out of the womb and dependent upon it – necessary for survival. Meaning: your face is a bunch of cells that came together as a result of your parents' tryst. You don't take pride in your beauty, since you didn't do anything to earn it.*

Caro takes loud sips of her coffee. “So,” she says playfully, “How did things go with Patrick last night?” It’s a gray, raw afternoon and the stuffy café takes the edge off.

“Fine,” I say with faux nonchalance.

“Yeah, I know they went fine. I was locked out of my own bedroom. So what happened?” Caro gossips voraciously. She claims that gossip is the Spanish national pastime.

“Yeah, sorry about that. The new bed is really comfy though. What kind is it?”

“Sealy. Got a great deal down at this place on 21<sup>st</sup> and Lex. I know the manager there. So, what happened?”

“I’ve been thinking of getting a new bed. My futon has basically had it. You remember I bought that thing back in college? It’s disgusting. Patrick is amazing.” I lean in towards her, over the table and our steaming coffees. “He fucked me up against the closet door, Car. Standing up.”

“Oooh, I don’t like it standing up.” She wrinkles her nose and makes a face. Caro is not pretty to begin with, and her face all scrunched up looks funny, like a witch from a fairy tale. She has a hooked nose and eyes set a bit too close, but she has beautiful skin that looks like stretched, warm caramel, and dark hair that hangs thick and wavy to her chest. She says the skin and hair are recompense for the rest.

“No, I’m telling you it was great. Except for the doorknob in my back. It was really sexy. Then we moved to the bed (complements again on buying a winner), and I’m telling you,” I put on my know-it-all face, “the man is an absolute divinity with his mouth. Godlike.”

“Mmm. So I should definitely wash those sheets.”

“How much did you pay for the bed, by the way?”

“700 bucks for the whole thing, box spring and all. Are you going to see him again?”

“Yeah. I mean, I guess. He gave me his number and told me to call.”

“You don’t sound too excited.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you sound excited? I hate to ask, but...” Caro trails off dramatically at times. This is one of those times. She blows on her coffee, eying me over the rim.

“Just say it.”

“Well, I am just wondering – don’t get mad at me – but I am just wondering if your hesitation has anything to do with Tucker.”

“I don’t think so. I really don’t.” Caro raises a thin, chocolate-brown eyebrow. “Maybe.”

“I can see it on your face, Tellie. You miss him so much.”

“Of *course* I do. Of course I miss him. But he’s not my boyfriend, Car. It’s just not like that between us, and it never will be. I fucked up. I fucked up big time and now I am paying for it. In fact, my mother said he’s been asking his mother for advice about engagement rings. Engagement rings! He’s going to propose to Sasha.”

“Knee-jerk reaction.”

“So?”

“So, it won’t work out. You guys belong together.”

“We *don't* belong together. We were never meant to be together. That's the problem. We never should have...fucked everything up. Now it's just all a mess. I'm missing my best friend from my whole life, who may never speak to me again, and I am bedding strangers with beautiful eyes in your new apartment and not using any protection. Everything's upside down.”

“No protection? *Telemaka*....” Her words are chiding, but her tone is not. “Tsk tsk.”

“I know. It just happened. Ugh. I feel disgusting today.”

“Oh, there's no use in that. You had fun. It's so Carrie Bradshaw.”

“I hate that show.”

“I live for that show.”

“I don't want to be *living* that show.”

“I know, Tel. So are you going to call him?”

I have plans to have dinner with my aunt Annie tonight, and I'm supposed to bring the wine and the salad. I love to cook, which is anathema in New York City. My friends don't even have cornflakes in their kitchen cabinets, and I spend a good chunk of my pathetic salary on things like vanilla beans, shrimp paste, and Spanish olive oil. If I have a little extra, I splurge on a new appliance. My most recent is a fruit dehydrator. I am experimenting with all kinds of dehydrated fruits and vegetables – even meats – and using them as fillings for pork tenderloin and Chinese dumplings. My friends love to come over for dinner.

Tonight, though, Annie has invited me over. I think she wants to talk. Annie is my dad's little sister, a red-haired fireball who wears colors like chartreuse and saffron and dangly earrings and never any makeup. She thinks makeup is an affront to feminism and admonishes me every time I wear it. I just roll my eyes at her, and this is our loving-aunt-and-niece routine.

I make a shredded carrot salad dressed with a lime and fish-sauce vinaigrette and buy my favorite Australian white – dry and crisp – to go with it. Annie is a no-meat vegetarian and only drinks white wine. She says that red stains her teeth “something awful” and hasn't touched it since her only trip to France in 1982.

“Tellie!” She opens the door and her long earrings – metallic blue and green balls hanging from copper wire – bounce off her neck as she throws up her arms to give me a hug. Her hug is bony and fierce. As usual, she has eggplant-purple reading glasses perched atop her head, tethered by a chain. “My granny glasses’ chain,” she always jokes. “Granny Annie.” Annie is a savior. She is the mother I should have had, and I tell her pretty much everything. She disapproves of the men in my life and says I can't say no to them. She claims I am in denial about the whole thing, which usually gets on my nerves. But in the end, she is probably right. I can't say no. Case in point: last night.

Memory: 1991, fourteen years old

By the time I entered ninth grade, I craved male attention but not touch: I had never been kissed and didn't even really want to be, except that basically everyone else in my class seemed to have done it, and Laurel James, the most popular girl, officially labeled me a prude. At my small, private school, personal sexual experience was public knowledge. At

the beginning of freshman year, it was well known that I had never been to third base, like Laurel and the rest of those girls, nor to second like the Stenton twins who had attracted the attention of some junior boys over the summer, nor even first base – French kissing – which nearly everyone had done, even Alec Twittlehoffer, the guy who lugged a laptop around in a tote bag to all his classes before internet even existed. I was worse than Alec Twittlehoffer.

I was desperate to lose my kissing virginity just so my classmates would stop calling me a prude, but I didn't actually want to kiss anyone. Not in the way that a body wants another one. I was skinny – my knees were bigger than my thighs – and as flat-chested as a diving board. Boys didn't desire me in ninth grade, not the way they lusted after Laurel and her C-cup chest. My friends, one rank down from Laurel (but several ranks above Alec Twittlehoffer), had all kissed boys. Lizzie had kissed a boy from our neighborhood, Trevor Small, the summer between eighth and ninth grade. "It's like rolling your tongue over itself in your mouth, but softer." I tried rolling my tongue around in my own mouth for hours, attempting to imagine it was someone else's. But I couldn't.

Tamara Steiner, my other close girl friend, had become a French-kissing pro at her Jewish camp in New Hampshire. Mark Rabinovitz, a fellow camper, had been the first to stick his tongue in her mouth. Tamara had liked it so much, she claimed upon returning from New Hampshire in late August, that she didn't know how she would live without the taste of his saliva. "Tellie, I want to marry him," she said. "He is the best kisser on earth."

"I thought he was your first kiss."

“Yeah, so?” she asked, annoyed.

“So how do you know he’s the best if you have nothing to compare him to?”

“Don’t be immature, Tel. When someone is the best, you can just *tell*. You’ll know what I mean someday.” Tamara emphasized the “someday,” making me feel small and prudish.

And then there was Tuck. Tuck, my neighbor and life-long best friend. Even slightly dorky Tuck had been kissed. I went to a private school twenty minutes from our neighborhood, but Tuck went to the local public school where girls seemed to be older and use more makeup and hair products. They wore tight jeans and Tretorns with the laces loose. And they had parties, big parties in dark houses where parents left their children for the weekend, unsuspecting (or uncaring) that the children would invite loads of town kids, especially freshman girls, so that junior and senior boys could play with them like dolls, getting them drunk and sticking fingers and tongues in all sorts of moist places. Public school kids were fast, and Tuck benefited from this. Tuck’s first kiss was at one of those dark, senior parties when he was only an eighth-grader. Seth, Tuck’s older brother, was a sophomore and was required to take his brother with him everywhere. At Tuck’s first party, Seth and his friends thought it was hilarious to ply him with big, plastic cupfuls of beer and then watch as he stumbled into a bedroom to pass out. Later, he woke up to find himself next to a girl with no shirt – only a black, lacy bra and jeans – and he vaguely remembered being kissed by her for a while before they both passed out.

“But it wasn’t anything special,” he assured me when I saw him two days later and he confessed the whole thing. His long, shaggy hair was always tangled and in his



face. It was as fine and blond as baby hair, and he blew a strand of it out of his eyes. “I mean, you aren’t missing out, T.”

“Whatever,” I said, annoyed that Tucker had been first. It didn’t seem fair.

Officially, I was more popular at my school than he was at his.

“Seriously, T. It’s not even that fun. To tell you the truth, I don’t even remember it much.”

“Look, Tuck, I don’t really care, OK? It’s fine.” But he could tell it wasn’t fine. So he let it drop.

Actually, I owe my first kiss to Tucker. He knew I was desperate and he arranged for me and Lizzie to meet him and a boy from his school, Michael Piacelli, for pizza and a movie in his basement. Tuck’s house had a huge basement with a cracked leather sofa that the stuffing spilled from. It was perfect for first kisses. Tuck had rented Monty Python’s *Search for the Holy Grail*, which Lizzie declared “retarded” after an hour as she made her way up the basement stairs to the bathroom. Tuck followed her, saying he needed to ask his brother something, but I knew he was leaving me alone – right at the scene where the knights arrive at the castle with all the creepy, oversexed women – so Michael could kiss me. I was sure that Tuck had prepped Michael on the whole thing, sure that Michael understood that he was only there to kiss me, but, once we were alone, he seemed more nervous than me. His eyes never strayed from the movie, and he laughed too much at each joke.

“It’s a pretty weird movie,” I ventured, looking over at him. He sat on the other side of the escaping stuffing, more than a foot away from me.

“Yeah, but it’s funny,” he replied without looking at me. I could see the bouncing, blue reflection of the screen in his eyes. He had an inky shadow of hair on his upper lip, brown eyes, and small, delicate ears. He wasn’t what Lizzie or I would call hot; he looked like the hundreds of boys that exist throughout your whole life and never call your attention because they are just always there, playing whiffle ball or wearing navy-blue sweatpants with sneakers, or showing up to school with a cowlick the size of Montana on the back of their heads. One of those boys that are nice enough, but you just don’t notice much.

I couldn’t bear the thought of another school year without being kissed. I moved and put my hand over Michael’s. He looked up at me, surprise on his face. Maybe fear, too. It occurred to me then that the reason Michael had come was that he, too, had never been kissed. My heart kicked the breaststroke inside my chest and I leaned over and placed my lips over his, soft as pudding, and let my tongue dart inside his mouth for two seconds. I had just enough time to feel his tongue slide over mine before the upstairs door squeaked open and Lizzie came bounding down. We pulled away fast and turned back to the movie. “It’s eleven thirty,” Lizzie sang. “Let’s turn this crap off and watch *Saturday Night Live*.” She grabbed the clicker and changed the channel.

Michael and I didn’t say a word to each other the rest of the night until Lizzie and I walked back to my house at midnight, when he muttered a sheepish “bye” to us from behind the screen door of Tuck’s kitchen. I remember that dew had settled on the grass and the stinging, sharp smell of fall was in the air as Lizzie and I walked across the lawn to my house. The wet grass soaked through the cuffs of my jeans and felt good against my skin. I didn’t like the kiss at all; it was disgusting, but at least it was done with.

The following summer, the summer before my tenth-grade year, things had changed. I wanted boys' tongues inside my mouth. I even got Michael's number from Tuck, called him one lonely July night when all my friends were away. Michael and I walked down to the town soccer fields, overgrown with soft, dark grass. I let him kiss me for hours in those fields, felt his hard bulge against my thigh as he lay on top of me, and, though he didn't do more than put his hand up my shirt and feel around, I knew I had what he wanted.

January 2005, twenty-seven years old

"So, Tellie," Annie says, pouring me a glass of wine in an orange goblet, "I want to ask you something."

"Uh-oh," I joke, taking a sip of my wine and hiding my dread behind the glass. Since I woke up today, looked over and saw freckled Patrick in the gray, late-morning light, I have been feeling a little raw. I am not sure I can handle another emotionally charged chat right now.

"What is it you're looking for?" Annie's arrow hits my dread dead center; its shaft quivers with the force.

"Pardon?" I play dumb, do not want to have this conversation.

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know what you mean, An."

"Yes you do." She levels her eyes with mine and there is a seriousness there that I have never seen before.

“I,” I begin but can’t finish. “I…” I don’t even know how to respond, don’t know how we went from carrot salad to this in a matter of seconds, a cleaver slicing through meat and hitting bone.

“Because I gotta’ tell you, Tellie, you might not have lost your chance. You might still have one.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m not supposed to say this,” she says, rumpling geranium-red eyebrows into a frown, “so, please don’t let on that I told you.”

“Told me *what?*” I haven’t eaten enough, and the wine has gone to my head, it’s swollen and light, a balloon trying to fly away.

“He called me, Tellie.”

“Dad?”

“No, no sweetie,” she turns soft and apologetic, her hand reaching across the table to cover mine. Her unpolished fingernails curl under my hand and she squeezes.

“Tucker.” She stares at me with a look of condescending affection, and it’s more than I can bear. I start to cry.

“Stop, please stop,” I beg, shaking my head from side to side and wiping my face with my sleeve. “I can’t take this right now, Annie. I’m just,” I don’t know what I want to say, so I trail off. I cry, my chest shaking with the effort. Annie’s antique wooden chairs creak under me, registering the force of my despair. And it really is despair; there isn’t a better word to describe it, because I am utterly hopeless, immobilized by how fruitless this search has become.

“You’re running from the only thing that can anchor you, Tellie.” I look up at Annie, a blur of red and purple through my tears. “He may not be coming back, and you need to accept that, swallow it whole. It’s reality. But Tucker is *here*, he is here *now*, and you are wasting the best chance you’ve got at love.”

Annie becomes clear before me, sitting in her chair and leaning forward with all the concern and attention she’s got inside. And she’s right. The urgency hits me like a mallet in the chest; I know what I have to do.

## Book II

October 2004, 26 years old

i.

*Sometimes you seek out men's stares in public places: the park, the gym, the olive bar at Whole Foods Market. It's an old habit very hard to break, and even though you know this – know it's a bad habit – you can't break it. Or you don't really want to. It's a game you play by yourself. If you broke it down psychologically and explained it to somebody, you would form theories and hypotheses and draw conclusions about why you do it, what fundamental need you are fulfilling when you are piercing an oversized green olive stuffed with garlic and you feel that guy's eyes fall on your back, your shoulders, and you look up just to confirm that he is watching you because you are beautiful and not merely because the olive you are piercing seems like something he might want to try. If you explained it in clear, rational terms to someone else, you would certainly be able to acknowledge that you like men to look at you, you like them to notice and flirt with you, just so you can prove to yourself that you have done it. You show men that you are the prey they hunt, and then you dart off, rarely caught, never trapped, a bounce in your step and a smile in your eyes, because you exist. A man wants you for his own, even if just for half an hour, and this – despite all the good reasons you know it shouldn't – makes you feel good.*

*You are no dummy. You know this is all a game, one that isn't particularly healthy. But it's like learning to hold a tennis racket the wrong way and playing that way for years. Try as you might to unlearn the grip later, you find that your own body won't*

*obey; the habit has become a part of you. You hate the idea of being nothing else but beautiful. But if that's all you've been for as long as you've been alive, then – without it – what really are you?*



I met the new tenant by the mailboxes downstairs last Tuesday. Well, “met” is a bit of an exaggeration, since I really only saw him as we crossed paths – me on my way out to lunch with Rox and he on his way in. He had just moved in a week before. I remember the moving van parked on the sidewalk right next to the sign that said HOLLOW SIDEWALK – DO NOT PARK. This past Tuesday, though, was the first time I had gotten a look at him. He stood in front of his apartment door, arm wrapped around a paper shopping bag, his lips with two envelopes between them. He struggled to turn the lock, keys jangling against the red-painted front door.

“Need some help?” I offered. He turned and I saw that he was adorable, a twenty-something Eric Stoltz, all strawberry blond and tan and smiling. He mumbled a reply that I couldn’t make out because of the envelopes in his mouth, so I laughed, trying to be charming. “I’ll take that as a yes.” I took the keys from his hand, slid them into the lock, turned, and pulled towards me just a little – a trick for opening the cranky doors in this building. The latch clicked and the door squeaked open an inch. He let the envelopes fall from his lips, and they dropped to the floor just inside his apartment. “How’d you do that?” he asked, the right corner of his mouth pulling back in a sly smile.

“I’m smart. Went to college and everything.”

“Funny, too.” He was staring at me as if he wanted to devour me, something I can’t say I would have been averse to.

“OK, then,” I chirped, pulling his keys from the lock and dropping them into his hand. “Glad I could help.”

“Right, thanks,” he replied, still smiling. When the door clicked shut behind him, I spun around to find his name on one of the mailboxes. CHARLES H. KOSTER. I thought about those long fingers, the ones that had just opened and closed over the keys I had dropped into his hand, and imagined what they would feel like inside of me. The thought made me smile as I looked at his name again, written on the white slip of paper in crisp, blank ink, and I whispered it aloud to myself like a promise, an incantation.

And now it is Saturday, and I have a date with Charles H. Koster, and I am panicking a little about what to wear. It’s in-between weather – not done with fall, not quite winter – and I am debating between jeans and a cashmere turtleneck or a skirt and sexy long-sleeve shirt.

“Skirt and shirt,” Caro tells me decidedly over the phone. “It’s not *too* cold yet, and you definitely want to show off your legs.”

“Ha ha. Seriously, Car, help me decide.”

“I am serious. Besides, turtleneck says ‘Don’t touch me. I’m a frigid librarian covered in goat-hair up to my neck. Stay away.’”

“Since when does a black cashmere sweater say that?”

“Trust me. Not a date-kind-of-*prenda*.” Caro has the annoying habit of sprinkling Spanish into everyday conversation, as if everyone else might just guess what she is saying.

“Translation please?”

“Piece of clothing.”

“Was that so hard to come up with in English?”

“Skirt and shirt, I’m telling you. You’ll get laid for sure.”

“And if I don’t want to get laid?”

“Yeah, right. *You?* Is this Tellie we are talking about here?”

“Well, maybe I’ve changed. Maybe this time it’s about love.”

“Then wear the turtleneck, Tel. If he still finds you sexy, then it really is love.”

Charles picks me up at eight and we walk down the stairs together to the first floor, which makes me laugh. “What?” he asks.

“It’s funny to go out with someone in my building. It’s like college, a dorm or something. Maybe later, if the date goes badly, I can come down and borrow some ice cream to drown my sorrows in.”

“You’re funny,” he says, pinching me on the arm.

“Looking,” I reply and open the building’s front door. The cold rakes across my bare legs and up my skirt.

“Aren’t you going to be chilly?” Charles asks, looking down with concern at my legs.

“Nope. I’m a cold-weather girl,” I lie. Actually, I get cold when it’s 75°.

“Well, I’m glad. Because you look fantastic.” Charles knows how to play. He is clearly used to playing, like me.

“I know,” I reply and skip down the front-stoop steps ahead of him.

While we wait at the bar, Charles orders us two Jack and Gingers. I sip mine through the tiny straw. “It’s delicious,” I say, and it is.

“Told you. You gotta trust me.” He opens up his hands a melon’s-width apart and raises his blond eyebrows, as if to say: I was right, wasn’t I?

Later, when I have had a few too many Jack and Gingers and we are back at his place kissing frantically on the couch, I can taste the drinks in both our mouths like sugary Band-aids. Our hands skitter over each other’s arms, thighs, shoulder’s, ribs, pulling and picking at the clothing there. Then Charles eases me back against the armrest of the couch and slides a hand under my shirt, cupping my breast there and squeezes, massages in the way most men think we like it, though having my breast squeezed and massaged feels about as good as having my kneecap squeezed and massaged. It doesn’t matter, because this is just a move, a knock on the door, a harbinger for what’s to come, and just the thought makes my whole body dilate.

Memory: October 1992, fifteen years old

My first real hook-up, aside from the kiss-fest in the soccer fields with Michael, was at a dance my tenth-grade year. I was invited to the semi-formal by Stiles Addison, a junior who was the biggest preppie at our school. He became famous for his pink pants, navy blue ties with mint-green palm trees printed on them, and a patchwork Nantucket blazer. His father’s family were supposedly direct descendents of John Adams, and what he made up for in preppiness and New England country-club wealth, he lacked in looks. He was a tall, gangly boy with a large nose and bristly blond eyebrows cutting a straight line across his forehead. He had a huge honker; you could have hung a lightweight coat on it. He played lacrosse and ice hockey, which made him popular with the boys, but – for obvious reasons – he wasn’t popular with the girls.

It was my mission to go to the semi-formal in tenth grade, since only juniors and seniors were invited and they could bring dates from any other class. Laurel and the popular girls, girls who all had nice, big breasts and had had their periods since eighth grade, went with their senior boyfriends or senior boys who planned to, at the very least, get a good feel-up. I, on the other hand, still lacked anything resembling breasts. I had two swelling lumps that barely touched my hands when cupped over them. It was a source of humiliation and shame that by the fall of sophomore year, when I was turning fifteen, I still didn't have my period. All my friends had gotten theirs in ninth grade or the summer before tenth. Tamara Steiner, who by tenth grade was well over Mark Rabinovitz, her first love from Jewish camp, had gotten hers in math class at the beginning of ninth grade, and I was sick with envy. Weeks later, I tried to convince her that it had happened to me, too. "Got my period today, Tamara," I told her casually over the phone.

"No you didn't."

"Yes I did!"

"What does it feel like?"

I paused, unsure how to answer. "It stings."

"Ha!" she barked. "It does *not* sting! I knew you were lying." And that was the end of trying to convince anyone that I had menstruated.

So, by tenth grade, while I was reportedly one of the cutest girls in the school, the problem was, I was still very much a "girl." Guys seemed to be attracted to girls that looked more like women, girls with bumps and curves. The guys in the dining hall, circled territorially around their tables, talked of "asses," "tits," and "bushes." I didn't

have much of any of those. So, it was a great relief when Stiles Addison looked down from his high, gangly perch at me the Monday afternoon before the semi and asked me to be his date. “Sure,” I said, and that was that. I had never spoken to him before, and we didn’t speak much before the dance, except once when he called me on the phone to ask me for directions to my house and tell me he would pick me up at six on Saturday. I could have guessed what his motives were, but I was too busy buying a dress and shoes with Lizzie, who was going with her junior boyfriend, a sweet, shy guy named Adam from the wrestling team.

I bought a short, black velvet dress with spaghetti straps. The hemline cut a black line across my white thighs, and there was a little padding in the bust. I looked pretty OK in the dress, and my mom even let me splurge on heels and a French twist at the salon.

“Big date?” Trisha at the salon asked as she sprayed half a can of hairspray into my hair. Trisha was thirty-five, single, and had three kids. Her roots were always showing and she wore acid-washed jeans that tapered at the ankles, her butt held snugly inside. She had been our family hairdresser for twelve years.

“Yeah, I guess. Semi-formal,” I replied.

“Wow. Sounds fun. Wow, semi-formal. We never had that kinda stuff at my school. You go to such a nice fancy school. You get good grades this year?”

“Yeah, OK. Not in math, though.”

“Well that’s good. My Andy is so lazy! He never wants to do his homework. He says, ‘Ma! Why I gotta do this homework, right? I just wanna be a policeman, right? So why I gotta know about biology and Roman history?’ He’s a PITA, that Andy.”

““PITA?”” I asked.

“Pain In The Ass.”

“That’s funny.”

“Yeah,” Trish said teasing the ends of my hair with a comb. “My dad used to call me that all the time. Anyway, you going with your boyfriend or what?”

“No.”

“You going alone?” she asked, alarmed. She stopped pulling at the ends of my hair with the comb and stared at me in the mirror.

“No, with this guy.”

“Oh, good.” She began teasing the ends again, and I could feel the dull aches in my head as she pulled the hair. “You like ‘em?”

“Not really. We’re just friends I guess.”

“Don’t you let him get in your pants, now, Tellie. You got that? Those men they are all the same. You’re a good girl. You just let him take you to the dance and give you a nice kiss, but nothing else.” I was turning flamingo pink, just like a pair of Stiles’ pants, in the salon’s faux leather chair.

“It’s not like that,” I mumbled, looking at the floor. A dark curl of hair rested there against the linoleum. It looked so soft I felt like reaching down and touching it.

“It’s always like that,” Trish said, pulling a chunk of my hair back and pinning it tightly with a bobby pin. “I’m sorry to tell you, honey, but they are always, always like that.”

When she was done half an hour later, I looked like a princess from the neck up. My hair was pulled back in a perfect French twist, secured with several dozen caramel-colored bobby pins, which I could feel like wires against my skull.

Later, dancing with Stiles – my arms craned up to reach his shoulders – my hair was beginning to come undone. One strand had fallen limply against my neck after the first few songs, and when I touched my hand to my hair, I could feel the ends of a few bobby pins sticking out.

“You wanna get some air?” Stiles asked after “Stairway to Heaven” came on for the second time. According to Stiles, they always played “Stairway to Heaven” twice at all the dances, and the second time signified the last dance. I didn’t want to miss the last dance, but Stiles was already moving away from the dining-hall makeshift dance floor and towards the door. Outside we walked a slow circle around the building and I was shivering cold. Stiles offered me his jacket, but I declined.

“You look really pretty,” he said awkwardly, without looking at me, as we turned the corner of the building towards the back where the dumpsters were. It smelled of wet cardboard and grease, and the hint of something sweet, like fruit, in decay.

“Thanks,” I mumbled as we passed the first dumpster. I was a bit wobbly on my first pair of high heels despite practicing for a week at home in my room. I rubbed my arms and tried to focus on each step so that my ankles didn’t roll.

“You’re so beautiful, do you know that?” Stiles stopped between the second and third dumpster, and the smell of trash was overpowering. It didn’t seem to bother him.

“Thanks,” I said, not knowing what else to say. Just then, Stiles leaned down and kissed me so forcefully that his front tooth hit mine, making a scraping sound. I thought I tasted blood, but I didn’t have time to check since his tongue was inside my mouth, roving its cavernous walls like a probe. He stepped toward me, pulling me to him with his long arms and putting his tongue deeper and deeper in my mouth, his big nose pressing



into my cheek. Before I knew it, one of his oversized hands was down the neckline of my velvet dress, inside the padding and the new A bra I had bought for the occasion, squeezing and twisting. The other hand found its way so fast up my hemline that I gasped a little when his fingers pulled aside my underwear elastic and pushed their way inside me. His fingers charged in and out in and out, and I wondered if I was supposed to feel anything other than the pinch of dry skin rubbing dry skin. I tried to relax, to shift my weight to allow him more room, since apparently he was after something, clearly eager to push his way inside me through one orifice or another. I wasn't thinking about sex, and the thought of reaching out to him, of my hands asserting themselves inside his clothing, never crossed my mind. I couldn't have imagined then that he was pushing so hard to get inside me because he wanted me to reciprocate. I just figured he was enjoying what he was doing to me, so I let him. And, while it wasn't enjoyable, really, what I kept thinking about was that at least I had been to third base and Lizzie hadn't even done that with Adam.

On Monday, I went to school wearing my cutest outfit, black corduroys with a cream cable-knit sweater and black and white ribbons pulling back a ponytail. I waited until I saw Stiles in the hallway after second period and gave him a big grin, stopped to talk. But he just nodded coldly at me and continued on, not looking back once. Stunned, I walked to Latin class where I sat in the back, brooding and quiet, taking notes furiously so Mr. Mapelli wouldn't call on me. I wasn't sure if I was more embarrassed about Stiles using me or about Trisha being right.

October 1994, twenty-six years old

“You’re hot,” Charles says to me as his nose touches mine in the most affectionate way. We are naked as the day we were born, hunkered down under his comforter, pressed up against each other in the feverish, before-sex way. Agitated and itchy.

“So I’m told.”

“And modest, too,” he teases, touching a fingertip to one of my nipples, relaxed and wide as a silver dollar. It tightens at his touch. “I think she likes me,” he says.

“She does,” I reply and reach over to his nightstand where he has already placed a condom. I rip open the wrapper and inhale the chalky, rubber smell. The smell of sex. Men. The last ten years. With one hand I roll it onto him and there is a moment just before where we look at each other and say nothing, both of us staring into each other’s eyes, searching for something there, and we seem to find it at the same time, and we break into smiles, and then I pull him inside of me so swiftly and easily that he groans with the surprise.

“Oh, Jesus, Tellie,” he moans, and I muse to myself that men are so predictable. So easy to please. Just a sliding up and down. A contracting of muscles. A careful, rhythmic sucking. It’s so simple it’s humorous. “Oh, Jesus, Jesus. I’m not...slow down...slower...I’m really...worked up, Jesus...”

But nothing can stop me when I get going.

iii.

*Beautiful, you are so beautiful, and you could be a model and you should model it's good money and you really have the face and body for it, though you could be taller, too bad you aren't a little taller, but you are quite stunning and have you seen my granddaughter's picture isn't she beautiful smart too look at those eyes and yes she is a little skinny but she looks great in the dress doesn't she? Have you met my daughter oh thank you yes she is beautiful she takes after her father's side no no we don't really look alike I was never so beautiful oh thank you thank you no I don't think she even knows how beautiful she is she has no idea the power she has over men she just doesn't see it or chooses not to thank you thank you we are very proud of her.*

*When you stare into cameras, any camera, you can't deny that you tilt your head down, eyes level with the lens, and smile in the way that you practiced so many times alone, in high school, in front of the mirror. You can't deny that.*

“Tuck, I’ve met someone.”

“Again?” he asks, sounding distracted. He’s chewing something.

“Tuck, I hate when you eat when we’re on the phone. You know that.”

“Yeah, but I am eating lunch and you happened to call, love. Can’t do anything ‘bout that. A boy’s gotta eat.”

“So don’t you wanna know about Charles?”

“Yes, tell me all about him,” he replies, but he doesn’t sound as interested as I want him to be.

“Tuck, turn off the TV and put your sandwich down and focus for fifteen minutes so your best friend can tell you about the awesome guy she has met. Can you handle that?”

“OK, OK. Busted. It’s off and the sandwich is down. Shoot. Tell me about Chuck.”

“*Charles*. He hates Chuck. Don’t ever call him that.”

“OK. I will never call him Chuck if I ever meet him, which I am sure I never will.”

“How do you know that?”

“T, I am running out of fingers and toes to count your boyfriends on. I am going to have to start counting other appendages, which isn’t a pretty thought.”

“Charles is amazing. He’s different. He’s a surfer from Jersey—”

“I’m sorry, did you say *surfer*?” Tuck’s voice is thick with the irony that got him through adolescence. Without it, he would have been just slightly unpopular. With it, he was witty and biting and slightly unpopular. “As in ‘hang ten?’”

“Oh, give it a rest. Let me finish.”

“From *Jersey*? Who the fuck surfs in Jersey? He’s pulling your leg, T.”

“He is not. I’ve seen his boards.”

“Whoa, so it *is* serious.”

“Tuck, *please*. Besides, lots of people surf in Jersey. I have other friends who do. And he’s invited me to his place in Ocean Grove to surf with him next summer.”

“That’s a long time away.”

“Yeah, well I think this might be a long-term kind of thing.”

“*Really*,” he asks, and I can imagine his white-blond eyelashes touching the skin above as his eyes open wide.

“Truly. And he’s an actor. He’s just finished filming an indie in Montana—

“Montana?”

“Yes, and the sex is incredible.”

“I *so* don’t need the details of that, T.”

“Why not? I tell Caro and Rox and Lizzie details. Why not you too?”

“Cuz I’m a guy and I don’t really care to hear about how another guy is in bed. It hurts my ego. Makes me feel like a terrible lover.” I can hear him chewing again.

“You’re eating, aren’t you?”

“No way,” he says with a mouth full of food.

“Some things never change.”

“I love you, too, T.”

Memory: 1991, fourteen years old

When I was fourteen, my mother decided to buy me my own telephone line. She couldn't take the fact that I was on for several hours every day of the school year, and in summers, five or six. She couldn't take the constant ringing, and, in the days before call waiting, she would have to apologize continuously to my grandmother or friends who tried to call and for hours couldn't get through. “What I just can't understand, Telemaka, is why you have to use the phone to talk to someone who lives a hundred yards away. Just go to his *house* for crying out loud.” She would touch the tips of her fingers to her temples as if it would help her better understand the concept. “It's beyond me.”

“It's not the same,” I muttered in sulky, adolescent defense.

It wasn't the same. In person, Tuck and I got along great and we spent plenty of hours hanging out in his basement playing air hockey and listening to his father's classic rock CD collection, since CDs were a brand new and thrilling experience when we were fourteen. But on the phone, Tuck and I were stripped of any inhibitions and we talked freely about everything, late into the night, me under the covers in the dark, the cordless phone tucked between my ear and shoulder, and him on his top bunk, the cord of the receiver just reaching from his desk. Mostly, we talked about sex.

“I heard that Stacy Winters let Eric Pfannestiel stick a pencil up her thing,” Tuck told me excitedly.

“Ew!” I howled. “That is *disgusting!*”

“Not if you're Stacy Winters.”

“I would never let a guy do that to me.”

“Maybe you’d like it.”

“Would not. I swear.”

“Well, you can ask Stacy what it feels like. I heard she liked it.”

“She’s such a slut, Tuck. Lizzie told me that she hooked up with two guys in one night at a party last summer.”

“Yeah, my brother said the same thing.”

“Your brother wishes he were one of them!”

“Yeah, Seth is all about getting laid. It’s all he talks about. And he jerks off all the time.”

“That is disgusting, Tuck. Ew! Don’t tell me that!”

“Whatever. It’s true.”

“Gross.” But curiosity got the better of me. “Have you?”

“Have I what?” he asked, but I knew he knew what I meant.

“Ever done it?”

“Maybe.”

“That means yes.”

“Maybe means maybe.”

“Why don’t you just tell me, Tuck? It’s not a big deal.” There was silence from the other end. I could hear his breathing and I knew it smelled like milk. His breath was always a little milky.

“If I tell you, then you have to tell me, too, T.”

“OK.”

“Yes,” he said hesitantly.

“Yes you have done it?”

“Yes.”

“A lot.”

“Not really. I don’t know.”

“What does it feel like?” I could feel everything tightening down there, under the covers. I shifted a bit.

“I don’t know.”

“C’mon, Tuck. Just tell me. I’m not gonna say anything to anyone.”

“I don’t know, really. I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Well, does it feel good?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” He paused. “Like being tickled.”

“Huh.”

“Now you, T.”

“Now me what?”

“Have you ever?”

“Of course not. Girls can’t jerk off.”

“Of course they can.”

“Cannot,” I asserted, but already I was feeling a pull and urgency down there that made me want to believe otherwise.



“I mean, it’s not the same thing for girls. But you can get off just the same. You just put your finger in.”

“Ew!”

“I’m serious. We saw this movie at Aaron Lapinsky’s house a few weeks ago, and the women in it were doing it to themselves and they were totally into it.”

“That’s sick,” I said, but already my hand was reaching for the drawstring on my pajama bottoms.

“Well, they seemed to like it in the movie. You should try.”

“No way,” I said, but my breath was shortened as my fingers found the slippery lips of skin.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I replied. I could hear Tuck rustling his sheets and the receiver rattled against something. Maybe the wall.

“What are you doing?” I asked as one of my fingers peeked inside, testing. A surge went through me, the thrill of doing something naughty.

“Nothing,” he said, but he sounded distracted and I heard the faint rip of a zipper.

“Are you doing it to yourself right now?” I asked softly. I didn’t want to embarrass him, and I didn’t want him to get off the phone.

“No,” he protested, but it was a guilty “no.” I could hear more rustling.

“Are you, Tuck?” I asked, and I dared to stick half a finger up inside. I felt warm and urgent, like in the middle of a soccer game, flushed with oxygen and pumping blood and the taste of winning in the back of my mouth.

“Maybe,” he said, and I could hear his breathing getting deeper.

“Me too,” I said.

“Yeah?” he asked, and through the phone I could hear him moving, a frantic back and forth, rustling and pulling.

“Yeah,” I said, and I began to move my finger in and out, a shiver spreading all over my face.

“What does it feel like?” he asked, his voice a squeaky whisper.

“I don’t know.”

“C’mon, T. I told you,” he said, breathless. He swallowed twice.

“It feels good. Soft and slippery.” Tucker let out a throaty noise, a cross between relief and agony, and I heard the phone drop from his shoulder against the wall. I didn’t want to stop, but I didn’t know at the time that there was an end, a finality. An orgasm for me, too.

“Tuck?”

“Yeah,” he said quietly.

“Just wanted to make sure you were still there.”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“OK, good.”

“Did you like it?” he asked, his voice full of sincerity.

“I don’t know. I guess so.”

“Told you,” he said, and I could just see him smirking on the other end of the line.

“Told you you’d like it.” And he was right.

October 2004, twenty-six years old

Now, twelve years later, Tuck is too shy to talk about sex on the phone.

“Just let me tell you one little detail.”

“Please, T, spare me *all* the details.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I know.” I can hear him licking his fingers, and I know exactly what he looks like, sucking the last bit of olive oil and vinegar off each one. He loves Italian subs with olive oil and vinegar. When he visits me, I stock up on the ingredients. “I don’t burden you with all the gory details of me and Sasha’s sex life, do I?”

“Sasha’s and my sex life,” I correct him. “And you could if you wanted to.”

“I don’t want to do that to you, T. It would make you sick with jealousy.”

“I *promise* that it wouldn’t.”

“Oh, but it would. You would die if you knew all my secret lover tricks. If I told them to you, you would commit suicide on the spot.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you wouldn’t be able to live knowing that you had never had me and that you never will. It’s a tragedy, really.”

“Yes, of epic proportions.”

“Just like you, T. A Greek tragedy.”

“Very funny.”

“Hey, I am thinking of you. It’s in your best interest that you don’t die of jealousy over the fact that you could have had me years ago and you passed. If, on top of that

tragedy, I told you all my secret moves, well. Then I couldn't live with myself. I'm not that cruel."

"You really should give up politics, Tuck, and go into comedy."

"I tried. They said I was too ugly." This makes me laugh.

"When are you coming to New York to visit me? Caro misses you."

"I don't know. I have a ton of work with the elections, you know? And Sasha's birthday is in two weeks. What should I get her?"

"Earrings. Something sparkly and silver. She looks good in silver jewelry."

"Good idea. I can always count on you."

"Well, come as soon as you can. I miss you. I'll get tickets to a show or something this time."

"OK. After the elections I'll come up, if Sasha will let me."

"What does that mean?"

"She gets weirded out by you. You know, we have so much history."

"So?" I don't mean to sound as defensive as I do. "We're like family? Does she get weirded out when you see Seth?"

"You know it's not the same."

"All I know is that you are whipped. Just get your ass up here in November. You still owe me a round of drinks, I believe."

"I'll see what I can do, T," but I can hear hesitation in his voice, and I wonder why people want to be in relationships at all. It seems like nothing but a drag.

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“So, I’ve met someone, Annie.”

“Oh, lord, help us.”

“Oh, stop. He’s nice. This one’s really nice. Charles.”

“Charles? What, is he seventy and British?”

“No, as a matter of fact he is twenty-nine and from Jersey. The nice part.” I dip rice wrappers in a bowl of hot water and lay them flat and shiny on a dishtowel on the counter. Annie drops a spoonful of the rice and mint filling and rolls them up, putting them on a plate. “They’ve got to be rolled really tightly, An, so that no filling comes out when you pick them up.”

“Like this?” I watch as she folds the wet rice wrapper of the filling and tucks it under, rolling the whole thing up in a neat package.

“Perfect,” I say.

“So what is Charles like?” Annie asks, and I know it’s just to be nice. She gets exasperated with me and my litany of men. I don’t do it on purpose. I’m not trying to win a prize or anything. It’s just that every time I meet someone, I am delighted by the prospect, the possibility of starting over, of finding the right guy. *This is it*, I think to myself every time. *This just might be the guy I wind up with*. I’m optimistic about finding him.

“He’s great, An. I think you’d like him. He’s an actor—”

“There’s a surprise. An actor in New York. Sure he’s not gay?”

“Oh, be quiet and keep rolling. You’re getting behind here, and I’ve got to make three dozen of these for tonight.”

“Why are you throwing a baby shower for your boss anyway? I thought you hated her?”

“I don’t hate her. She’s just this lonely, single New Yorky woman always complaining about how there are no eligible men.”

“And she got pregnant how?”

“Donor. She saw forty knocking on the door and went running to the sperm bank.”

“You’re terrible, Telemaka.” Annie scratches her cheek with the back of one hand and a piece of wet mint gets stuck there.

“She says so herself! I’m happy she’s having a baby, but I just can’t stand the spinster blubbering. I hate that shit. I don’t think it’s so hard to go out and find someone, you know? There are a million fucked-up kooks out there looking for love.”

“Well, it’s easy for you to say,” Annie says, and there is a note of smirkiness in her voice. I stop dipping the rice wrappers so Annie can catch up with the rolling. My hands hang over the rim of the bowl, water dripping off my fingertips.

“What does that mean?”

“I mean that it’s easy for you to say. Men line up just to hold your coat.”

“That’s not true. I don’t even know what that means. Do you want to dip the wrappers and I’ll roll?”

“No, I got it.” She’s quiet for a minute as she rolls three or four. Then she says, “It’s just that you don’t quite see how easy it is for you to have any man you want. I don’t think you get that it isn’t that way for everyone else.”

“OK, so I should lay off Emily and let her complain about not meeting any eligible bachelors?”

“No, Tellie. What I mean is that it’s so easy for you it’s not even a challenge. It’s not healthy. You should take a break from it all, really. Just swear them off once and for all.”

“And what about Charles?”

“Forget Charles! You really need a hiatus. Just say no, like Nancy Reagan.”

“What do you want me to do, Annie? Never sleep with another man again?” I laugh as I say it, sure that isn’t what she means.

“That’s what I am saying, dear. It’s like when I tried to be a vegetarian years back in my twenties, did it for seven years. And I would go out and someone would order a huge grilled steak or a nice breast of chicken, and my mouth would water. But I would say to myself: Annie, don’t eat the meat. Don’t eat the meat. And I didn’t. Even though I wanted to, I didn’t.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Annie?”

“Don’t eat the meat, Tel.”

“Why not?”

“Because it never gets us anywhere.”

“Meaning?”

“Men are like meat: they taste good, but they aren’t that good for you. You are always worse for it in the end. When it comes to men, go vegan.”

“But I *like* the meat, Annie. I want to eat the meat. It’s fine if you don’t want to – just like you don’t want to wear makeup and I sometimes do, or you don’t want to eat my grilled Cajun shrimp because shrimp are ‘bottom feeders’ and that grosses you out. They are personal choices. I,” I emphasize while handing her the last slick rice wrapper, “choose to eat the meat. I love the meat.”

“Your loss,” she quips, and I can tell that behind her jovial façade, she’s slightly annoyed. But this is nothing new. We’ve been having the same conversation for years.

Memory: Summer 1991, fourteen years old

The first time I felt overwhelmed with desire, sick with (what I thought was) love, was the summer between my eighth- and ninth-grade years, right before my first kiss with Michael.

Tamara Steiner and I got hired to baby-sit for two families down in Hyannis for two weeks in July. The couples were good friends and rented adjacent homes at the beach every summer and hired young girls to baby-sit. Marsha, a woman who epitomized the pear-shaped figure, was charged with interviewing us. She was married to Gary, an equally overweight man with bristly hairs coming out of his nose and ears, who couldn’t have been older than thirty-five or thirty-six. The two of them had a three-year-old son, Ben, who had a mortal fear of going number two.

“Sho,” Marsha said, and Tamara and I tried very hard not to laugh at her lisp as we sat on Marsha’s small, cramped deck that badly needed varnish. “Do you guysh have



any exshperiensh babysitting?” Tamara was nearly undone by “babysitting,” and she quickly reached for her glass of iced tea.

“Yeah,” I jumped in. I bit my tongue to the point where it began to hurt. “We’ve both baby-sat a lot in our neighborhood. And Tamara sits for her brother all the time. He’s four,” I added.

“OK, great,” Marsha said, scribbling onto a yellow legal pad. “And any shpeshific exshperiensh with babies?” I sensed in her voice that this was an important point, an issue that would make or break our chance to get two weeks down at the beach and make a hundred bucks each.

“Definitely,” Tamara jumped in. “Oodles of experience with babies.” She was lying. Neither of us had ever changed a diaper.

“That’sh good.” Marsha scribbled some more on her notepad, and proceeded to ask us banal questions about allergies, parental consent, and food preferences. At the end of the interview, the job was ours. We were to spend two weeks with Gary and Marsha and their best friends, Alan and Judy Fine, and the couples’ five children: Ben, the neurotic toddler, and the Fines’ two sets of twins, twin three-year old boys and twin six-month-old girls.

Tamara and I shared bunk beds in the house that Gary and Marsha had rented, and we learned quickly that toddlers get up very early and want to play, babies need to have sterilized bottles full of milk without any bubbles, and that Gary stared at Tamara’s boobs – a full size C – whenever he could.

“He’s disgusting,” she complained to me as we sat on the hot sand and dug our toes down under, the toddlers excavating down by the water with their elaborate

collection of pails and shovels. The moms and babies were at home, and Gary and Alan were sitting in folding chairs with the Sunday *Globes*, a cooler of beer between them, fifty yards behind us. “I, like, want to put a t-shirt on every time we come to the beach because he can’t stop ogling.” She looked down at her swimsuit, a bright orange Speedo that showed off cleavage. She was fourteen and had actual cleavage. I looked down at my silver-and-black printed suit front, stretched flat.

“So why don’t you?” I asked, and Tamara looked up, puzzled. “Wear a t-shirt, I mean?”

“Duh, because then I would have a stupid-looking farmer tan. Whose side are you on, anyway, Tellie? The point is that that gross-o man can’t stop fondling my boobs with his eyeballs.” And she was right. He couldn’t.

While Gary was an overweight, back-haired Humbert Humbert, Alan was a lean, compact, self-respecting non-ogler. He was polite and even apologetic. “Tellie?” he would ask. “I’m really sorry, but do you think you could change Alison while I feed Rachel?” He always apologized when asking us to do anything, whereas Gary seemed to find excuses for Tamara to do anything that required bending over or raising her arms.

“Catch the ball!” he barked, tossing a Nerf football over her head the first afternoon at the beach. She jumped and reached with both hands to snag it, and we both noticed how he had admired her bounce.

Alan didn’t have back hair or nose hair or breasts bigger than mine the way Gary did. Alan had muscles, a tan, and, though he was short, he was taller than both Tamara and I. He was a Jewish Clark Kent who never said more than necessary to us. He spent most of his time attending to his two sets of twins, who were always dressed in different

colors so that we could all tell them apart. I was enamored with how much time he spent with his kids and said so one afternoon when Marsha took me food shopping with her at the Hyannis Shop N' Save.

"Yeah," she said, sounding unconvinced. "But, frankly, he probably findsh refuge there, if you know what I mean, Telemaka." She looked at me knowingly, and I nodded, though I didn't have a clue what she was talking about. "You know that Judy ish totally anorexshic, right? That'sh why they've got two shetsh of twinsh. She had to take fertility drugsh." I could hear just the slightest bit of resentment in Marsha's voice. Maybe she knew after all what an ogler her husband was. Maybe she was envious that she hadn't married an Alan. But I didn't care much about Marsha or Gary at all. Or Judy and her anorexia for that matter. Because little by little, I was falling madly in love with Alan Fine.

In the humid darkness of our room that night, I whispered the Judy gossip up to Tamara on the top bunk.

"Doesn't surprise me," Tamara said. "She's always running and doing her aerobics videos, and then she never eats anything. Did you notice what she did with her cookie last night at dinner?"

"Yes! How weird was that!" I hollered.

"Shh! Marsha and Gary will hear us!"

"Sorry," I whispered. "But I have never seen anyone nibble around all the chocolate chips in a cookie and then leave them on the plate. Yuck. She's a freak."

"Yeah. Hey, Tellie, do you think," Tamara lowered her voice for emphasis, "that Alan has a big one?"

“Ew! Don’t be gross!”

“Bet he does. Bet that’s why they’ve got so many kids!”

“You’re sick, Tamara!” I could see the sag in the mattress above me where Tamara lay, and the mattress had the faint odor of mold and sea salt.

“Big dicks must make twins!” she whispered hoarsely, and dissolved into quiet laughter that shook the bed frame.

“You are so gross. Only *you* would think something like that,” I chided, but I, too, had thought about Alan and his penis. At fourteen, the only experience with penises I had was changing the twins and Ben from their swimsuits to their underoos. I was surprised by how unexciting and uncomplex their things seemed after hearing so much about them.

But I imagined that Alan’s would have to be more impressive, more interesting since he was an adult, and I knew from having watched women in changing rooms and seeing R-rated movies that adult women’s breasts were far more interesting than mine. So I imagined a larger version of the twins’ things on their father, and the thought made me weak with both curiosity and shame. What kind of person thinks about these things? I asked myself. I did. I thought them. Sometimes I imagined what would happen if I had breasts the size of Tamara’s and Alan looked at them, ogled me. I didn’t think I would mind.

Tamara and I survived the two weeks in Hyannis, and we became regular sitters for both families on weekends. Gary and Marsha always seemed to call on Tamara, and she was sure it was so Gary could get another look at her chest. “Sicko,” she muttered, but I was pretty sure she liked it.

Alan and Judy called me more since Tamara was usually sitting for Ben. It was pretty easy to sit for the four kids since they were practically ready for bed by the time Judy and Alan were out the door, and all I had to do was watch TV, eat Oreos (which must have been Alan's or the toddlers, since I know Judy wouldn't have touched them), and check on the babies periodically to make sure they were breathing. Judy was very concerned about SIDS and required me to check on the girls every hour. The best part about sitting for the Fines, though, was the ride home back to Needham. Judy would always open the front door and announce that Alan was waiting in the driveway to take me home. I would get into the front seat, still warm from Judy's bony rear, and settle in for the fifteen-minute ride to my house.

"Did you guys have fun tonight," I asked one chilly, fall night, trying to be charming. I smoothed my shoulder-length blonde hair down with my palms and pulled my Chapstick from my pants' pocket and wiped my lips with it until I could taste the waxy, cherry flavor.

"Yeah, just a movie and dinner at Bertucci's," he replied tiredly, forcing a smile.

"Tamara always calls that place 'Ber-touch-me's'," I said, and regretted it instantly. I puffed an awkward little laugh.

"That sounds like Tamara," he said not taking his eyes of the road. "She's a funny one."

"Yeah. Actually, you know what else she says?" I asked, my heart quickening.

"What?"

"That Gary can't stop ogling her chest." I wasn't saying it to tattle. I was suggesting it, putting it out there as a possibility. At fourteen, I didn't know how to

seduce a man, a married man. All I knew was that I wouldn't have minded at all, not one bit, if Alan Fine politely asked, apologetically requested, to stare at my boobs. I wanted him to. I wanted him to want to, and I didn't think at all about his being married or my never having been kissed, or that any kind of fondling at all would be against the law. I just knew that I was in love with him and thought about what he looked like in the shower. So I was telling him about Gary's ogling so that, perhaps, he might consider, just maybe, doing it himself once in a while to me.

"What? Is that true?" He sounded concerned, parental.

"Um, yeah. I've seen him do it."

"That's really bad. Tellie, that's...that's just really inappropriate. Oh, I'm sorry."

He looked at me and then back at the road, then back at me again. "I kind of knew he was like that, but I didn't think...not with, you know...you *kids*." The word stung like cold sea spray. I had been imagining Alan stopping the car alongside the road any minute, taking me in his arms and kissing me. And here he equated me to children, to his own children, probably, someone to protect and keep from harm. "I'll talk to him, okay? I'm glad you told me." He reached over and patted my hand, and then reached back to the steering wheel where he fixed his eyes in pensive thought for the rest of the ride.

When Alan pulled up to my house, the dark one with only the porch light left on, I hoped for one last time that he might reach over and take my hand in his, confess his love for me. I told myself that I would even considering having sex with this man. I would let him be my first, the first to put himself inside of me, no matter how much it hurt. I would do that for him.

“Alright, Tellie. Thanks for sitting tonight and I promise to talk to Gary. That kind of stuff just can’t happen, you know?” I nodded. “Alright, see you.” And, because there was nothing else for me to do – no way in my fourteen-year-old universe for me to reach out, take his face in my hands and say, “Alan, I love you. I’ll do anything you want me to. Anything,” – I stepped out of the car into the chilly October air and closed the door behind me. Alan sped off down the street and I watched the taillights until they turned at the corner and disappeared. Neither Alan or Judy nor Gary or Marsha ever called to ask us to baby-sit again.

November 2004, twenty-six years old

Charles’ and my second date is less formal than the first. There is no going out, no sexy skirt, no Jack and Gingers. Instead I decide to make a simple puttanesca and vermicelli and invite him up. As I am finishing making dinner, the doorbell rings. When I open it, Charles leans in to kiss me on the cheek. He smells of soap and cocoa butter, and, while the pasta is still boiling on the stove, he pulls me by the hand through the living room, past the bathroom, and into the bedroom and pulls off my clothes. He fucks me until my thighs nearly give out, as we collide over and over again, almost angrily, and we come at the same exhausted time.

“You are incredible,” he declares into my neck, lying limp and sweaty on top of me.

“I read *Cosmo* to learn all the sex tricks.”

“How come a girl as sexy and gorgeous as you isn’t dating anyone?”

“Who said I wasn’t? I have five boyfriends at the moment. I’m looking for two more so that I have one for each night.”

“Is that so?” he pulls away, peering at me slyly. He looks as if he wants to say more, but suddenly I push him off and jump up. The acrid smell of burning has reached my nose, and I run through the apartment, naked, to the kitchen. The pot of pasta is on the stove, plumes of gray smoke streaming out of it. I grab an oven mitt and throw the pot in the sink, turn on the faucet. It hisses and spits, and the heat booms against my face and bare chest. When the smoke and noise clear, I see the pasta is stuck to the bottom of the pan, hard and blackened, and there is no way to salvage it.



*If you knew how to stop, you might. But you don't. Ever since you were a girl you knew how to use your beauty to your advantage, even when you were small and underdeveloped and the least sexy thing on earth. You knew the way that friends' fathers looked at you, the way they teased you, the way that older siblings got either nervous or bold when you were around, that you had some kind of power over all of them. It wasn't even as conscious as that, as knowing that you have power. It was more like you understood that this was your role, your destiny: Beautiful Girl. They weren't going to let you be anything else. You weren't anything special in school. You didn't get the grades your obsessed, grade-grubbing friend did, the one who took three A.P.'s sophomore year and got into Harvard early decision. And you weren't sporty the way some other friends were, especially the one who was captain of the crew team and was recruited by Penn. And you weren't the actress that your drama friend was, the one who dreamed of growing up and making it big, and you all agreed she had just enough sass and gumption to make it. No, you weren't bad at anything, but you weren't good at anything, either. You were just beautiful. You were beautiful at senior prom, when William Baker's mother declared you "so gorgeous, so L.A.," as she snapped pictures of you and her son. You were beautiful for senior pictures, when you smiled your five-thousand dollar smile and were secretly pleased every time you passed the picture boards in the hallway and saw yourself smiling down from the top row. You were beautiful the first time a boy made you feel sexy, sensual. And so you became just Beautiful. And it was all anyone could seem to see when they looked at you. Or when you looked at yourself, there in the mirror, and there she was – staring back – a face that looked so attractive and so terrified.*

“So when do I get to meet Charles?” Caro begs. “I’m dying to meet your newest conquest.”

“I don’t know. Soon, I guess.” I am folding laundry in the bathroom and I can see Caro slung across the couch, one of her legs thrown over the armrest.

“Do you know how lucky you are to have a washer and drier in your apartment?”

“Yes, you tell me every week.”

“So how come you don’t want me meeting Mr. Charles?” Caro asks, turning her head to face me. A thick streak of dark hair falls against her cheek.

“It’s not that. I just think it’s kind of early for ‘meet my friends.’ I’ve only seen him a couple times.”

“Afraid I’ll steal his heart away from you?” she teases.

“That’s exactly it.” I slam the washer door closed, a metallic bang. I don’t want to follow this conversation any further, see where it wanders. “Let’s get lunch. I’m starved. Are you in the mood for Thai?”

Memory: Fall 2000, twenty-two years old

I first moved to New York four years ago. I was just out of college and had spent the summer living at home and working at the Gap until I had enough saved up for first, last, and security. Caro, who – along with Roxanne – was my best friend from college, had moved to the city in June and was sharing an apartment with Roxanne. When I arrived in late August, I felt like I had already missed out on everything. The only thing I had was a contract to teach at a private school in Soho, something I had never done before. But

Caro and Rox seemed to have everything else: Their apartment was totally set up, and I didn't even have one. They had already mastered the subway, and I felt dazed by its complexity and filth. They already had discovered a favorite Chinese place they ate at every Sunday, and I hadn't tried a single culinary delight in Manhattan. And Caro already had a New York boyfriend.

Aaron Knightly was an investment banker from Greenwich, CT who made so much money he had both an apartment in Brooklyn with a skyline-view and a pied-a-terre in the Village. Aaron was handsome but balding. You could easily imagine him at eighteen: young, fit, green-eyed and with a full head of dirty-blond hair, captain of the soccer team, a guy who had lost his virginity young and yet had chosen a string of long relationships over one-night-stands. But, when Caro met him, he was thirty-four and already divorced. He had shaved his head in a pre-emptive strike against the balding, but you could still see the darker, stubbly area receding on his scalp. He looked, overall, like a man who made a lot of money and spent most of his days wishing he weren't lonely and young and washed-up. His green eyes were as dull as a dead fish's.

It didn't surprise me that he had found Caro, who was so incredibly young and full of life at twenty-two that she was practically infectious. She wasn't – and isn't – a beauty, but she's vivacious. She's all energy and faithfulness and sex and pancakes with real maple syrup and tennis and Christmas shopping all in one. She inspires optimism. So it's no wonder that Aaron was attracted to her; she embodied everything he had lost.

What was a surprise is why he took a liking to me. I didn't see it coming. Later, Rox would say that I was either an idiot or a liar if I didn't see the warning signs of his affections, and I'm not entirely sure which is true. All I know is that one Friday night

when Caro was home visiting her parents in Miami, Aaron showed up at my cramped studio, boxes still unpacked, with the lame excuse that he thought he had left his favorite Brooks Brothers scarf the last time he had come over with Caro.

“Can I just poke around and see if it’s here? It’s got to be here,” he remarked with phony emphasis.

“You can poke around all you want, Aaron, but I honestly don’t think it’s here. I would have seen it. It’s only one room, you know?” I was trying to organize some wicker baskets in the lone closet, and I was beginning to get frustrated. I couldn’t find the right way to stack them so that they fit on one shelf.

I heard him half-heartedly rustling around in the far corner, over near my bed. “Hey,” he said, his voice brightening. “You’ve got *Goonies* on tape. I love that movie.” He was peering into one of the open boxes.

“Um, yeah. It was my favorite when I was a kid. I haven’t seen it in years, though. My mom packed me some movies to bring and she probably thought I would like it.”

“Wanna watch it?” He was as excited as a puppy. “I loved that movie, too. Remember Chunk? And the kissing scene with the braces?”

“Um, vaguely. I guess you can watch it if you want. I’ve got some unpacking to do here. I can’t go another month like this with these boxes and stuff.”

“C’mon, you’ve got to watch with me,” he said, falling into the small couch ass first, as if relaxing after a long day, knees spread apart. “It’s a classic.”

“Alright, just for a bit,” I had said, but already I regretted it. I had a ton of stuff to unpack, and I didn’t even like the sound of saying in my head to Caro: *Yeah, Aaron just stopped by and we watched a movie*. It sounded like a lie, even if it wasn’t.

We watched the whole movie, from start to finish on the tiny loveseat my mom had given to me. I was mashed up against the armrest the entire time, declaring it comfortable to be able to rest my head there. Aaron spread out and didn't make an effort to stay to his side at all. When the movie finished, I flicked it off quickly. "That was so disappointing," I declared. "I remembered that film as being much better. Funny."

"Oh, I thought it was great," he replied, and I could see on his face that it was true. He looked like a depressed guy with a bit of temporary hope. "You, know, Tellie, I wanted to come over here to talk to you."

"Yeah, OK. Sure." I tried to keep my voice light and bouncy.

"I don't really know how to say this..."

"What?" I didn't want to know, but there was nothing else to say.

"I don't really think it's working out with Caro, you know? She's great – totally great – and I love her so much. But I'm just not *in* love with her, you know?"

"Aaron, wow. I guess I know. That's too bad. But, I think maybe you should be telling her this, right? Not me."

"Yeah, but you're the problem."

"I'm sorry?"

"Because I am in love with you." I could feel the heat rising to my neck and face.

"What? What are you talking about, Aaron? I, I hardly know you." He smiled an "I-know-sheesh-you're-right" smile and threw his hands up in defense.

"Can't help it. I am just totally in love with you. It just happened."

"How? How did it happen? I've only seen you a few times in my life."

“I know, but you’re just so perfect. I mean look at you—” he gestured at me with his hand. “You’re absolutely gorgeous, great body, smart. You’ve got it all.”

“This conversation is surreal,” I said shaking my head, but I already knew that if I was going to ask him to leave, I would have done it by now. I hated myself for that.

“No, it’s real,” he said, and I cringed. “I’m totally crazy for you.” He leaned over and took my hand and kissed my fingertips. He looked at me with his desolate eyes, begging, pleading with me for a last chance at love. When he leaned in to kiss me, I didn’t stop him. And when we found our way to my futon on the hardwood floor, I just sighed at the mess I knew I was making. But I couldn’t say no.

Even afterwards, hours later, as I lay swimming with regret and disgustingness while Adam snored faintly on the other side of the bed, I knew I couldn’t have said no. I cursed myself for not being able to, for being the lousiest friend alive, for being more wretched and pathetic than thirty-four-year-old divorced Aaron. I had let him in after all. I had let the man come inside of me twice that night. But I couldn’t say no. Because, while he was digging deep inside of me for some lost speck of his own youth and beauty, I was digging inside of him, too. I was searching for something and, even though I knew before the first kiss that night that I wouldn’t find it with him, I had to try anyway. And only an idiot or a liar would keep trying.

November 2004, twenty-six years old

“Caro,” I say, pensively over pad thai. “Did I ever tell you how sorry I am about Aaron Knightly?” I was the one who didn’t want to bring it up, but now I am stewing over it as we eat, and I feel that I need to say something.

“What makes you bring that up?” she asks, averting her eyes. I follow her gaze to an older couple in the corner. The woman is gesturing wildly with her hands, explaining some kind of offense, as her husband listens and nods, slurping soup.

“I just want you to know how sorry I am for that, Car.”

“Would you look at them?” she whispers to me. “Don’t you want to be just like that when you are 80? Gabbing away with your hubby in some Thai restaurant together?”

“Caro, I’m serious. Look at me for a sec. Did I ever properly apologize for that?”

Caro’s eyes find my face for a second and then dart away.

“Yes, Tel. You did.”

“Well I want to say it again.”

“Why are you bringing this up?”

“I don’t know. I just feel...” But I don’t have a reason. I look down at my pad Thai, suddenly don’t want any more. I pick up the lime wedge to squeeze more juice from it, but it flattens against my pressed fingers. There is nothing left but pulp.

“Is this about Charles?” She asks, looking at me.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, does this guy Charles remind you of Aaron or something?”

“No. Oh, god, not at all. Yuck.” I laugh at the idea, and Caro laughs, too.

“Aaron the slobberer,” Caro snickers, which makes me crack up. The old, gesticulating lady pauses and looks over at us. I wave at her, which makes Caro laugh harder.

“You know what it is, Car?” I ask, taking in a deep breath and trying to put my thoughts in a straight line. “I want to come clean. I want to just feel clean. Do you know

what I'm talking about?" I pause, my chopsticks in mid-air, and I remember something my mother once said to me when I was twelve or thirteen and asked her if she had been a virgin when she married. She was probably taken aback by my question, but she replied without hesitation, "Well, Telemaka, that's something personal. But I will tell you this: if you give yourself away and give yourself away, you can't expect there to be much of anything left at all for you." She was folding laundry on her bed at the time, and I remember that with a quick, fluid motion she tucked the last unfolded sweater under her chin, crossed the arms, folded it up on her chest, and plopped it in the basket, with a "Well!" signifying the end of the chore and our conversation.

"I guess so. You mean you want to get all the skeletons out of your closet?"

"Sort of. Not just that. I think I'm ready for something real. Something more substantial. Annie is hounding me about giving up men—"

"Again?"

"I know," I laugh. "I know, I know. But I think she has it all wrong. I don't think I need to give up men at all. I think what I need is to get *more* into them."

"Is that even possible?"

"No, I mean maybe I'm ready for something deeper. Look at Tuck, right? He's been in a relationship for seven years. Eight years! That's insane. And yet, maybe it's not really doing me any good to just be...giving little bits of myself away all the time to all the men I meet and date and fuck—" The old lady pauses again from her diatribe when I say the word "fuck," and she glares at me briefly. I lean in to Caro and lower my voice. "I'm starting to feel like I am giving away all of myself and I am not even trying. Like something is just eating away at me slowly. Soon there'll be nothing left."



“This is an uplifting lunch conversation.”

“I don’t mean to be a downer. Actually, what I mean is, I think I might want to try to get more serious with someone.”

“And that someone is Charles?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Well, if it does get serious, so serious that you are picking out hand towels together, please at least introduce me, Tel.”

“Sure thing, babe.” I pick up the lime again, knowing it won’t deliver anything, but I try and squeeze it anyway.

Memory: Summer 1989, twelve years old

When I was twelve, I developed a massive crush on Brian Linden, a boy from my day camp. In the years before tits and ass and bush were the most important thing for boys, Brian told me I was pretty. He said I had nice eyes and a cute smile. Brian was several inches shorter than me, and he had spiky, gelled hair and a tan. He’s the kind of boy who now probably is still short and works out excessively and leases a nice car to compensate for it. But, in the early years, just like Brian didn’t care that I didn’t have any breasts to speak of, nor even a bra to snap, no girl at twelve cared if the cutest boy at camp was a bit shorter than her. Love in those days didn’t have anything to do with size.

Brian and I spent every night on the phone watching reruns of *Batman* on Nick at Nite. We commented together on the scenes and the corny dialogue.

“That guy is so gay,” Brian would assert, imitating the older counselors at camp who said things like that.

“Yeah, look at the way he kicks! Look at him. He’s a retard. Retardo Man,” I said, and Brian giggled. I was glad to make him laugh. I was flattered that he liked me in the first place. We had been going out for almost two weeks, ever since the mid-summer dance when his best friend, Jason, told Lizzie that he thought I was pretty.

“So, Tellie, when are you going to kiss me?” Brian asked into the phone as Batman unleashed a firecracker of blows on one of the Penguin’s henchman. *Blammo!* exploded over the henchman’s head. *Zowie! Pow!*

“Huh?” I asked, playing dumb.

“When are you gonna kiss me?” His voice was direct, assertive. He didn’t seem shy about asking at all.

“I dunno,” I replied coyly, my heart thudding away. I was fascinated by Brian’s interest in me, but that was all. Fascination. I loved that I was his girlfriend, that when we walked back from swimming or archery, he would sling an arm around me or take hold of my hand with his hand that had a wart on it. I was enamored by his interest.

“I hope it’s soon.”

“Sure,” I said as Robin rushed in and saw Batman tied up by several Penguin cronies. *Holy dirty trap, Batman!*

The following weekend, Brian invited me over to watch a video at his house. *Look Who’s Talking* had just come out on video, and I never saw it in the theatre. Brian assured me it was hysterical. We sat on his TV room couch, and his mother, a short, stocky woman with a tight perm, popped her head in every half hour to see if we needed more popcorn or soda, to which I always said yes. We didn’t have either in my house. Brian’s dog,

Nike, sat between us on the floor. In the middle of the film, just as Brian reached over and put his arm around me, which made me flush, Nike farted loudly. “Oh, Jesus, Nike!” Brian yelled, covering his nose. “Ma!” he called. “MA! Get Nike outta here!” His mother shuffled in quickly and shooed the dog out, fanning the air in the room with her hands, chuckling and apologizing. As soon as she was gone, I felt more nervous. Somehow, with the dog there, it seemed safer. Now I was sure Brian was going to try to kiss me, and I didn’t want him to. I just wanted to hold his hand, to finish the movie, to laugh, to feel liked by the cutest boy in camp, and to have his mom bring me another root beer and more oily popcorn. When Brian reached his arm around my shoulder a second time, I flinched. I didn’t look at him once, and I didn’t move to take his hand. When he scooted over closer to me so that our thighs were touching, I told him I had better call my mom to let her know what time she should pick me up. “You can stay for dinner,” he offered. “My mom won’t mind.”

“Nah. My mom wants me to eat at home tonight.” It was a lie. My mom wouldn’t have cared, but I was getting nervous. I wanted everything about him except his body, his kisses.

When I came back from the phone in the kitchen, I sat at the other end of the couch, and he didn’t try to put his arm around me during the remainder of the movie. “You were right,” I told him, flashing my cutest smile, when the credits rolled. “That was so funny.” I was hoping to let him know that even if I didn’t want him to kiss me, I still liked him.

A week later, Jason told Lizzie that Brian was no longer my boyfriend. He had gone to a birthday party for Stacy Raptapolous, a townie from our camp who had an

above-ground pool, and Stacy had dived off the side about forty times until her bikini top finally wound up around her ankles on the fortieth try. “I’m so embarrassed!” she had gushed. “I can’t believe it!” She shrieked in agony, her boobs bouncing along the surface of the shallow water, as she hopped on one foot trying to free her ankle from the bikini top. That afternoon, Brian and Stacy were a couple. He never even called to dump me.

November 2004, twenty-six years old

Charles and I are supposed to be going to a new Brazilian restaurant that has great food and live Samba. He promised me, his voice thick with charm, that he would take me out for a “date date” so that I could get dressed up. I like date dates. I like showing Charles off. He’s that cute.

But he is late. An hour and fourteen minutes late, to be exact, and I have called his apartment six times. I left two messages already and am getting that lonely, nervous feeling, like when I was in high school and I needed to talk to someone on a particular night, and everyone I knew was out, so I would dig out my phonebook and call old friends, from camp or elementary school, with whom I had fallen out of touch. I would sprawl out on the carpeted, cement basement floor of my parent’s house, phone cord stretched as far from the base as possible, and dial and dial, staring up at the Styrofoam drop ceiling as I listened and counted the trembling rings. There was always a kind of desperate feeling in the pit of my stomach when I called, just as there is now. *Be home*, I telepathically communicate as Charles’s phone rings again. Eight times. Ten times. I once discovered in high school that if you let a phone ring more than fifty times, the line

goes dead. It just cuts off, silent and eerie, like someone has picked up the phone and just isn't saying anything.

I call Caro. Not home. I dial Tuck's number and after the second ring, he picks up. "Tuck!"

"Hey, T. What's up? I'm just on my way out with Sash. How you doing?"

"Oh, fine. I don't want to keep you if you are on your way out..." I let it linger, let my voice lilt a little so he knows I *do* mean to keep him.

"No, it's OK. I got a few minutes. Hold on." I hear him cover the receiver. Through his fingers, I can hear his muffled voice say to Sasha that it's me, that I need to talk. Sasha replies with a whine, and he says something to her I can't hear, soothing, and I hear her rabbit voice say, "It's always her over me," and then she moves away.

"What's up, T? I got just a few minutes, because Sash and I are headed out for her birthday."

"Oh, OK. Well, I really don't mean to keep you, Tuck. I forgot it was her birthday today. You get the earrings?"

"Yep."

"How'd they go over?"

"Don't know. I'm giving them to her at dinner. We're going to this great Japanese place that just opened up here. I hear the sake's really good."

"Well, don't drink too much. You might lose your sexual inhibitions and do something you'll regret," I tease, but my heart isn't in it. I meant to tell Tuck about Charles apparently standing me up, but I can't bring myself to do it now. It seems petty. I

lean back against the couch armrest and put my feet up on a pillow, high heels and all. New shoes for the date.

“Yeah, I’m still hoping to lose my virginity. You think the sake will help me?”

“Ha ha.” The window behind the couch shows the fading light of day. The sky is grainy blue-grey, like the screen of the old TV in my parents’ basement when it’s flicked on and warming up. It’s a sad, in-between sky. Not a good hour to be alone.

“So, anything up? I only have a minute. We have reservations and it was tough to get a table, and Sash is really psyched about the place.”

“No, it’s cool. Just wanted to say hi. Tell Sasha happy birthday for me, K? Call me tomorrow and let me know if she liked your gift.”

“You got it, T. See you, girl.”

“Bye, Tuck.” I let him hang up and I watch the sky creep darker, until the off-the-hook signal begins to sound in my ear and I switch off the cordless and let it drop from my hand onto the hardwood floor.

I’m dozing on the couch and there is a tiny string of drool running from my mouth onto a cushion. I wake, confused for a moment in the darkness, and then I sit up, see my dress and shoes in the streetlight from the window. Just as I remember that something woke me up, some sound, and I am trying to piece it together in my head as I get up off the couch, there is a loud, heavy knock on the door. That was it; that’s what woke me.

When I open the door, Charles is all smiles, leaning against the doorjamb. “Tellie, hey. You ready? I wanna take you somewhere.”

“Um, yeah,” I say, smoothing my hair down and closing my eyes to focus a bit. I am still groggy from the nap. “Where have you been? You were supposed to pick me up hours ago.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry bout that. I got tied up this afternoon. You ready?” This is the only apology I get, and I know I can take it or leave it.

“Yeah, just let me get my coat.” I clack off down the hall in my new heels to grab my coat from the closet and check the mirror. Not bad for post-nap. At least there are no cushion lines in my face. A little lip-gloss and I am ready to go.

Charles is nearly pulling me by the hand down the street. “Where are we going?” I ask. “The Brazilian place is over on Bleecker.”

“I’m not hungry. I want to take you somewhere else. I want to show you something.” I love surprises, though I am hobbling through the streets on my new heels, which are already rubbing angrily at the sides of my feet.

We turn onto West 4<sup>th</sup> and walk two blocks, and then Charles stops in front of a lovely, white brick building. All of the buildings in the Village make me think of Henry James novels with their front stoops and brick and wrought-iron gates. I can practically hear the horse hooves’ clip-clopping on cobblestone streets that have long ago been paved.

Charles extracts a key from his pants and opens the front door, leads me up the stairs, and with another key opens the door to a small apartment that has much nicer furniture than either of ours.

“Do you know whose house this is?” he asks, closing the heavy white door behind us and dropping the keys on an antique wooden table.

“Yours?” I joke, looking around. It clearly belongs to a woman. The taste is feminine: crisp, white drapes, ivory couch, pear-colored rugs and gold-framed prints all over the walls.

“Gwyneth Paltrow’s,” he replies nonchalantly. “I’m serious,” he says before I can disbelieve out loud.

“And why do you have the key?” I ask, my hands on my hips. But instead of a reply, Charles moves towards me, pulls me to him, and takes my head in both his hands. I can feel the erection beneath his thin, black pants. His mouth covers mine and he is kissing me. Suddenly I am melting, forgetting how he stood me up earlier, or at least pushing it so far back into my brain that it won’t distract me for the time being.

He pulls me down onto the pear-colored rug with him, its softness on the back of my bare calves as Charles takes my hand and draws it to his fly. “I’m going to make you a very happy boy,” I tease.

“Wait,” he says, pushing my hand away and getting up quickly. He jogs down the hallway and disappears. I’m about to get up and follow him when he returns, dangling something from one hand.

“It’s much better with this,” he says, waving the bottle of Vaseline Intensive Care Moisturizing Lotion back and forth in his hand. He lays back down next to me, promptly removes his pants and boxers, naked only from the waist down, and directs my hand to the bottle of lotion first, and then to his hard penis. I pump my hand back and forth, thinking of the irony. What is it with men and lotion? I watch his face as I pump harder, squeezing just the right amount of pressure and knowing the effect it will have. I became an expert at this in high school. Charles lies on his back, eyes closed, looking impatient



and peaceful all at once, until he suddenly starts twitching and calling my name, and he closes his eyes tight and tightens his stomach, as if punched, and comes violently all over his own shirt and my slippery, lotion-covered hand.

“Oh my god, Tellie,” he sighs, eyes still closed. “You have no idea how well you do that.” Something in his voice makes me know he’s a liar, that he’s full of shit pretty much all the time, that there is no way this is Gwyneth Paltrow’s apartment. But I don’t care. I’m pleased with the compliment, even if I dressed up and came all the way here for nothing but a messy hand job.

Memory: Fall 1993, sixteen years old

The first penis I ever touched belonged to Daniel McGormick, who was the guiltiest, Irish-Catholic boy I have ever dated. He was my first serious boyfriend, a senior when I was a junior, friends with Lizzie’s boyfriend, Adam, from wrestling. Adam and Lizzie fixed me up with him because he thought I was cute, and I was flattered after the Stiles fiasco. It was nice to have the affections of an older boy at school, even if that older boy was a little less than cool, and a wrestler. He was sweet. And he had a car.

Our first kiss was leaning against that car just outside Molly Snyder’s beginning-of-the-year party. Her parents had gone away for Labor Day weekend and left their fourteen-room home without anyone to look after it except sixteen-year-old Molly. So, naturally, she invited the entire junior and senior classes over. Someone even brought a keg, a rarity at prep-school parties, and after draining it, some of the football players were skinny-dipping in Molly’s duck pond.

The four of us went together, the excitement of the new school year in our throats. “Juniors,” Lizzie said from the back seat. Since it was Daniel’s car, everyone thought I should get in the front passenger seat, which embarrassed me. I hardly knew Daniel, had never really spoken to him before that night when the three of them came to pick me up. “I can’t freaking believe we are actually juniors!” she squealed and scrunched her face up.

“Yeah, so we get to beat up on you now,” Adam teased, soft-punching her on the meaty part of her arm. They had been together almost a year and still hadn’t had sex. Lizzie and I talked about it all the time. She thought she might be ready, but she wasn’t sure, and it just hadn’t really come up yet. I found that hard to believe, given that he was turning eighteen in a few weeks, but Lizzie swore that they were just content to do other things. I knew she had given him a couple blow-jobs, which she said made him crazy, but she said they were so disgusting she prayed he wouldn’t ask for another one. “His thing goes all the way into the back of my mouth and it’s awful. It makes you gag and cry. Don’t do it,” she warned, and I burned with envy. It’s not that I wanted to endure what she described, but she got all the bragging rights. I had never even seen or touched a penis, and she had had one all the way in the back of her mouth.

At the time, I didn’t know much about Daniel at all. I wasn’t sure if he was a virgin or not, though I figured he probably was. Tuck still was. Tuck’s old brother Seth was off at college and no longer around to ridicule him much for being a sixteen-year-old virgin. “I know this sounds really retarded,” he had confessed to me on one of our late-night calls the summer before junior year. “But I just don’t want the first time to be with ‘some girl,’ you know? I want the first time to be special.”

“I don’t think that’s retarded at all,” I had replied. “I think that’s normal.”

So, if Tuck was waiting for the right girl, it was conceivable Daniel was, too, and this is what I was thinking as we stood against the closed passenger door of his car outside Molly’s house, ablaze with lights and thumping base, kissing each other softly and wetly for a few minutes. It was the fourth boy I had ever kissed, and I was turning sixteen. I finally had breasts, though they were only a B cup, and my period had come with little fanfare and much less excitement than I had anticipated. It hurt and made me feel crabby and tired. Thankfully, it didn’t come often. And now that I felt like kissing boys, felt like having their tongues in my mouth, I began to imagine lots of other things I wanted to have done to me. I would feel incredibly shivery when I thought about anyone touching me, when I saw sex scenes in movies or read them for my English class. There was one particular scene from *Sophie’s Choice* when the narrator described his kissing spree on the couch with some woman; when I read that scene, alone in my room on a school night, I suddenly realized that I *got* it. I finally got what the big deal was all about, all the hormones and sexy movies and guys jerking themselves off. Suddenly, I wanted to be in on all of it. All that dirty, gross stuff seemed less dirty and gross and more like something I would like to try.

“You’re a really good kisser,” Daniel said, pulling away. “And you’re so pretty, Tellie. I can’t believe I am actually kissing you.”

“Why?” I asked, subtly wiping some of his saliva off my chin. It smelled like my field hockey mouth guard.

“I don’t know.”

“No, c’mon, tell me.” I reached out and touched his hand a little, curious to hear it, but also already knowing what he would say. It was beginning to repeat itself over and over again, like a recurring dream, in my life. I didn’t feel pretty.

“Because it’s you. You’re like, gorgeous. And smart, and nice...” but it was gorgeous that stood out and hung in the September night air between us, like a breath. I leaned in and kissed him again, feeling suddenly very safe and very glad to have a boy’s – almost a man’s – arms around me, holding me tight.

The first time I saw Daniel’s penis was two months later. We had grown a little tired of kissing and groping over layers of clothing, speckled with the occasional feel-up. I should say that I had tired of it, because I had a lot of catching up to do with Lizzie, who was going to lose her virginity any day and I still hadn’t touched a penis. Daniel really liked to kiss and grope, and I could feel his hardness there, against my leg or digging into my crotch if I lay on top of him, clothes intact. His erection was like a present – obvious and beckoning, but I politely pretended it wasn’t there so that it’s unwrapping would come at the right time for both of us. I both wanted to and didn’t want to know what I would find. Or let me put it this way: I was both terrified and thrilled about the possibilities unzipping that fly would bring.

I was surprised at first that Daniel didn’t urge me on. In the first weeks of our relationship, he didn’t try anything more than kiss me, despite Lizzie’s insisting on boys and their penis obsession. “Just wait til you’re blowing him, Tellie,” she cautioned. “They just love it. Yuck! I only do it because I am in love with Adam.”

But weeks and weeks passed, and suddenly it was almost Thanksgiving and neither of us had ventured below the other’s belt. I couldn’t understand why not, so one

day when we were snuggling on my basement couch, watching reruns of *Laverne and Shirley*, I asked. “How come you never try anything more than just kissing me?”

Daniel looked down at me, a bit taken aback. “I, uh, didn’t think you’d like that.”

“Well,” I said sighing and pulling my pony-tail out from under his elbow, “I might not mind.” I felt flushed all over just saying it. I could feel parts of my body swelling.

“It’s a sin,” he whispered quietly.

“What?”

“I don’t want to sin.”

“It’s a sin to touch each other?”

“Well, not like we are now. But, you know...” he looked away, a little annoyed.

“Well, do you do it to yourself?” I felt irritated that he thought doing anything with me was a sin. That I was somehow part of a sin.

“What?” he asked, surprised.

“Don’t you do it to yourself? Of course you do. All guys do.” I was acting bolder than I was. I didn’t know what guys did, but I figured if they were like Tuck, they did it to themselves a lot.

“No,” he mumbled, but the way he said it, I knew he was lying.

“Because that’s a sin, too,” I said. “And if you do that, it’s not any worse than doing it to me. Or, you know...”

“I guess,” Daniel replied distantly. We both stared at the screen and didn’t say much else, just watched Lenny and Squiggy making asses of themselves.

But then Daniel surprised me. One afternoon over Thanksgiving break, when his parents were at a funeral, Daniel and I were kissing on his couch, rubbing against each other in our usual, clothed way. But this time, he took my hand and directed it to his bulging fly. I smiled at him, though I was flitting and nervous inside, and slowly undid the button and zipper there. The sound of his zipper was like something tearing, and I was afraid to look down and see it. “Wait,” he said. He reached under the couch and moved his hand around, looking for something. He found it and came up, a bottle of lotion in his hand. “Do you mind using this?” I was surprised that he had calculated the whole thing, planted the bottle there, knowing that this would be the day I gave him a handjob. I shook my head no, I didn’t mind, and squeezed a Hershey-kiss dollop of yellow lotion into my palm. It was cold, and when I reached down to touch him, he flinched. Then my hand was around him and I was moving it all around, up and over, like one might gently wipe down a counter. With his eyes closed and his breathing steady but hitched, he placed his hand over mine and moved it back and forth, back and forth, until the two of us had a rhythm going. And suddenly he came. His warm semen spurted jerkily onto my hand, and I thought: *so that’s what it’s like*. I finally looked down and saw the tip of his penis, shiny and pink, staring up at me, and, as Daniel reached for a towel that he had hidden beneath the sofa as well, I wondered if what I was feeling just then was love.

December 2004, twenty-six years old

vii.

*You are sexy and gorgeous and you wear your hair long down your back so that it touches the tips of men's noses as you lean over them, riding on top of them, in bed, because they love when you do that. You learned a long time ago that you can make any man you want fall in love with you, you even admitted it once to a male friend, who agreed with you, and you laughed, but inside you were terrified.*

*You once heard about a model who had a stalker that followed her around, and one day he took a razor blade to her face and cut her cheeks and forehead and nose until she was scarred for the rest of her life, her beauty no longer alive. And you fantasize about this, let it torment and thrill you; what if you were horribly disfigured in some way? Would men still fall in love with you like dominoes? You know the answer. Anybody would. Your face first, your body second, your winning personality and brains third. But you know that without that face, no dominoes fall. No coy approach in a bar, an offer to buy you a drink. No flirting in the elevator. No set-up with your friend's friend. And you imagine yourself like the model, scratched up and scarred over, no way of getting back what feeds you. Because it's true that, while they all wind up really falling in love with you, the real you, the whole package, the first thing they fall in love with – every time – is your beautiful face.*

It's just like when I was young, just like those late nights, those ungodly hours, when I would call Tuck in the middle of the night and wake him up, knowing that he would always get it after the first ring. And I would cry to him, about my break-up with Daniel or my parents and their never-ending arguments on the phone, and he would listen and calm me down for hours and hours.

"Please pick up, Tuck, please pick up," I whisper through a face of tears and snot, red and puffy with hours of crying. "Please, oh God, please, Tuck. Pick up, pick up," I say to myself, over and over again, wiping my nose on the sleeve of my shirt. I hear the hopeful sound of plastic clumsily knocking against plastic, and my heart leaps. "Oh Tuck, thank God," I say.

"T?" He asks, sounding disoriented. "What time is it?"

"Tuck, it's over."

"What time is it, T? It's really late. What's going on?" I can tell he is still half-asleep, not really grasping that I am a mess.

"I am just freaking out, Tuck. I can't take this anymore."

"Take what?"

"This. This city. This life. It's over, you know,"

"What are you talking about, T?" I can hear him sitting up in bed, and it occurs to me he isn't alone.

"Is Sasha there?" I ask.

"No, she's at her place," he says sounding a bit more awake.

"The Charles thing. That's what's over."



“Oh, T. I’m sorry, sweet-stuff. He doesn’t know what he’s giving up.” His voice is filled with sleep.

“Oh, save it, Tuck,” I say, begin to cry again. My head aches with the effort. “It’s not even that. I mean, it’s just the fucking icing on the cake, you know? But it’s not *him*, it’s just the whole situation. I’m an idiot.”

“You are not an idiot, T. Tell me what happened.” I hear him switch his bedside light on.

“He just said it wasn’t working out and we could be friends and all that crap. But it’s bullshit. I’m sure he’s already screwing some bimbo, some actress, right now.” I begin to cry hard, my eyes closed, my chest shaking. I sound like a little girl, one of the ones you might see sobbing on the street behind her mother, begging for something – a toy, attention, to stay just a bit longer at the park – and not getting it, reduced to sobs.

“He broke up with you?” I nod, even though he can’t see me. “He’s a prick, T. He doesn’t know what he’s giving up.”

“Give me a break, Tuck!” I pause to blow my nose into a raggedy tissue. “We both know that he does know what he’s giving up. We started out on the right foot, both of us in the same place, but I guess I just wound up wanting more somewhere along the way. I mean, not more like a fiancé and three kids, but more like...like...respect.” When I say this last word, I feel sobered. Dry-eyed.

“Aretha Franklin does have a point.”

“Tuck, I’m serious. Do you know that he only took me out for one real date – one! – in two months?”

“I know, I know. Look, T, you are great, you are amazing and gorgeous and funny and basically any normal guy’s wet dream. If this guy is too much of a moron to see that, then screw him. You’re better off.” Tuck sounds weary, like he is reading a list. “Besides, what kind of actor works in Montana, anyway? Tell me *that*.” I snort a little laugh. “He’s probably a farmhand who pretends he’s an actor. Forget him; don’t let it get to you, OK? You’re too good for him.”

I appreciate his words, his sweet words, and know this is exactly why I called. But still, I can’t help wincing a little at Tuck’s guyness, his typical male response. *Fuck it. Don’t let it get to you. You’re too good for him.* It all sounds so easy, so simplistic, so monosyllabic. But I know that what I feel isn’t even about Charles. He’s just the symptom of the disease. But Tuck can’t really understand that.

So I don’t tell him about the night last week when Charles showed up at two a.m., ringing my bell like a madman. When I opened the door in my flannel pajamas and slippers, he pushed me up against the wall, kissing me hard, saying my name over and over again, telling me he had missed me, and his words rode on whiskey breath to my ear. And I felt his hand on my head, pushing me down like a piston to his waist, where his other hand unzipped the fly, and I suddenly found his penis inside my mouth, bumping against my cheeks and teeth for a moment until I found the rhythm and sucked him off right there in my foyer, thinking the entire time, on my flannel knees, of the old saying from middle school: *What’s the difference between like and love? Spit or swallow.* When he finished, when I swallowed his semen, more out of convenience than love, he sighed, zipped up, gave me a dry kiss on the cheek and a squeeze on the hand.

“You are the best, Tellie,” he said. And he let himself out, as I stared at the closing door, still tasting his semen all the way in my mouth.

I knew from the start that the whole premise of this relationship was sex. When I think of Charles, I think of the rubbery smell of a condom, the salty taste of his cum, the warm, hot feeling of his chest against mine. But in spite of knowing it was only about sex, it still grated me a bit every day, shaving me down like a yellowed parmesan rind, to the lonely fact that I was loved only sexually. He claimed to be amazed by my handjobs, declaring the Gwyneth Paltrow apartment handjob the best of his life, and my mouth “worked wonders” on him. He loved the sex most of all, to pull himself into me and push and push until he could push no more and collapsed, exhausted, on top. It was then that I felt my power the strongest, power as thin as a piece of thread, already slipping away after his orgasm.

But I knew from the start that I was only his sexual fulfillment, his collection of orifices to poke and push and play with until he was satisfied over and over again, and I let him – over and over again – at any hour on any day during these past two months because somewhere in the back of my mind I figured it would pay off. It was like an internship: you’re happy to be used for the worst office jobs – coffee and messenger errands phone answering – because they are the dues you pay for a better job later. I guess I figured that all my cow-towing to his every sexual whim would earn me something better with him. Not that the sex wasn’t good. It was. But who really cares about that when there’s nothing else?

So when Charles called tonight and told me it wasn’t working out, that we could still be friends, I didn’t hold back.

“I don’t fuck my friends.”

He chuckled awkwardly. “Well, you know what I mean, Tellie.”

And I did. I knew exactly what he meant, and before I could think of something great to say, something that would go down in the books as the best tell-off ever, he was off the phone with a slick excuse and I was left staring at the black, cordless phone as if it were an alien.

I don’t say anything about all that to Tuck. I don’t feel like admitting it right now, of having to hear my own voice explain what a fool I am.

“Tuck, I just can’t take this right now. I hate it here. I hate this fucking city. I hate it.” My voice is panicky, shrill.

“Ssshhh,” he whispers. “T, I know, I know. It’s OK.”

“I hate it. It’s the loneliest place on earth,” I say and begin to cry again. There is a long, gray silence from Tuck’s end. He lets me cry for several seconds, maybe several minutes. Finally, he interrupts.

“T, tomorrow’s Friday, right?”

“Yeah.”

“OK, I’m coming up there. I’m coming to see you, OK? Can I crash with you?”

His voice is excited. I can tell he thinks he has found the way to make me stop crying, to keep me together in one piece. And he’s right.

“Are you serious?”

“Of course. I get off work at five and will try to make a sixish train. I’ll be there by nine and we can spend the whole weekend together, OK? But one condition...”

“What?”

“No more tears. And get some sleep.”

“Deal,” I say, wiping my face with my sleeve. I already feel guilty for making him offer to come. But I am happy to take it, happy that I have the distraction all weekend and an excuse to forget how hollowed out I feel.

Memory: Winter and Spring 1995, seventeen years old

I dated Daniel my entire junior year. Since I was seventeen and perpetually fighting with my mother, Daniel and I spent most of our time at his house or in his car, an old, beat-up Subaru wagon. The car had white dog hairs all over the navy felt upholstery and it smelled faintly of mold. Daniel and I had spent many fall and winter nights fooling around in that back seat, trying out everything except for sex. “It’s a sin,” he would whisper hotly every time I suggested it. I had even bought a pack of condoms, a little box of three Trojans, with spermicidal lubricant. I carried one of them, wrapped in its stiff wrapper, in my wallet in case Daniel changed his mind.

“We’ve done everything else that’s a sin,” I challenged. “And you don’t go to mass every week.”

“It’s different.” He shrugged in the cramped darkness of the parked car, heat blasting, as he sucked on one of my raisiny-hard nipples. Lizzie and Adam had finally done it over Christmas break that year, and Lizzie had become a little haughty since. As if she were older and more mature than me. I was desperate to lose my virginity. If not with Daniel, then who? We had been going out for eight months and had done everything else together. He had even admitted that I had been his first kiss. So why not his first everything? My other girl friends were split fifty-fifty, half of them virgins and half of

them not. But all the ones who had lost it had lost it with their first serious boyfriends, and here I was with my first, serious boyfriend, and I couldn't believe he wouldn't do it with me. He was going to college the coming fall as a self-chosen virgin. It seemed strange.

I didn't talk about it with Tuck, though, because Tuck was also still a virgin, still waiting. He said I was the only person he talked about it to. "It sucks to be a guy, you know, T? It's like you always have to be someone you're not," he admitted over a tub of Breyer's mint-chocolate chip in his basement. "It's easier for girls. If you want to wait, you wait and nobody questions it. It's not like I'm fucking Mother Theresa or something," he said. "It's just that everyone expects me to be like this horny guy. And I am," he said with his big sideways grin, pointing his spoon at me.

"Of course," I said, smiling back.

"I like messing around with girls, you know? But I just want the first time to be with someone meaningful. Like you and Daniel."

"You want a threesome with us?"

"Shut-up, T," he replied. "Leave the sarcasm to me."

I didn't think that Tuck would appreciate my complaining to him about how Daniel was perpetually worried about God's wrath raining down on him for having sex. Tuck seemed gloomy enough as it was lately; he wanted a girlfriend. But he knew that Daniel and I still hadn't done it, and I think this made him feel better.

By March of my junior year, Daniel and I were arguing a lot. I was always trying to talk about our relationship, examine it, and get closer by having long, deep talks, just the way every woman on every show and in every movie did. It seemed like the

important thing to do once you had been dating seriously for eight months. Daniel was content to just be together, fool around, and not talk about it at all. Then, just before Spring Break, an old camp friend's father passed away, and I was devastated. It was the first wake I had ever attended – none of my school friends or neighbors were Catholic – and when I saw his father stretched out there in the casket, looking as sunken and dead as dough, I panicked. I had never fainted before, but I thought I might just then. I started to sweat and quickly stood up and moved on down the receiving line, mumbling things to Jake and his family that attempted to sound sincere and heartfelt, though inside of me numbness and dread rang like a school bell.

“It was so sad,” I sad over and over to Daniel on the phone. It was the night before he was to leave for his senior Spring Break trip to the Bahamas with his wrestling friends. I was leaving early in the morning, too, to go to Lizzie's parents' place in Sanibel, Florida. “It was just so sad to see Jake's mother break down and cry in the middle of the meal. I can't believe his father is gone. Just gone.”

“Yeah,” Daniel said, sounding bored.

“I mean, I just freaked when I saw his body there. I mean, he was there, in that casket, but nothing else was. It brought back a lot of weird memories for me. You know, about my dad.”

“Your dad's not dead.”

“I know that,” I whispered. “It just freaked me out, OK?”

“Yeah, well. Death is crazy.” There was a long pause screaming out of the receiver. Daniel's apathy was loud.

“Why can’t you be a little nicer?” I asked. “I’m just sad for my friend. And, you know, it was a funeral. It was kind of emotional.”

“I know that. I just don’t see why you have to get so worked up over his death. I mean, it’s awful, but you seem really affected by it. It’s not like you had seen your friend much in the past few years.”

“So? He’s still my friend. And he lost his *father*.”

“I know that, but you’re taking it like it was *your* father.”

“I am not. You’re just so obtuse.” My mother used to call my father this. I didn’t really know what it meant, just that it was insulting.

“I just don’t get why this funeral means that much. It’s really sad when someone dies, but you barely knew the guy. And you haven’t seen your friend in years. It’s weird to me that you’re taking it this way.” I could tell he couldn’t wait to get on the plane tomorrow and go away. I could tell he was tired of headachy talks about us, about our relationship. I could tell he was a little sick of me. So, as any emotional, dramatic sixteen-year-old would do, I pushed further.

“I’m not sure this is working out, Daniel.” Even as I said it, I knew that wasn’t what I wanted; Daniel had become my entire junior year. But I felt the surge of power at saying something so loaded, so capable of inflicting hurt, that it felt good, like scratching poison ivy, knowing later that I would likely regret it.

“Whatever, Tellie.” He was exhausted.

“Look, go have fun on your trip. I can’t deal with this.” My voice began to rise in pitch. I could hear my mother’s voice in it. “If you can’t figure out why a friend’s father’s death would upset me, then I am not really sure what I am doing with you.”



“Fine. I’ll see you when I get back.”

“Whatever,” I said, mocking him. I wanted him to fly off to the Bahamas swimming in guilt and regret. He feels guilty for all the wrong things, I thought. Let him feel some fucking guilt for being a jerk.

And we hung up.

There were about fifteen juniors and seniors in Sanibel that Spring Break, all with their parents. We would all meet up at night at the beach club and try to get college students to buy beer and rum for us at the store. Most days it worked, and we would walk around on the chilly, dark beach at night, in hooded sweatshirts and bare feet, drinking from oversized cans of Foster’s or swigging gulps of Captain and Coke, which Christian McVale swore was the best drink ever.

It rained nearly every day, and the first day the sun came out, piercing and strong, Lizzie and I lathered ourselves up with SPF 2 coconut oil lotion and sat out all day at the beach in front of her parents’ villa. Stiles Addison was one of the seniors down in Sanibel, staying at Christian McVale’s place. I still hadn’t forgiven him for the semi-formal the year before, and I was openly pleased when Christian told me later that night that Stiles had fallen asleep in the sun and had been burnt so badly he had blisters all over his body. “The dude is *purple*,” Christian laughed, shaking his head from side to side. “Poor fuck.” He sipped a little rum and Coke from his cup. Christian was a short, very attractive senior. He was blond and classically handsome, small and muscular. He dated Molly Snyder and drove a rusted Jeep CJ-7. He liked to sail and could fix things, like engine parts and radio equipment. His family was rich, waspy, and polite. He always had blond stubble on his face, like the sheets of sandpaper we used in fifth-grade woodshop.

“I hate that guy,” I admitted, feeling warm and woozy from the rum. Christian and I were sitting off by a beach bonfire that some college kids had started. The fire felt like it was baking my skin, and the front of my sweatshirt felt hot enough for the UPENN logo to melt right off. Lizzie had gone back to the house to call Adam while Christian and some other kids and I tried to mingle with the college students, who – so far – had been obliging. I think the college guys were hoping to score with some of us girls.

“How come?” Christian asked, looking at me. He reminded me of an outsider, someone whose destiny was jumbled up. He should’ve been born to a family of ranchers in Wyoming. He didn’t seem to belong in his stuffy family and huge Wellesley mansion, or at school with all the hockey and lacrosse players, soft boys who acted hard. Christian was hard.

“He was a total dick to me last year. He’s an ass,” I said. I didn’t care if he later told Stiles what I said. I told myself that Stiles deserved it.

“Come take a walk with me. I feel like walking.” He stood up and dusted the sand off his bare legs. They were short, muscular, and hairy. A man’s legs. He leaned down to offer me a hand and pulled me up.

We walked down the beach away from the bonfire. If Lizzie came back, she would wonder where I had gone, but the alcohol melted away any worry I had about it. It just became a fact, hanging there in the back of my mind.

Somewhere along the way, a hundred yards or so from the beach party, as waves rolled and crashed off to our left, Christian took my hand in his and interlaced his fingers with mine. It didn’t surprise me, and I didn’t say anything. When we were a long ways

off and could see the fire back down the beach like a tiny match flame, we sat in the cold sand and dug our toes in. It was wet underneath.

“You’re gorgeous, you know that?”

“Stiles said the same thing.”

“Fuck Stiles,” Christian said, and leaned over to kiss me. I had only then kissed three boys – Michael, Stiles, and Daniel – so I didn’t have much to compare to, but Christian’s was the softest kiss I had ever had. His tongue tasted of sugary Coke, and his breath blossomed with rum. I didn’t even think about Daniel as Christian gently pushed me back against the sand and surprised my mouth with another rummy kiss. His grinding stubble raked my mouth and chin, and I couldn’t get enough.

Every move and kiss felt perfectly timed and placed; perhaps it was the rum or the waves; perhaps it was the first time my hormones surged in such a way that I wanted him because I wanted him, not because I imagined I was supposed to. My body was aching with the effort of restraint, and suddenly – away from everyone else, from school, from the party, the bonfire, and all other rules of the universe that required us to be proper preppy New Englanders, I didn’t care about doing everything right or looking good or gossip. And I could tell Christian didn’t either.

He pulled off my clothes piece by piece: first my oversized, hooded UPenn sweatshirt; then my top, then the button-fly faded jeans I bought with Lizzie at the second-hand store on Newbury Street. When I got down to my bra and panties, he pulled me against him and kissed me wetly on the neck. Then he moved back and began to take off his shirt and pants. A little breeze picked up and licked the spot on my neck where he kissed me, making it colder there.

He wore only his boxers now, his hot, flat chest against mine. We were two teenagers that could easily be mistaken as drunk and sloppily making out on a Spring Break trip. But we weren't. It was something else driving us on, something we hadn't found previously – or at least I hadn't – that made every second there entangled with him guiltless. It was true sexual pleasure. It wasn't love or hooking up or using each other. It was the first time I understood the term that had always made me cringe: lover.

As if he could read my thoughts, he turned me over onto my side and kissed my back, rubbing his tongue along the skin there, and in spite of my sixteen, inexperienced years, I moaned. I had never done anything like that before, but I had never felt so free, either, so unmoored. As if we had just been at a concert – full of the noise of high school and SATs and shouting parents and popular girls who whisper about you in the hallways and hookups, all the weekend hookups in basements, and the handjobs and blowjobs and bases that you were supposed to round without question and the hair products you used to make your hair not frizzy and the bras you saved up to buy to feel sexy in at sixteen and the gum you chewed after lunch so your breath wouldn't smell bad and the boys who sized you up with one, crude glance from across the senior lounge – and suddenly the noise just faded away, as if someone turned down the dial. And we were alone, just me and Christian, on this perfectly quiet beach, and the salty air mixed with Christian's saliva and I tasted for a moment my future: men loving me. The thought thrilled me; I felt like a balloon rubbed vigorously against someone's head, a second from popping.

Then Christian did something that Daniel never had; he turned me over and moved down, away from me, in the sand and opened his mouth, kissing and licking me. I pulled at his short blond hair, swirled it around and around in my fingers, wondering just

how drunk I was, but not caring either way. When I came, it was fully. My whole body went with the effort, and my legs collapsed, weak and watery. It was the first orgasm I had ever had. Actually, I didn't even realize at the time that it was an orgasm; I just knew that it had left me flat out.

Later, after I had done the same for him, the two of us were lying in each other's arms, drawing patterns in the sand with our index fingers. Christian whispered, "You are amazing." I kissed him on the shoulder, nibbled his ear lightly and could feel my own hot breath bouncing off his skin.

"Thank you." I wasn't thanking him for the compliment, but for the experience. I didn't feel any sense of responsibility to him, and I knew – despite having had too much to drink – that we were both going to return to Boston without much else. He would continue on with Molly, and I would probably do the same with Daniel. We would see each other at school and nod hello, go on about our lives as if nothing had really happened. Not because we were being fake or loyal to our boyfriend and girlfriend; rather, we knew that ours was just that night. That beach. That one time.

Later, nearly midnight, I was back at the house with Lizzie drinking hot chocolate on the screened-in porch. I had confessed everything to her and she was wide-eyed, jealous, shocked. I had sworn her to secrecy, but I was so lightheaded from the whole night that I almost didn't care anymore. Whatever.

"I just can't believe it," she muttered, sipping loudly from her mug.

“I know.” Guilt was already creeping in. I never meant to hurt Daniel. “It just happened,” I said out loud to her as much as myself. My feelings were whirling. Just then, the phone rang, cutting through the humid night.

“Hello?” Lizzie answered. “Oh, hey. Hey *Daniel*,” she said, opening her eyes wide at me as she spoke. “Yeah, she’s right here. Hold on. Hold on.” She handed me the phone with a terrified look. I ignored her.

“Hey,” I said, and the guilt in my voice seemed as obvious as a fog horn.

“Tellie, I am so sorry. So sorry,” he blurted, and I could tell he was drunk. “I love you, and I get it. I finally get what you’ve been saying.” There was a sinking feeling in my stomach.

“What are you talking about?”

“I get everything you’ve been trying to tell me. I’m sorry for being such an ass lately. About your friend’s dad’s death, about all the stupid stuff. Just, being down here and seeing the way people are acting, I just... I get it. I just love you, Tellie. I love you and I am sorry.”

“Oh, Jesus, Daniel. I...” I couldn’t stop myself from saying it. “I’ve fucked up. I hooked up with someone.”

“Oh no,” he said. “No, no, no.” He began to cry. I had never heard him cry before, and it made cry, too. Lizzie, with a crumpled, I’m-sorry-for-you face, got up and left me alone on the porch. “Why?” he asked, and I started to answer, try to explain, but he kept repeating the question over and over, “Why? Why? Why?” while crying, and so I just listened for as long as it took, which was a long time.

December 2004, twenty-six years old

I'm sure I see Tuck's white-blond hair in the undulating crowd of people that flow from the train car like blood from a cut vein. I am positive I saw that familiar flash of blond and perhaps a yellow and black coat before my eyes lost it to the sea of brown-haired men in suits, expertly maneuvering their rolling carry-ons among the crowd. The crowd advances towards me, up the stairs of Track 19, jostling and trembling as one. I envy businessmen their cell phones. Many of the dark-haired men in dark suits are flipping open phones as they pass by me, punching buttons with their fat thumbs. I've resisted cell phones for years, even though all my friends have them. But times like this, I can see why they are so useful. If I miss Tuck here, I'll have to head home and wait for him to call. He has never been to my new place. The last time he was here a year ago, I lived with two roommates on the Upper West side. I watch, in particular, one of the men with the cell phones, wonder if he is calling his wife, when I feel an arm wrap around my neck and pull me from behind. I try to pull away, but the arm holds me tight.

"Hey, gorgeous!" Tuck yells in my ear, still holding me from behind. My back is to him, and I can only see the yellow nylon sleeve of his jacket, but the smell is unmistakably his. That clean-sweat, little boy smell mixed with Ivory Snow detergent. I turn around slowly, still trapped by the yellow v, and face Tuck's neck. I clasp my hands behind him and pull him close.

"Tuck! I'm so glad you are here. I was worried I wouldn't find you with all these suits."

Tuck just hugs me tightly, not saying anything. Finally, he pulls away, and readjusts the strap from his bag, hanging across his chest.

He smiles at me, musses up my hair. “You look like shit, T. Good thing I’m here!”

“Yeah. Thanks so much for coming to straighten me out. Hey, are you hungry?”

“Starved. Where are you taking me for dinner?”

We have to wait at the bar for the Broadway crowd rush to dissipate, which happens in a matter of minutes. Virgil’s Barbecue is near all the theaters and is packed just before and after the nightly shows. But even when the restaurant empties out, we decide to stay at the bar. We’ve already drained two beers and several baskets of popcorn, perched on the bar stools with our bags at our feet and our coats spread over our laps.

Tuck licks his fingers after devouring a chicken wing.

“Here.” I hand him a towel. There are no napkins at Virgil’s, just rough, white hand towels for wiping off the grease and sticky, brown barbecue sauce.

“This Virgil guy doesn’t mess around,” he says, taking the towel and wiping each finger with it. “So, I haven’t asked yet, but how are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling fine,” I say, a little too quickly. I don’t want to rehash the whole Charles bit now. In fact, I feel like never rehashing it again. I know that as soon as Tuck leaves on Sunday I will feel rotten again, lonely and sick, but I just don’t want to think about the last two months and how badly I allowed myself to be treated. Ick. Besides, I am having a good time with Tuck.



I pick up a wing, scorched black in several spots, and raise it to Tuck's eyelevel. "Salud," I say, and bite into the wing, tearing off a piece of greasy, blistered skin. "That," I say, turning back to him, "is heaven on earth."

I'm exhausted when I finally turn the key in the lock of my apartment door. The beer and the heavy food have settled in my stomach. I think I could sleep for days. "OK, Tuck," I say, dropping my keys in the bowl by the door and yawning. "I've only got one bed, which you are welcome to share, but you need to know something."

"What?"

"I kick in my sleep." I can't help yawning again as I take off my coat and hang it on the hook on the back of the front door.

"Jesus, you still do that?"

"How did you know I kicked in my sleep?" I move through the apartment, turning on lights as I go, leaving a trail of brightness behind me.

"Remember that Fourth of July we all spent in Gloucester when you and I were like ten? By the way, waste a little energy?" He makes a sweeping gesture with his arm at the lights in the living room and hallway.

"Yeah, I like a bright house. And yes, I remember that Fourth."

"Well," he says, flicking off the lights as he follows behind me, "you and I had to share a bed because there weren't enough in that little house that we rented or borrowed, and you kicked the crap out of me all night."

"I did?"

“Actually, my parents still talk about how I came into their room in tears in the middle of the night, begging them to let me sleep with them because you were kicking me in your sleep. It’s like a family joke.” Tuck hangs his jacket on my bedroom door and flips open his black messenger bag.

I stand by my dresser, pull the elastic from my hair. I run my fingers through it, massaging my scalp, which tingles from the tight ponytail. “I don’t remember that at all,” I say, trying to think back to that summer. “I remember that Fourth of July because your mom got that watermelon sherbert from Friendly’s, the one with the chocolate chips for seeds, and it was the first time I ever tried it and I *loved* it. My mom had to buy that for weeks after because I was crazy about it. But I don’t remember kicking you.”

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” Tuck asks, pulling his toothbrush and toothpaste from his bag. “How two people can remember differently about the same thing.”

“I know. You and I always remember different things.”

“Well, anyway, I hope I won’t have to call my parents in the middle of the night.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Please go brush your teeth, because I am dead tired and may fall asleep before you get back. Bathroom’s right there.” I point to the door opposite the bedroom.

When we are both washed up and in bed, Tucker where Charles slept only a week ago, I feel sleep immediately pulling me in. It’s one of the rare occasions when I can fall asleep practically as my head touches the pillow.

“T?” Tuck whispers.

“Mmmm,” I mumble. I have my eyes closed, but I hear Tuck turn over and face me.

“You know what we’re gonna do tomorrow?”

“Uhhh?”

“Get drunk.”

As tired as I am, I laugh. “OK, Tuck. ‘Night.”

“‘Night.”

I’m crossing the building foyer, a white paper bag of warm bagels against my chest, when Charles’s door whines open, a terrible wooden squeaky noise. I force myself to ignore it and jog up the first few steps that lead up to my apartment.

“Hey, Tellie,” Charles chirps as he closes and locks his door.

I pretend to be surprised. “Oh. Oh, hey there, Charles.” Indifferent. Cool. Just eat it up, you little shit.

“Whatchya up to today?” he asks coyly, dropping the keys into his jeans, indigo Levi’s faded in stripes across his thighs. He’s wearing a black turtleneck sweater, and he looks good. But I just don’t care today. It feels like things with Charles happened centuries ago, not days.

“I have a friend in town,” I reply. “Tucker.” I emphasize his name, even though I know Charles doesn’t know who he is. I never told him about Tucker. I pull a strand of hair from my face and pull it behind my ear, cutting him off before he can say anything else. “OK, gotta run.” I hold out the bagels and rattle them for effect, forcing a smile. I begin trotting up the stairs loudly and smile at the thought of Charles standing below, still looking up at me in my absence.

“I got New York City bagels, Tucker, so get your arse out of bed!” I drop the keys in the bowl where they make a satisfying clink and head to the kitchen to make the bagels.

When the first set of bagels pops out of the toaster, Tucker shuffles into the kitchen. His hair is sticking straight up in several places, and he is still wearing his flannel p.j. bottoms and a t-shirt with a faded picture of R2D2.

“Morning, sleepy head.” I spread cream cheese on the hot bagel. It burns my fingers as I hold it in place. “Ouch,” I say, blowing on them, and reach for the other half. “You like cream cheese, right?” Tuck nods a sleepy “yes,” and pulls out one of the chairs from my small kitchen table.

“O.J.?” I ask. Tuck nods again, rubbing his eyes. “How’d you sleep?”

Tucker stretches and yawns. “What time is it?” He asks.

“Almost nine.”

“Jesus,” he says. “It’s not a work day, T. You could sleep in, you know.”

“Tuck, it’s a gorgeous November Saturday,” I turn around and point the cheese-covered knife at him, “and I have two days to enjoy your company, so if you think I am going to sleep through it—” I turn back to the bagel, “you’re wrong.”

We eat without talking. Tuck downs three full glasses of O.J. and two bagels.

“Don’t you get fed in Washington?” I ask.

“Not really,” he replies, winking as he bites into his last half bagel.

Later, while Tuck does the dishes, whistling the theme song to *Indiana Jones* all the while, I go take a shower and get dressed. As I am blow-drying my hair, thinking

about where we should go this afternoon, Tuck pops his head in the bathroom door and asks if he can use the phone.

“Sure,” I say, shaking the wet strands of hair and running my fingers through them.

“Great. I have a calling card,” he says, “so no worries about phone bills.”

“Oh my God, Tuck, give me a break. You don’t need to use a calling card. Who are you calling, Sasha?”

“Yup. Gotta do my duty,” he jokes.

“OK, well, tell her I say hi. Phone’s in the living room, on that little table in the corner.”

Sasha and I are not close. I have always found her a little snooty. She studied comparative lit and is always praising obscure German writers. Well, at least they are obscure to me. But it isn’t just her love for German philosophers or her curly, unkempt hair and jangly bracelets or her obsession with Joni Mitchell that keeps me from really liking her. It’s that I have always known, from the moment I met her, that she doesn’t trust me. No matter how many times Tuck denies it, I can just feel it. We girls know these things, know them like daggers running through our spleens. And it bugs me because I really tried to be friendly to her, to make her feel like we could all be buddies, but she just never reciprocated. There is a picture of her, Tuck, and me in Tuck’s living room in a silver frame. It’s a picture from their college graduation five years ago. I am sandwiched between them, both of them dressed in cap and gown. I’m smiling like a moron, my arms out and holding both Sasha and Tuck together, as if pulling the three of us closer.

“She must be crazy wild in the sack,” Caro suggested once after Tuck and Sasha had come to visit me for a weekend in the city. “I bet she is like a ferret in bed. She just has that look about her. *Dir-ty*.”

“Caro, I honestly don’t know what he sees in her.” I said.

“I’ll tell you what he sees in her,” Caro said, flipping her long hair over one shoulder for effect. “He sees a girl he can *have* when he can’t have the one he really *wants*.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you, *maja*. This guy has been crazy about you since you were a zygote.”

“No way, Car. We are over that. We are just friends. Why is it so freaking impossible? Everyone gives me crap about this. We are just best friends, and he is totally in love with Sasha. Don’t ask me why. I never said my best friend had good taste...”

Caro wagged her index finger back and forth in front of her face. “*Lo que tú digas*.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“‘Whatever you say.’”

I switch off the hairdryer and crack the bathroom door to let the suffocating heat escape. I can hear Tuck talking in the other room. His voice is soft and melodic, and I can’t quite make out the words. I open the door a bit more and lean my ear to the cool space between the door and frame.

“...wasn’t really important,” Tuck says. There is a long pause. Then, in a whisper, he hisses, “Sasha, that is *so* unfair. You know that isn’t true. Yes, you do. Yes, you do.”

I feel a little guilty, idling there by the crack in the door, but I can't bring myself to pull away. I tell myself that Caro would tell me I have a right to hear anything that goes on in my own apartment, and this makes me feel slightly less horrible.

"She needs someone right now. She's having a rough time and she needs a friend. Period."

A flash of heat hits my gut; Tuck's defending me to Sasha. Clearly Sasha doesn't like his being here. I close the bathroom door and leave Tuck to finish his argument in whispers. I wrap the long, black cord around the neck of the hair dryer, and I can't help but feel inflated, a little smug, for having one-upped Sasha just a bit by having him come here.

I take Tuck to my favorite little sandwich shop in the Village. I am absolutely mad about the chicken salad with grapes, and I insist that Tuck order it, too. "It's orgasmic," I tell him. We sit on wooden stools in front of the glass window and watch people walk by.

"Look at that guy," Tuck says before taking a bite of his sandwich. Two fat, purple grape halves fall from the bottom of his sandwich to the wax paper.

"Which one?"

"The one with the yellow back-pack and the Michael Bolton hairdo."

I laugh. "OK, yeah. What about him?"

"Doesn't he look really sketchy? What if he's a terrorist or something."

"More like mental patient than terrorist, Tuck."

“No, I’m serious. I bet he’s like a terrorist or something. Look, his backpack still has the tag hanging off it. Look!” Tucker grabs my arm and points with his other hand. If I didn’t know him so well, I would have thought he was serious.

“OK, look at *her*,” I say turning my attention to one of the cooler-than-cool New York women sashaying down the sidewalk. She is dressed in skinny-legged jeans and a long-oversized gray sweater, and she is carrying an expensive-looking handbag that could carry a medium-sized dog. Oversized black sunglasses cover half her face. She walks with purpose, as if she owns New York. Just as I point her out to Tuck, she stops abruptly in the street, fumbles through the humongous handbag, and extracts a cell phone. She flips it open and begins talking emotionlessly, one head cocked sideways to hold the phone to her shoulder, as she continues down the street.

“What about her?” Tuck asks.

“What does she do for a living?”

“Oh, that is Julia Vanderhaus. She is the heir to the Vanderhaus millions. She lives off her trust fund,” he replies, pausing to sip soda from his waxed paper cup. He smacks his lips together. “Don’t you just love Cherry Coke?”

“Too easy. She’s not a trust fund baby. She looks too much like she wants to impress. And no, I think Cherry Coke is disgusting. But I am glad you like it; I told you this place is awesome.”

“OK. Good call, not a trust fund baby. She was a bored Midwestern housewife with seven children who left her husband, Harlan, one day, wiped out the savings account, headed east, got liposuction and Botox, and now she is living her New York dream.”



“And she is really 56, although she looks only 30.”

“Exactly,” Tuck replied.

“And her boyfriend is a 20-year-old Calvin Klein model,” I add.

“Yes, the kind who only does underwear ads and goes by the fake name of André so people believe he is European.”

“But he is really from Des Moines.”

“Exactly, T. I’m glad you are so smart.”

We sit watching for another half hour or so, slurping empty soda cups and kicking our feet from the high stools, back and forth.

I cringe as Tucker pulls the bottle of gin from the paper bag. I have never liked gin; it reminds me of my mom’s father, Granpop, who now has Alzheimer’s and is in a home. He always had a tumbler of gin and tonic in his hand from five p.m. onward. Once I sneaked a sip when I was twelve and nearly threw up; it tasted like witch hazel and burned going down.

Tucker makes a face back at me as he pulls a bag of crushed ice from the brown paper bag. “Oh, you’ll like this. Trust me.”

“Gin is gross. It’s old-person alcohol.”

“Get over it. It’s like high school, gin and juice.” He pours two tall glasses of gin, fresh-squeezed lemonade, and crushed ice. “Cheers.” He reaches his glass out to meet mine, and they clink together solidly.

“That’s really good,” I say after my first sip. The lemonade taste reminds me of summer, youth. Tuck puts the cap back on the gin bottle and takes a long sip from his glass.

I don’t know how long we have been drinking, but we find our way to the living room and are sitting on the floor, backs against the couch, with the bottle of gin and the carton of lemonade between us.

“So, Tucky,” I say, “tell me why your girlfriend is upset with you.”

“What are you smiling about, T?” Tuck traces a pattern on the floor with his finger.

“I’m not smi-ling,” I reply, drawing the word out as long as a snake. I feel very drunk, drunker than I have been in a long time. Years. I feel silly and loose, like I’ve taken a bunch of sedatives.

“Oh yes you are, my sweet,” Tuck says putting one of his long fingers to my lips, smooshing them against my teeth. I make as if to bite his finger.

“Watch out. I bite.”

“Don’t I know it, T.”

“Ew! Don’t be smarmy, Tucker Malcolm Rawlings.”

“What? I just meant I bet you do bite.”

“You’re nasty,” I say, fake punching him on the arm. I miscalculate a bit and my fist, which is slow and heavy, grazes the side of Tucker’s bicep and hits the back of the couch. “Ow,” I say, rubbing my knuckles. “Look what you made me do.” I pout, and

Tucker takes my fist in his hands, brings it to his mouth, and kisses the top of my knuckles.

“All better,” he announces, dropping my hand.

I am quiet for a bit, feeling the heat in my cheeks and trying to fight being so drunk. I sip more of the gin and lemonade, because I am too lazy to get up and get a glass of water. If I concentrate hard on sipping, I can straighten my head a bit and think. Or at least not get lost.

“Oh, yeah. I remember now,” I blurt out. “Why’s your girlfriend mad at you?”

“Who says she’s mad?”

“You did.”

“No I didn’t.”

“I heard your conversation with her this morning. What was up with that?”

“Oh, she’s just weird sometimes. About stuff.” Tuck grows quiet and looks down at the pattern his finger has gone back to tracing.

“‘Bout what stuff?”

“Just stuff. You.”

“Me?” I pretend to be incredulous, but I am thrilled at the idea. I feel my rank and I like it. Sasha may have his heart, but I have his history. That belongs to me, and I savor this realization like a sourball in my mouth.

“She just feels threatened sometimes, you know? I mean she knew I used to have feelings for you, and she has trouble letting go of that.”

“Ooh, Tuck, ‘have feelings,’” I tease. “I bet you’re the kind of guy who says ‘make love.’ Ew. I hate even thinking that word.”

“It’s two words, actually,” Tuck says, holding up two fingers.

“Fuck off.” I flip up my middle finger at him, and he leans in as if to bite it. I pull away in time. “Hey, I have an idea. Let’s look at old pix of us. I haven’t done that in ages. C’mon, I’ve got a family album under the futon frame in the bedroom.”

“Does that mean I have to move?” Tuck asks, flicking his blond hair out of his eyes.

“Yes, move your lazy ass. Now.” I stand up and pull on Tuck’s hand to get him to stand up. Finally he complies, and I nearly fly backwards, losing my balance.

We lie across the bed, our socked feet dangling over the side, as I flip old, plastic-covered pages of my family album.

“Look, there we are at your third birthday. Man, those cakes were the best, those ones from Carvel with the ice cream and the crunchy brown grit on the side.” I point at the cake with three candles that toddler Tuck is trying to blow out.

“Wow, there is something I haven’t thought about in...well, ever. The crunchy grit on Carvel ice cream cakes. How come you always remind me of ice cream events from our past?”

“I guess I was born to eat. Oh look at this one, look!” It’s a picture of the two of us on my parents’ old couch, asleep in our pajamas.

“Those p.j.s were the best,” Tuck declares. In the picture, both of us are wearing fuzzy blue zip-up pajamas with white feet. “Whatever happened to those?” he asks, and I can smell the sweetness of the liquor on his breath.

“I don’t know. Tuck, can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“Do you think my dad loved me?”

“Whoa, there’s a light question.”

“I’m serious,” I say, turning away from the album and propping my head on my hand.

“Of course he loved you, T. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not being ridiculous. If he loved me so much, why’d he leave? Where is he now?”

“Isn’t he in Fiji or something? Cape Verde?”

“Oh, who the hell knows, Tuck. I’m serious. Where is the man who loved me? Who was he? The guy who dressed me in those p.j.s,” I turn back to the photo and point a finger at my four-year-old self, asleep on the couch, “and kissed me on the forehead goodnight? Did he just vanish? Did he only exist in my imagination?”

“T, he loved you. He’s just really fucked up. Don’t think about it so much, don’t beat yourself up.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” I reply with a bit too much edge.

“Yeah, it *is* easy for me to say, T, but what are you going to do about it? You can’t bring it back, not him or the jammies or anything else. You know that. So why torture yourself?”

“I need to know what made him leave me.”

“He didn’t leave *you*, T.”

“Yes, Tuck, he did. And he has never looked back.”

Tuck doesn't answer, and I'm afraid I have gone too far, turned the night from something fun to something else, something dark and deep. I didn't mean to; it just crept in. I just feel so untethered, so lost in my own body. So drunk.

"I'm sorry, Tuck. I just need to go to bed I think," I mumble, turning back to the photo album.

"It's fine, T. I just wish..."

"What?"

"I just wish it had been different for you. I wish you could feel the way about you that I do. I wish you didn't feel so empty, so...so fucking left behind."

I don't know what to say. The fact that Tuck says both of these adjectives out loud so matter-of-factly surprises me, makes me realize he has thought about me in ways I might have no idea of. Maybe he even talks about me to Sasha, talks about my dad and my issues. The thought bothers me.

"Yeah, well, thanks, Tuck. Let's go to bed. I'm wasted."

But once I am in bed, the lights out, and Tuck beside me, I can't stop thinking. My head spins and I feel really, really drunk, and I get a little confused and think for a minute that Tuck *is* my dad, and I get confused by the finger tracing patterns on the floor from before, and I am not sure if it was my own finger or Tuck's, but there it is, suddenly, tracing its way down the length of my thigh, under the covers, and I am trying to figure out who it is that is touching me.

"Tuck?"

"Mmm?"

"What are you doing?"

“Nothing,” he replies, sounding awake.

“Tuck?” I ask again, and for a second I think I might cry. I can’t stand the idea of it. Instead of saying anything, I roll over towards him and grab him around the neck, pulling him to me. I just need to feel him, his warmth. The fact that he is here, real, and that he loves me. Even if he is just a friend. I feel small, and the picture of me in my p.j.s flashes in my mind, that small self, asleep there peacefully. Sometimes I wonder if I will ever feel more than eight-years-old inside.

Tuck hugs me back, traces patterns on my back over my t-shirt, and then his hands find their way underneath and rub the skin back and forth, back and forth like soft sponges. And then his hand finds its way to my waist, to the little curve on my side where my pelvis is underneath all the flesh and muscle and tendon, and he holds me there, firmly and pulls his head away and looks at me in the dark. I can see the flash of his eyes and nothing else.

“I love you, T,” he says, and there is the sweet liquor breath again.

“I love you, too, Tuck,” I say, staring back into his face, just a dark mask inches from my own. I am not sure who pulls who, but suddenly we are both touching, our lips meeting, pressing together shyly. Then our mouths are taking little nips at each other. I’m aware of the silence in the room, the utter silence in such a raucous and nocturnal city, and suddenly, as I realize it’s true, that thing about New York being the city that never sleeps, Tucker’s tongue is inside my mouth, or mine inside his, and we are inside each other’s mouths, slipping and sucking and I feel a surge I haven’t felt in months, years; I feel pulled and pulled to him, pushing against the boy who is like my brother, praying for both of us to have the will to stop and only wanting it to go further.

Tuck's hand, so big, the fingers so long compared to Charles', find its way under the elastic of my boxers and move to the space between my legs. I want to say, "don't," to say, "it's not a good idea," but I can't find the words inside me, deep down, because what is bubbling up, swelling so strongly, is a force like a tide. It churns and roars, waves like after a hurricane, and I push myself forward and forward until I am naked, pushing forward so that I can get closer, even closer. I want to be inside him, or have him inside me. I can't tell which it is, and we don't say one word. I'm all heat and darkness and breath, and I suddenly think: touch is the most important of the five senses. The rest mean nothing, in a moment like this, it's all about temperature, sensation, feeling someone's skin against yours. His fingers trace a pattern all over me, sticky, hot fingers that find their way into dark places, into crevices, dipping and slipping up inside me until then it is him, not his fingers at all, and I am on top, pushing him deeper into me and I have only felt such urgency once before in my life, back during the last visit I had with my dad and I masturbated, shame-faced in his dark guest room, and the two moments become connected, intertwined, until I'm not sure if it is my father or Tucker inside me because I am so fucking drunk and the taste of gin on Tucker's breath is so sweet, and I can just ride him and ride him and ride him all night, and I suck on his lips as if I could suck the life from him, and we push into each other again and again, I don't know how many times, until finally it rises up in me, up my belly and I can't control it much longer. I hear my own voice, calling out in the room, and can't believe it belongs to me. I can hear the sound of me saying Tucker's name, of moaning, of begging, but I feel separate from it, as if it isn't my voice at all. I can feel him inside me, lurching, the two of us bent into each other like junkies, bending inward and forward, until finally it releases, and everything in



me goes slack: my arms and legs are loose and free, as if under water, and I am sinking to the depths, falling down into the room and its darkness, the gleam in Tucker's eye, and I let go and collapse onto him, feeling a flood come out of me, all over both of us.

We lie there, panting and charged like electricity. I never even thought it was true, never believed the stories about it, but there it is: female ejaculation. My fingers trace a pattern through the warm puddle that pools off Tuck's hips onto the sheet.

I do not want either of us to speak, so I let Tucker hold me, let him plant one more alcoholic kiss on my raw, wet lips before I roll off him and quickly find my way to sleep, naked and still soaking wet with sweat, or tide, or semen. I can't even tell I am so gone.

*Oh, you are fucking beautiful, standing before the bathroom mirror, naked and shivering, staring at yourself, your wide green eyes, your blank face, your small breasts, your ribs like the sand at low tide. You examine it all, sucking in your cheeks, pulling back your hair, turning your head from side to side to check which profile is better. Sometimes you just stare into your own eyes for so long you are convinced there is nothing there, convinced of something so black and frightening and bottomless that you have to stop, to look away, to get dressed and pretend that it doesn't matter, that there are far more important things.*

*Beautiful. You hear the word in your head like a scream, like the only thing you know how to be, the secret to your self-esteem, the dirty trick they all played on you, the three syllables you need to hear from everyone you meet in order to feel like somebody, somebody who matters, the three syllables you need to hear from every man before you can chew him up and spit him out and feel truly sorry but not know how else to be because you are beautiful. Beautiful people like you are never satisfied, and your beauty is as soft and loving as a razor.*

I didn't dream at all. If I did, I can't remember my dreams, but I remember last night so clearly it hurts my stomach. Before the sun peaks through the cracks between the window and shade, I'm wide awake. I stare at the blank wall, my back to Tuck, who breathes in a way that tells me he's deeply asleep. Sometime last night I lost my t-shirt and boxers, but I don't want to wake Tuck trying to find them. I feel sinfully naked, embarrassed, as if I were fifteen. I tuck the sheet a bit tighter under my arms, over my breasts.

I want to throw up. My mouth is so dry that my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth every time I touch it there. Touch, stick. Touch, stick. My eyes search the blue-gray room for an old glass of water I might be able to drink, but there is none. I am going to have to get up sooner or later, and even if Tuck wakes up now – which I pray he won't – hopefully I can be clothed by the time he is awake. The thought of him seeing me naked fills me with dread. It's silly, after last night...oh, god, last night. It comes back at me in waves, just like it happened, wave after wave, rolling over my mind. Each one makes me feel sicker. I want to groan out loud, to crawl out of my own skin and leave it here, like a shadow, in the bed for a while. I need a break. From what? From myself. From this city, from these boys, these boys who always wind up inside me somehow. How does it always happen? I stare at the wall and think, yes, it's better to get up now, even if he wakes up. I do not want to be naked when he sees me.

I don't want to look over at him, turn and see him there asleep and vulnerable. Suddenly I think: I hope he won't tell Sasha. It's a stupid, selfish wish, but it lodges itself in my brain and I cling to it. If he doesn't tell Sasha, we can get through this. If he tells, her, she will always blame me, and then things will never be the same between me and Tuck again.

But will it ever be anyway? How could it be? Is that possible? Maybe. After all, we have known each other our whole lives. One night couldn't erase that, could it? Stupid, stupid slut, I think. I have never liked that word, but suddenly I feel its power, its self-hatred, like a white-hot iron. Slut. You dirty slut, I think, over and over again until I begin to feel scared, as if I'm slipping down somewhere I'm not sure I can get out of. Time to get up, have some coffee. Stop thinking so much about this, or at least stop thinking about it here, naked in bed next to him.

I pull the sheet from under my sides slowly, careful to make as little movement as possible. I slide the sheet from off my front, pulling it an inch at a time towards the middle of the bed, towards Tucker and his rhythmic breathing. My left breast is exposed, a small mound with a taught, gumdrop nipple that is shriveled and brown. Slowly, I watch the right breast appear, identically cold and ugly. I lay still, counting to ten in my head, as goose bumps rise all over my chest, belly, and thighs. This must be what dead bodies look like, pasty white and cold in the sharp light of the morgue.

I slip my legs sideways off the futon mattress to the floor, and my bare feet touch the cold wood. I sit upright quickly, a mouse avoiding a predator.

I stand up and tiptoe softly to my dresser, roll the middle drawer out, coax it: please be quiet. I pull out an old UMass sweatshirt and gray sweatpants. I don't risk opening another drawer for socks and underwear. I leave the middle drawer open and pad in bare feet to the door. I turn back to look at Tucker as I close the bedroom door. He is facing me, eyes closed and mouth open. His two front teeth are visible between his lips, and straw-dry blond hair hangs over his forehead, covering one eye. A stab of regret runs through me, and that word – incest – bubbles up. I close the door.

The coffee burns my tongue and throat, and I wish I could leave the apartment. My shoes are in the bedroom closet, and I can't go out in bare feet, though I do consider the prospect. I am nervous, antsy, and have the urge to do something I haven't done in years: smoke. I have never been a smoker, really, only at parties a few times in college or on the occasional car ride into Boston with friends in high school, but now the need for a cigarette tears into me like hunger. I remember that someone left a pack of cigarettes here over the summer during a party, and I am pretty sure I put them in one of the kitchen cabinets. I begin opening cabinet doors and drawers all over the kitchen in the hopes of finding the pack. I have one leg kneeling on the counter, the other foot barely touching the floor – on tiptoe – as I stretch up to the high cabinets over the stove. “C’mon, you fuckers. Where are you?” I mutter, feeling a muscle in my neck pull and spring in a way that sends heat radiating downward.

“Hey,” Tucker says from behind me, and I freeze there, one hand stretched upward into the cabinet, as I turn to see him. He’s standing in the doorway in green flannel boxers and nothing else. He’s rubbing one eye, not quite looking at me. I’m a little shocked to seeing Tuck just standing there in his underwear, as if he always did this, as if we always did what we did last night. My stomach does a queasy flip.

“Morning, Tuck,” I chirp. “Just looking for some cigarettes here. Thought I might have a smoke.” I have no idea where the upbeat, happy note came from. It cut into my voice without permission, and it takes me by surprise.

Tuck nods, and I turn back to the cabinet, hoist both legs onto the counter to kneel and stare into the cabinet where my hand has been grasping. Nothing but a dusty box of cornstarch and three aluminum bread pans. Damn.

“Are you hungry? We could go out for breakfast,” I hear my upbeat voice suggest. I have never been a fake person, and I hate liars. All I really want to say to Tuck is: I’m sorry, oh god I’m sorry and let’s never mention this again and please go home now, right now, on a train to D.C. Instead, I sound like a Girl Scout, excited about going out to the corner diner with the runny eggs.

“Sure,” he says, looking at me and shrugging. I have no idea what he’s thinking, and I don’t want to. If we can spend the whole day – our whole lives – pretending this never happened, it will be fine with me. I don’t ever want to talk about last night. Maybe that is how Annie is able to stay so sane: forced optimism. If men are problematic, you just don’t get involved with them. Don’t eat the meat.

“Great,” I say, closing the cabinet door with a plunk and hopping down onto the floor. “I’m gonna shower.” I brush past him as if I’m in a big hurry.

The diner is packed and we have to wait twenty minutes for a table. I cringe at the thought of what I might even try to say as we stand on the black, rubberized rug at the front door listening to the bell attached to the doorframe ding every time someone comes in or out. I have run out of things to say. I’ve said, “I am so hungry” three times already, even though it isn’t true. Tuck nodded each time, and the third time, he rubs my arm, saying sweetly, “It’ll be a few minutes more. Don’t worry.” I think I might vomit, and it’s everything I can do not to jerk away instinctively from his touching me there, rubbing my arm as if he were my...what? Best friend? Maybe I am making too much of this. Maybe he is just as mortified as me. After all, he’s involved with someone else. There’s all that extra there for him, all that guilt. Maybe he is just as regretful, or more. Maybe he’s

thankful that I'm keeping up the banter, the false normalcy, as if last night never happened, not even in our imaginations.

My eggs are perfectly over easy. I sop my wheat bread in the liquid and feign delight at how good they are. Tuck pours an obscene amount of ketchup on his potatoes.

"Ketchup is disgusting," I say. "I have never understood you weird ketchup people."

"How can you not like ketchup?"

"It's OK, you know, just a little for fries or on a burger. But look at that: death by ketchup."

Tuck looks down at his plate and we both stare in silence at the half-eaten potatoes, fatty bacon, and English muffin. "Well," he says, spearing a triangular potato with his fork, "then it's a good thing we never dated. 'Cause I could never date a girl who didn't love ketchup." He pops the potato into his mouth and chews, looking up at me briefly.

I decide to take this as a joke and laugh – a bit too nervously – as I instinctively reach out and grab his arm for an affectionate shake. "Tuck, you crack me up."

Back at the apartment, I flop down on the couch. I hope he is leaving soon; I can't remember if he said what time his train was.

"I could sleep all day," I speak into a couch cushion.

"Yep. That was some night." My stomach tightens at this comment, and I try to convince myself that he only meant the whole night: the drinking, the little sleep, etc. Etcetera, I think to myself. You can't even say it.

“Tuck, what time’s your train?” I hope I still sound upbeat and innocent.

“Seven ten,” he replies, and I nearly groan. “Hey,” he says, “wanna see a movie?”

“I don’t really feel like going out,” I reply. “Too tired.” I’m still talking into the couch.

“Do you have any movies here? Do you have a DVD player?”

I nod without lifting my head up.

“What do you have?”

“I don’t know. All those there,” I say, lifting an arm behind me and pointing at a cabinet in the TV stand. I hear him go over to the cabinet, open it, and shuffle through the movies. Click, click, click.

“*Shawshank*?” he asks.

I shake my head no.

“*Pretty Woman*?”

I shake my head again. Just what we need: a romance.

“The Godfather parts I or II? You have part III, but it’s a crime to watch it.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s egregiously bad.” I pick my head up and look at him.

“Good word.”

“Thank you,” he replies, smiling. “Now which one is it, part I or II?” He holds a DVD case in each hand.

“I don’t care. I’ve never seen any of them,” I say, turning back to the couch. I am going to have to feign being tired all day. I begin to feel dreary and gray. Like one of my



worst days, when I am dying from boredom and yet can't seem to find my way off the couch.

*"What?"*

"I read the book. Does that count?" I ask meekly. I'm not in the mood for a chiding about my cinematic ignorance.

"It most certainly does not. Then we need to start your education today," he says, and I hear him snap open the case and turn on the DVD player. It clicks and whirs anxiously as he pops the disc in.

I was hoping to fall asleep on the couch and forget myself while Tuck watched his movie. But he keeps pointing out things, errors and factoids, and saying several of the lines over the actors. I don't care about any of it, and the only character I really like is the hotheaded brother, who dies at a tollbooth ambush in the beginning of the movie.

Five hours, two parts, and three tuna-curry sandwiches later, I watch the credits roll over a black screen. I check my watch and see that Tuck has to leave soon if he hopes to catch his train. "You better pack." I stretch my limbs as I sit on the far end of the couch, not touching him.

"Yeah," he replies glumly. He was quiet during Part II, and I was able to nod off a bit. But now I realize something is bothering him. I don't want to ask what. In another half hour, I will be gloriously alone with my regret.

"You want help?" I ask brightly.

"No thanks," he says, getting up and heading for the bedroom. I hear the sound of clothes being stuffed, toiletries being gathered. I switch from the DVD to the TV and flick through 73 channels twice. There is nothing on, so I leave it on MTV, which is

showing a marathon of some reality show competition. The contestants are hitting each other with oversized boxing gloves on a tropical beach. The women wear tiny little bikinis and look silly trying to punch each other. But I decide it's better to watch this than face Tuck in that room, with the bed still unmade.

"T?"

"Yeah?" I call loudly over the TV even though the apartment is small and it's not necessary.

"Can you come here for a minute?"

"What?" I heard him perfectly, but I just don't feel like it. I just want to be alone.

"Can you come here for a minute?" Tuck says again, hardly any louder, and I know that he knows that I heard him perfectly the first time. I get up, making a production of it, and walk to the bedroom doorway.

"What's up? Need help?"

Tuck is sitting on the edge of the unmade bed, his hands folded in front of him. His bag is bulging and folded closed.

"No, I'm done, but I really think we need to talk."

No we don't, I want to say. "Yeah," I agree, nodding.

He looks up at me with big, round eyes. I know those eyes so well it's amazing that they aren't my own. "I need to know what you think of all this," he says seriously.

"Of what?" I ask, and regret saying it. I know I am playing some stupid game, but I don't know what else to do. I don't want him here, can't deal with him right now.

"Of last night, T. C'mon. You know what."

"Oh, yeah. That."

“I mean, what was that?”

“Um, I’m not sure, Tuck.” I bite my lip, all of it part of some script in my head, an innocent role. “I guess we were pretty drunk,” I say lamely.

“Yeah.” he looks back down at the floor between his legs. “That must have been it,” he says, and I hear the sarcasm there.

“Well, wasn’t it?” I ask, not meaning to imply that it had been more than a drunken and lonely impulse. I mean it sincerely, as if to say: What else could it have been? What else but being drunk?

Tuck looks up at me, fixedly, and replies, “That’s what I’d like to know, T. Cause I am thinking...” He doesn’t finish his sentence, and I don’t encourage him.

Tuck stands up, walks over to me, and puts both hands on my arms. He stares into my eyes, eyes that must look terrified, and says, “T, I have dreamed about last night since I was fourteen. I have always felt that way about you, you know? I have never stopped...But you...you just...” He drops his arms at his sides, where they slap against his thighs. “Jesus, T, you are like a statue. Say something.”

“Something.”

“Oh, fuck you,” he says, turning away, and means it.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...” but the words die in my throat. I honestly don’t know what to say, know that anything I say will be wrong and the only right thing to say won’t be true. “I’m sorry,” I say again.

“Well it’s late for that, T. Jesus. You are really too much, you know that?” he turns back to me, his eyebrows pinched in anger. “I’m trying to tell you how I have

always felt about you, how long I have waited for last night, like some fucking teenager, like a stupid fantasy, and you just make a joke. That's what it is, isn't it?" he asks.

"What?" I'm afraid of what he'll say.

"It's like everyone is your personal joke. Your private little game, T. All those schmucks you went through in college, those guys who got so hung up on you and you could never deal with it. I listened to you bitch and bitch about why they all had to love you when you just wanted to have fun, and I thought: 'this girl is really a guy! She thinks the way a guy does.' And you know who I felt sorry for T? Not you, them. Them. Guess why?" he asks, leaning forward, raising his voice.

I shake my head slowly, unable to answer.

Tuck steps back and draws a breath. He runs a hand through his hair, blows the breath out between tensed lips.

"You know, T, when that Charles guy hurt you, I felt bad for you. I really did. I thought to myself: Maybe this time she'll learn. Maybe this time she'll figure out what it's like, what it feels like. And here you are, not three days later, playing the same fucking game. It's bullshit," he says. "Bullshit." Now he isn't even looking at me.

"I never meant to do that," I whisper. "I never meant to hurt anyone. You."

"Oh, no one ever means to hurt anyone, T. Grow up. It's not good enough anymore. Look, you want to know the truth?" I don't. I really don't, but I am afraid to say anything contrary. I know this has been boiling in Tuck all day and it has to come out sooner or later. Sooner better than later, I think. Let's get it over with.

"The truth is that you don't need to go looking for your father or wonder where he is." I look up and meet Tuck's eyes, slate gray. He stoops down to pick up his bag and

slings his coat over his arm. He steps close to me, no more than a foot, and his closeness makes me think – even though the moment is all wrong – that he will kiss me.

“You don’t need to look for him because he is right—” Tuck points a long finger at my chest and pokes me hard in the sternum, “—here.” He brushes past me without another word, and I stand there, looking out the bedroom window at nothing at all. The front door slams shut so loudly that a few little birds – sparrows, maybe – scatter in flight from the nearly bare tree branches just outside the window.

## Book III

September 1999, twenty-two years old

i.

*You are on your own, beautiful. No one there to hold you tight or tuck you in, which is a good thing, because you've left all that fairy-tale stuff behind anyway. You're grown up. You may not feel that way, but by law and experience, you are a woman and you rent your own apartment and you have your own real job with a salary and benefits that include disability and medical and dental. You've made it through the worst, gorgeous.*

*So why do you feel as if the worst is yet to come? Why do you feel younger and more childish than ever? Why do you sometimes feel like getting in your walk-in closet with the naked light bulb, closing the door, and hiding there amidst the hanging clothes and shoe racks, extra pillows and blankets, cardboard boxes full of keepsakes? Safe among all those womanly things, all those weapons of seduction – the new Jimmy Choos you put on your credit card as a congratulations-on-getting-your-first-job gift; the lavender silk teddy and matching thong from Victoria's Secret that make men weak when you wear them; the push-up bras in the drawer; the various shades of lipstick, always with a pink base to show off your fair skin and eyes; the half-used tube of KY Jelly, tucked away in your underwear drawer where you can easily grab it.*

*If you could just hide here, amidst all of your things, you might feel that you are finally a woman, that thing you always wanted to be when you were young. And then maybe it wouldn't scare you so damn much.*

She is some kind of genius, a child prodigy. Playing since she was three and a half, and now – at thirteen – she plays all over the world. Her face is one of seriousness, as if she were distressed by the music she makes. Her bow flies over the strings with a speed that dazzles. The sounds that come from the viola are quick and celebratory, punctuated occasionally with a mournful note. Bach? Mozart? I have no idea. I can't name a single classical piece.

"I had her in kindergarten," Ellen whispers to me, cupping her hand to her mouth. "She was intense even then." Ellen's mud-brown eyes twinkle, and I smile back. The kids are all paying attention except for a few antsy second-graders. Their teacher, a Swiss woman who is also new this year, scolds them with a look of such serious warning that it doesn't surprise me they shut up and stop fidgeting. The Swiss woman scares me a little. The second-graders turn their attention back to the thirteen-year-old – a girl so talented she was invited to play for the Swedish royal family at an event in Helsinki last year.

"It's unfortunate her parents let her leave the house like that," Ellen whispers, and I know she means the girl's haircut. There are several posters up around the room advertising her visit today. In the poster, the girl – Hope Candow – has long brown hair. Today, Hope has shown up with a terribly unflattering pixie that makes her head look too large and highlights the seriousness in her face. She looks like a forty-year-old in a thirteen-year-old's body.

But the music she makes is beautiful, and I am moved. I have only been here, teaching at St. Michael's, for two weeks. I hardly know the faculty or even my own middle-school students. Actually, I still can't remember most of their names. But this



little girl, Hope, a girl who would have been one of my students if she were a year younger, is playing her viola so perfectly I feel myself welling up. I can't help it. I have inherited this welling-up trait from my mother who inherited it from her mother. I try really hard to hold back the tears, burying them in my throat, and the effort strains muscles in my face and neck. Hope doesn't even use sheet music. According to Mr. Frample, St. Michael's music teacher, she doesn't read music at all. She memorizes half an hour of Bach or Mozart or whatever it is that she's playing and plays it straight from her head, just like one of the Swiss teacher's second-graders reciting the alphabet. Easy as pie.

Hope's brow furrows, and I can tell she's building to the finish: a twist of notes and strings climbs to a throaty, resounding climax, almost like a jazz singer's voice. I glance around at my colleagues. Several are watching with proud, beatific expressions; more than a few of them must think they have some claim to her success, having had her as a student in years past. Ellen is one of these beaming-proud teachers. A few other teachers are glancing at their feet, rocking back and forth with their hands clasped together behind their backs. Most of them are men, and they are obviously waiting for the music to end. And then there is me. I can hardly bring myself to look at this little girl in her pitiful pixie cut, her child-sized bow dancing over the viola and sending the music straight into my heart. It's so improbable, and I can't explain why, but it nearly kills me. I want to shake her and say, "Do you know how beautiful your music is? Do you have any idea?"

She finishes the very last chord or bar or whatever it is, and draws out the final note, long and low, triumphant. She lets go of her serious expression, lowers her

instrument to her side, and smiles. The crowd erupts with applause. A few of the second graders give standing ovations, smiling at their own foolishness, and Hope takes shy bows. Her parents come onto stage and give her a big hug, which makes everyone clap louder. Her eighth-grade peers move towards the stage to congratulate her. I wish I could congratulate her, say: “Hope, what a great musician you are!” and wrap my arms around her, only the two of us really understanding what beauty she makes, how the music is full with it, like August humidity. But it’s not possible. It’s only my first year here, and she doesn’t even know who I am, so I’ll have to admire her from afar, still choking back tears so I don’t look like an idiot in front of all the students.

Annie is coming over for dinner tonight. I just discovered an interesting-looking recipe for tomato-dill soup, and I want to get some of the last summer tomatoes at the market before they’re no longer in season. Annie always loves my vegetarian inventions.

“You’re the only friend I have who puts up with my vegetarianism,” she says.

“I’m family.”

“Yeah, well I consider you a friend, since you can’t choose your family, and I would’ve chosen you, darlin’.”

The market I like is down in Chelsea, which is a hike from St. Michael’s, but it’s a beautiful, late-September afternoon, and I decide to walk it. I cross through an industrial area with movers and meat-packers and very quickly regret the route.

“Hey *linda*,” one of three men loading a truck says to me through a fat grin.

“*Venconmigo, m’ija*.” I have no idea what he’s saying, but I don’t need to. It’s obvious in his grin. I look up and meet his eye for a split second, a mistake. I look away, quickly,

down to the pavement with its black patches of spit-out chewing gum. He says something else in Spanish as I pass by, and once they're behind me, I hear in English, "Come back, sweet stuff! We've got something for you!" and they laugh in unison like two disgusting teenagers.

Five minutes later, I pass a group of men working around a manhole. When I walk by, all three of them turn away from whatever they were looking at down in the manhole and settle their eyes into me like a fist into dough. "Hey, gorgeous," one of them ventures as another one lets out a long whistle between his top teeth and lower lip. It's a whistle that says "My, my, my." I can feel my face burning and a dozen nasty comebacks run through my brain, but I am too afraid to throw any of them. What if it just eggs them on? I am hyper aware of my body, my posture, that I have my bag slung over one shoulder, cutting a line across my chest. Blech. I want to melt and run down the drain.

"He wants your numba'," one of them says, pointing a meaty thumb at his buddy. Fat chance of that, I think. Fucking pigs. Disrespectful asses. What if it were your mother? Or your daughter? Out of the corner of my eye, I see one of them reach for his crotch, and I pass before I can see exactly what he was going to do with it. I can imagine: offer me some. It is revolting to be a woman.

"It's true," Annie agrees over the cold tomato soup. "It is revolting that men think they can get away with that kind of behavior. This gazpacho is fabulous by the way."

"It's not gazpacho. Just cold tomato soup."

"Same thing, right?"

"My friend Caro would have your head for that. You don't think it's too bland?"

“No! I love it,” she says, spooning more into her mouth to show me she really does. “But, as to the gross-o construction workers, you did the right thing. You should just ignore them.”

“I know, but don’t you ever feel like just turning around and telling them to fuck off?”

“Well, those wouldn’t be my exact choice of words, Tel,” she says twisting up her mouth. Annie abhors swearing nearly as much as makeup. She doesn’t mind when other people swear, but she just doesn’t swear herself. She said that when she and my dad were growing up, a swear got them a smack across the face, which was a powerful learning tool.

“You know what I mean. It feels like ignoring them just encourages them to keep at it. I mean, what if it was their own daughter or something? That’s what I felt like telling them: I could be your daughter.”

“Oh, they wouldn’t have cared. It’s better to just ignore them.”

“But don’t you get sick of it, Annie? I mean, this is like the fourth or fifth time since I moved here.

Annie smiles with one side of her mouth, a you-poor-little-niece smile. “I’m sure, dear Tellie, that you have a higher rate of occurrence than most.” I know what she means, but I don’t want to hear it. So what? So what if I am considered attractive? Why does that give anyone the right to publicly proposition me?

“It doesn’t matter. It makes me feel disgusting.”

“Well, don’t let it get to you. New York’s got a little bit of everything, especially lugheads. So just toughen up a bit and you’ll be fine.” Annie tears off a chunk of

sourdough bread from the loaf I bought, dips it into her soup, and pops it into her mouth, ending the conversation.

Later, I am nibbling a chocolate-chunk biscotti Annie has put out with the coffee and sitting cross-legged on her couch, probably the most comfortable couch in existence. It is faded turquoise velvet, the cushions sunken and worn but still providing just the right amount of fluff for a person to stretch out and nap. She got it at a yard sale in New Jersey. As I admire Annie's good taste in biscotti, I'm thinking about the last time I got laid, which was a long time ago. Three months to be exact.

"So, Tel, have you heard from your dad at all lately?"

"No." I take one hand off my hot mug of coffee and place it against my cheek to feel the warmth there.

Annie peers over her eggplant glasses at me from the other end of the couch.

"When was the last time you heard from him?"

"April." The warmth dissipates, and I put my hand back on the mug.

"So he didn't come to graduation?" she asks gingerly. I give her a look that says: are you kidding me?

"Right," she replies, taking a sip of jasmine tea. She never drinks coffee. "So, what was the news in April?"

"It was a post card from Cape Verde sent to my mom's."

"Any return address?"

"Of course not." I'm used to my father's absence now. It's more real than his presence, which was so long ago it feels like another life. Someone else's life.

"And when was the last time you saw him, Tel?"

“Freshman year. Four years ago, for Thanksgiving down in South Carolina.”

“Right. I remember now. The vegetarian Thanksgiving with the airy-fairy girlfriend.”

“You got it.” I eat another biscotti, feeling a little guilty. I haven’t had time to exercise at all since starting my new job, but I vow that this weekend I’ll start jogging.

“And your mom?” Annie asks. She’s just being curious; she has to ask me to get information about my parents. She has had very little contact with my dad, her baby brother, since they were in their twenties – more than twenty years ago. “We just weren’t a close kind of family,” she always says with a splinter of restraint in her voice. When I was younger, my dad told me that Grandpa Jack was abusive to Nance, my grandmother, and that he drank a lot. I can imagine what kind of family it must have been. Annie had a wall around her about ten miles thick, and I have never heard of her dating anyone; I think she’s closed up shop for good.

“My mom’s the same. You know...she tries, but she just is so pathetic when it comes to Roger. He walks all over her and she just takes it. Does whatever he wants. Last week I called her to tell her about my new job and everything, and she cut me off because she had to get dinner ready for Roger. Apparently he needs to eat at exactly 6:00 because it’s good for his digestion or something. I don’t know...” And I don’t. I don’t know how my mother can stand being married to such a cretin. I think she feels needed, and there’s something in that that appeals to her. Maybe she thinks if she’s a good enough wife, he won’t leave her. She’s more like a maid for him than a wife, but she says she’s happy, and I am done fighting with her about it. I don’t live there anymore, and it’s her life, I guess.

“How did you turn out to be such a stable kid with two seriously demented parents?” Annie reaches over and pinches me on the back of the hand.

“I have great friends. And a great aunt.” It’s nice to be called “stable.” I’m not sure the word fits me, and it’s a relief that Annie thinks it does.

Jake is the theatre teacher at school, and the kids love him. He’s been teaching at St. Michael’s for four years, since he graduated from Bowdoin. He has a scar through his right eyebrow where the hair doesn’t grow, and it’s everything I can do not to touch it when he’s talking to me. Which is often, because I think he likes me.

“So how’s it going? I mean your first few weeks at St. Mike’s?” he asks stirring a cup of oil-black coffee in the faculty room before first period. Someone has left the window open overnight and the room is chilly. “Nipply” as we said in high school, and I cross my arms over my chest in case they are.

“Pretty good, pretty good,” I nod. I don’t tell him about the bitchy history teacher who seems to find any excuse to let me know when I’ve done something wrong. Like the other day when I had just finished class with 7B and she taught right after me in the same room. “Try to remember to erase the board,” she said in front of all the students as she then erased it, a wide, fake smile on her stupid Smith College face. “Out of courtesy,” she added, and then turned to the class. “Alright, guys, notebooks out!” She ignored me until I left the room. I don’t tell Jake about the mother who emailed me, furious that I had given her daughter homework on Rosh Hashanah. Or that I left my planner at home yesterday and was unprepared for classes, so we played “literary charades,” a game I made up on the spot.

“That’s great. Hey, have you seen the theatre yet? I should give you a tour.” Jake is extremely cute. He’s confident and a good dresser. He always wears a dark brown calfskin jacket to work, and it sets off the brown in his hazel eyes.

“Um, I’ve sort of seen it. But not backstage or anything.” He hands me a cup of coffee, which I take and hold onto with both hands, still trying to cover my nipples with my arms. It’s a trick, but I pull it off. I stir the coffee, even though there’s nothing else in it. I take milk, but they only have cream.

“Well you’ll have to come and I’ll give you a tour.” Sometimes, during meetings, I catch him looking at me. Today, he’s looking directly into my eyes and I finally think I know what the expression “undressing you with his eyes” means.

“Sounds great. I’ll stop by after classes one day this week.”

“Awesome,” he says. “See you then.”

Memory: Spring 1994, seventeen years old

After spring break, when all of us slightly-sunburned prepsters straggled back to the Massachusetts gray and drizzle, Daniel and I broke up. But a week later, he forgave me for the Christian McVale thing and we were back to normal, something only high school couples can achieve after such a colossal act of infidelity. We stumbled our way through the spring and towards his graduation. He was accepted at his first choice, Notre Dame. I still had another year to go; Lizzie and I commiserated together about what life would be like without the boys. A drag, we decided. A blow-your-bangs-out-of-your-face, slumpy drag.



One May afternoon, before heading to Eddie Fulnik's graduation party – the kind with all the parents and little sandwiches and champagne for everyone on the sloping back lawn – Daniel took me down to his basement to fool around. We were up against the cement wall, and I could feel him getting hard against me. We still hadn't had sex; he couldn't get past the final sin, despite our having done everything else. As we were kissing against the wall, the smell of dust and canning jars in my nose, Daniel shyly asked, "What if we tried it from behind?"

"Tried what?"

"You know. It."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean in, you know, the other hole there."

"Ew, Daniel!" I swatted at him. "Gross."

"Yeah, but it's like the same thing, only not really a sin." I could tell he had thought about this. Had gone over the conversation in his mind a few times.

"Okay," I said. Anal sex was about the last thing I was interested in doing, but I was surprised that Daniel wanted to try something daring. And it was about the only thing Lizzie hadn't done with Adam, and it would feel good to just impress her with that little bomb: Daniel did me up the bum the other day.

And so there, up against the cement wall, we tried it. I lowered my pants, feeling the cold basement air on my thighs. Daniel bumbled about for a moment, his throat and breath full of concentration. When he found the right spot and pushed, it hurt. I winced, and he pushed a little more. "Ow," I said.

“Sorry,” he replied, but he didn’t stop. He just pushed more gently. I gripped his arm tightly, dug my nails in. I saw lemony spots of light, tasted ginger in my mouth.

“Ow, ow, ow! Stop,” I said, turning around. “It hurts. I don’t like it.” I pulled up my underwear and jeans, buckled my belt. I could see disappointment on his face. He knew it was going to have to be the old-fashioned way or not at all.

Later, on the ride over to Eddie’s house in Weston, I smiled to myself out the window. I had anal sex, I thought. I felt a little smug thinking about what had happened to me in just one year, how far I had gone. All the handjobs and blowjobs, the fling with Christian, the sucking and licking and inserting I had engaged in all school year with Daniel. And now this. I was excited about the idea of being a senior, too. I was going to miss Daniel, and I didn’t want him to leave at all, but I was thrilled by the thought of finally being the oldest, being in the class everyone else looked up to.

When we parked, I excused myself to go pee. In Eddie’s guest bathroom, done in shades of beige and off white – very tasteful – I saw a quarter-sized spot of brick-red blood in the seat of my underwear.

September 1999, twenty-two years old

iii.

*You admire Susan Sarandon and Madonna – strong women who don’t mess around. You have a black-and-white postcard of Sarandon, bare shoulders and beaming at the camera, and a vintage “Like a Virgin” poster from your childhood tacked up on your bedroom wall. They remind you that women are strong and smart; that they are in control.*

*Your mother told you that making love was a natural, good thing that two people committed to one another shared. And you often reflect on this, out loud, to the men who are sticking themselves inside you. You say it ironically, as if you get the last laugh, and the men laugh with you. Ha ha ha ha ha. You laugh together as you fuck, and you fuck and you fuck, with Susan and Madonna watching over you, and you wonder, not out loud, why your mother never told you about fucking or what that should be like, because you have never had it any other way.*

Jake smells like pears. He is showing me the cramped backstage area of the theatre, and when he motions for me to pass by him – stepping over cables and rolls of electrical tape – I can smell his clean pear scent. Our bodies nearly touch as we navigate the narrow offstage area, and once I trip and he reaches out a hand to steady me. I can see that he bites his nails.

“So...” he says, leading me through the left wing off the stage, down a long corridor with no lights. Suddenly, he opens a door, and we are in an echoey, open room with high ceilings. It smells like a swimming pool or a parking garage. “...Here is the studio.” He flicks on about seven light switches and the overheads hum alive, slowly warming up. The light grows gradually, fluorescent and cold. I can make out work stations with electric saws and huge bins full of materials.

“Wow,” I say, because what else can you say? “It’s big.”

“Yeah. I helped them design it when I came. It’s a great space for the kids. I hardly had anything like this in college, and they have it in high school.” The room was empty and bare; everything was shut up and put away in one of the five or six metal filing cabinets or on the shelves that lined the back wall from floor to ceiling.

“It’s so neat,” I say, trying to think of another compliment I can add. “And organized.”

“I’m a nazi about that. The kids can’t leave a scrap of material or wood or anything. They know I’ll freak. C’mon. I’ll show you the prop room,” he says, and he takes my shoulder in his hand. It’s subtle but clear; and I feel a zing go through me. Four months. Four months since I’ve even kissed a guy, let alone had any real fun.

Caro – who has a very strict dating code – would be disappointed in me. She’s always saying that it’s a terrible idea to date anyone from work. She worked as a waitress all through college and kept to this code like a religious nut, even when her cokehead manager was hot for her and offered to train her as a bartender if she’d stop being such an ice queen. “Never mix business and sex,” she always chimes. Later, she found out that the cokehead manager had herpes. “See?” she said, as if this were proof positive that her code was infallible.

But I don’t care. Where else am I supposed to meet someone? Caro and Rox have been here for almost six months and they have both dated. Caro has a boyfriend, Adam, some sad-sack Wall Street banker, and Rox has gone on half a dozen dates with New York men. I’ve met just this one, Jake. And he is nice. And his eyebrow scar is about the sexiest thing I have seen since sliced bread.

“Great. But only if I can play with the props.” I’m trying to be funny.

“Why else would I take you there?” he asks, raising a suggestive eyebrow at me, the one without the scar.

He pulls his keys off his belt loop and searches for the right one. “Here we go,” he says, pulling open the door.

This first thing I hear is a gasp, a childlike gasp, from inside the dark prop room. It’s stupid, by my first thought is: a ghost. But when Jake flicks on the lights, two students are sitting on the worn couch against the wall, hurriedly pulling on shirts, cinching belt, and pulling down skirt. “What’s going on here?” Jake demands in a teachery voice. The boy stands up first. His prepster hair is shaggy and disheveled. He’s thin and his dress shirt is buttoned unevenly so that one of the tails hangs inches lower

than the other down the front of his pants. The girl turns her back to us as she fumbles with her shirt and bra. Her posture says everything, though; the sad little slope of her spine makes it clear she's mortified.

"Uh, hi Mr. Parker. We're, uh, just trying on some props. For this drama project." He can hardly look at us. He runs a hand through the messy hair.

"In the dark, Mr. Mittelstadt?"

"Uh, yeah." Mr. Mittelstadt, a junior or senior by the looks of him, puffs a lame little laugh, as if to say: "Isn't that crazy? Aren't we so dumb?"

"Um, no," Jake replies taking a step forward. "Get dressed and get out of here, both of you. I want to see you in Mr. Jacques's office in five minutes and I expect you to tell both me and Mr. Jacques what you thought you were doing in here and how you got a key."

"Right. OK." Mittelstadt looks back to his prop-room date just as she figures out all the openings and pulls a gray shirt over her head. She turns around to face us, panic on her downcast face. Hope. It's Hope Candow, the prodigy violinist.

"Hope!" I hear myself breathe. She looks up sharply at me, and I think I see her lip tremble. I can't imagine why she would be here, making out in the dark prop room, with the likes of this kid, a guy who is clearly not getting any from his own classmates and has to turn to unsuspecting middle schoolers to get some play. Yuck. And suddenly it occurs to me that she has been forced to do something.

"Are you OK?" I ask, and she looks at me without answering, as if confused. Mittelstadt looks back and forth between us, as if he isn't sure who I am. "Did he, did he—" I point a thumb at the boy "—hurt you?"

She shakes her head no, looks down at the floor. Her unfortunate pixie is matted on one side. I don't believe her. I walk over to where she is, put a hand on her shoulder, and ask as gently as I can, "Did he make you do something you didn't want to?"

"No!" She protests and shrugs my hand off her shoulder with a sharp jounce. "Why don't you mind your business?" She eyes me with spite and brushes invisible bangs from her eyes.

"Excuse me, Ms. Candow?" Jake interrupts. "I think when you decide to behave inappropriately on school property, you make it everyone's business. And cut out the attitude. I'll see you in Jacques's office in five."

The kids skulk away, still fidgeting with their clothes. When they're out of earshot, Jake looks at me and smiles. "Well, that was unexpected!"

But I'm still smarting from the whole episode, from the way Hope spoke to me. "Yeah," I say, forcing a little laugh. "But, I mean, wow. That girl is, like, thirteen. I just can't believe she was in here of her own volition with that kid."

"Oh, believe it. Last year I caught two sixth-graders in the utility closet downstairs."

"Oh my God."

"I know. Besides, Mittlestadt is a hornball. And Hope, well, this isn't the first time she's been caught in a compromising position. Ah, well."

"Yuck." When did little kids become so old? At thirteen I couldn't have dreamed of a guy getting down my shirt or up my dress. Though, I remember that Laurel James, the most popular girl in school, was rumored to have slept with her junior-year boyfriend in eighth grade using only a Ziploc bag for protection. But in my memory Laurel seems

like she was so much older, bigger, than little Hope with her bony, naked back and her pixie cut.

“Well, I’m sorry to cut this short, Telemaka,” Jake says, flicking off the light. “I guess I’ve gotta dash to Alfred’s office to see these two. This sucks. I was really hoping to show you around. I haven’t even shown you the set your seventh-graders are painting.”

“Next time,” I say.

“Definitely.” The door bangs shut behind us.

Memory: June 1994, seventeen years old

Two weeks after Daniel’s graduation, we had sex. My mom and Roger were away for the weekend in Newport. Daniel stayed over Saturday night, sharing my small bed. In the morning, he woke up extremely turned on.

“Morning wood,” he joked, peeking under the covers.

“Ew, Daniel.”

“All I’m saying is, there it is.”

“It’s late,” I said looking out the bedroom window and seeing bright sun. We should get up. My mom and Roger will be home after lunch.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t feel like getting up yet.” He kissed me, his soft, sweet Daniel kisses. And suddenly I didn’t really want to get up either. I just wanted to stay in bed with him that morning, skin to skin. “I’ve been thinking, Tel,” he said, planting a kiss on my forehead. “About what you say about sins and stuff. About us sort of having done them all anyway.”

“Yeah?”



“And, you know, I thought. Maybe. I don’t know. Maybe you’re right.”

It wasn’t the most romantic proposal I had ever received. It wasn’t the way I imagined I’d lose it. Be there it was: a lazy Sunday morning in June, hot enough that the humidity was already creeping in from outside, and Daniel breathing on my neck as I rolled a condom (I kept a box in my closet just in case) over his penis until it stretched tight. And suddenly he was on top of me, pushing into me, and there we were, having sex. This is it! I thought. This is sex!

Daniel began to push harder and harder, until I felt crampy and achy. “What are you doing?” I asked. “That kinda hurts when you push like that.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I was just remembering the scene from the book *The Godfather* when Sonny is having sex with that lady and he goes crazy trying to do it to her so hard. I just thought...”

“I never read it. But don’t do that. It doesn’t feel good.”

“Okay.”

Later, when I was in the shower smiling to myself about the fact that I was no longer a virgin, never again!, I thought about how all the movies and girly books were wrong: sex didn’t hurt. I didn’t bleed. Why did people always say that you bled? I didn’t feel any pain at all, except for the Sonny part. But now — running my soapy hands all over my body and between my legs — I did feel grown up. I finally felt old.

“We did it, Tuck.”

“What?”

“Me and Daniel. We did it.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why?’”

“Well, I mean, why now? I thought Catholic Dan didn’t want to.”

“Tuck! Don’t make fun of him. He’s got very strong beliefs.”

“Well, they can’t be that strong.” I could imagine Tuck’s smirk on the other end of the line. It was late at night, and he was probably in bed, watching SNL.

“Tuck, stop. Don’t you even want to know what it’s like?”

“Um, no thanks, T. I’ll wait for my own chance. Thanks though.”

“C’mon. I could have called Lizzie and I called you.”

“I’m honored, T.”

“I’m serious. I want to talk. I think I’m in love.”

“What?”

“I think I’m in love.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time.”

“So why’d you ask?”

“I don’t know.”

“Anyway, you know, we’ve been together all year, and we finally did it, and I just feel, you know, really close to him right now. I think this is what it’s like to be in love.”

“I doubt it.” I could hear Tuck chewing something, maybe chips.

“Why do you doubt it? How would you know whether or not I am in love?”

“Because I know you, T. Better than Catholic Dan. I’ve known you your whole life, and you are not in love. You’re just in lust.”

“No I’m not. It’s not like I’m this super horny person, just looking to get laid or something. I really like Daniel. I really think I love him. Why are you being a jerk?”

“I just don’t feel like having this conversation.”

“Well, I thought you were my friend. I thought friends could talk to friends.” My voice rose angrily.

“I *am* talking to you. I can’t help it if you don’t like what I’m saying, T. If you ask me my opinion, I don’t think you are in love. That’s all.”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion. I just wanted you to, like, listen and have a normal conversation with me. But forget it. I obviously can’t talk to someone who doesn’t know the first thing about any of this anyway.”

“Meaning?” He was baiting me, and I took it.

“Meaning, it was my mistake to think I could talk to you about this when you’ve never been in love and you’re still a virgin.”

“Whatever, T. I gotta go. See you.” And he hung up, the first time he had ever hung up on me. I waited until the loud beeping began before putting the receiver back on the cradle. I wasn’t sure how the fight started, and I already felt terrible. I hadn’t meant to hurt him, but he was being mean. Didn’t he realize there’s only so much meanness a girl could take? Sometimes she just wanted a pat on the back, a sympathetic ear. But lately, with Tuck, that was impossible.

I picked up the phone and dialed Daniel’s number and hung up after one ring, our signal for him to call, since he wasn’t allowed to receive calls after ten. Within seconds, he called me back. “Just wanted to say I love you, Daniel.”

“Oh, me too, Tel. I gotta sleep, though. I have to caddy tomorrow early.”

“Okay, g’night.”

“Night.”

“Love you.”

September 1999, twenty-two years old

Jake likes to move around a lot during sex. He’s what I would call an “active player.” First he’s over, then under, then on the side, then behind. It’s a bit unnerving. I wonder if anyone has ever told him that women sort of need constant attention, constant rubbing and touching and frictiony motion in order to build to something worthwhile. Otherwise, it’s just a lot of bending and flexing and poking in and out, but not much orgasming.

But he’s really cute. And sweet. He brought flowers when he picked me up. I don’t think any guy I have ever dated in college gave me flowers before. And he insisted on paying for my movie ticket and popcorn, which I like even if I am a feminist. And he kissed me so sweetly at the door that I wasn’t sure whether or not to invite him in; I thought maybe it was too forward. But then I kissed him back, and I could tell that both of us very much wanted him to come in, so, here we are on my futon in my tiny apartment, unpacked boxes all around, engaging in the most calorie-burning sex I have probably ever had. While Jake seems to be enjoying himself with one of my legs up over his head, I tick them off in my head, all fifteen of them: Daniel, Max, Sid, Eddie, Rob, Jeremy, Tyler, Zack, Ross, Joseph, Andrew, Keith, A.J., Mike, and Dave. And now Jake, number sixteen. Sixteen. Caro says it’s too many. She’s only ever been with six men, including Adam. Caro says sixteen is “asking for an STD,” which is why I always use condoms.

“Genital warts and herpes can be transmitted even with a condom,” Caro likes to sing back at me. “Best to keep the numbers down to minimize your chances. Have your fun; just have it with the same guy over and over again.”

But that’s really hard for me. It just never seems to work out. I always want it to. I had high hopes for Jake, but already I am just wishing this were over and done with. I look up and see the sweaty smile on his face, the one that says he’s going to come in a few minutes, and I feel sick. He’s skinny without his clothes on, and pale. There are a few dark hairs on his breastbone, wily and pathetic. I can tell he’s got confidence issues, can feel, suddenly, how he must be a clingy call-you-all-the-time kind of boyfriend. I just want him to come already.

I pull him down onto his back and straddle him, pin my legs close to his sides, and sit back so that he can’t get up and move around anymore. And I ride him as smoothly as I can; it’s so easy it’s a joke. Within seconds, it’s over, and he’s panting and sweating and catching his breath and asking, “Did you?” and I am nodding sweetly, of course. I don’t mean to feel repulsed by him, but I am, and I get up and pad off to the bathroom thinking about how I will probably never, not ever, find a man that I can love.

*After sex, you don't really like to be held. You don't want to cuddle or fall asleep in his arms, since it just makes you want to crawl out of your skin. Usually, what you really want, is to move. To go somewhere. To walk out the door and keep walking, walk for miles alone. Sometimes you fantasize about this, about getting up and walking out the door and just leaving. But you know you don't have it in you.*

*The worst is when they turn to you, a look of compassion on their faces, and tell you how beautiful you are. Beautiful. B-you-tee-ful. What does it even mean? What is that? It's a curse. Being beautiful is a curse because it brings you a tireless list of men, pleading, adorable, fragile men, who start out attractive and turn to pathetic, loving mush. It's a curse because it brings you, like a pusher, the one thing you don't need – the thing you should most avoid – again and again. And again.*

Caro stirs her strawberry daiquiri – made with real strawberries – and makes a face at my story about Jake last weekend. “Oh, that’s unfortunate. Serves you right, though, for sleeping with a coworker.” She sips the drink through a tiny straw. “Mmm! That is amazing.” It’s Mexican night for me, Roxanne, and Caro. I’ve made a Caesar salad, tequila-glazed shrimp kebabs, and lime sorbet, the last summer meal of the year.

“How did you learn to cook and make drinks like this?” Rox asks, picking a glossy lettuce leaf from the salad bowl.

“Hey, no grazing, Rox. They’ll be none left. And don’t drink that too, fast, lady,” I say, pointing a knife at Caro. “There’s a lot of tequila in it.”

“Nah. Tastes too good.” She takes a long sip.

“Where’s Adam tonight?” I ask. “You could’ve brought him.”

“He’s at some client dinner. Anyway, I wanted just the girls tonight. Adam’s sweet, but sometimes he’s a little...”

“Of a downer?” I finish her sentence.

“No. Not a downer. Just a bit serious. Too much money makes Adam a serious boy,” she says smiling.

“So, Tel,” Rox says. “What are you going to do about this guy?”

“Who, Jake?”

“No, the Pope.”

“I don’t know.” I’m shredding cabbage for garnish under the kebabs, and I pause to answer. “It was not fun. He was a turnoff. I don’t know. Maybe I built it up so much, but I can’t really go back to feeling attracted to him, you know? It’s gone. Fizzled.”

“I hate when it fizzles,” Caro says.

“Me too,” adds Rox.

“And it was just awkward. Like weird. I don’t know. I’m not saying I can’t enjoy sex without an orgasm, you know?” Both of them nod. “But, it felt like I wasn’t even there. Like he was doing all this stuff, jumping all around, and I was, like secondary.”

“Like high school sex,” Caro suggests.

“Exactly,” I reply. “Exactly like high school sex. Like you are just along for the ride, but that’s about it. It’s not about the two of you, you know, getting yours. It’s more like he’s a boy scout, exploring how many positions he can twist you into just so he can say he did that.” Caro laughs and has to put her drink down.

“I just imagined this guy, you know, in a boy scout uniform.”

“How can you imagine him if you’ve never even met him?”

“Oh, you know what I mean. Speaking of high school sex, how old were you guys when you lost it?”

“Seventeen,” I say. “Daniel McGormick. My first serious boyfriend.”

“And you, Rox?”

“Fourteen.”

“Fourteen?” Caro and I say in unison.

“Yeah. Luke Appleton, my first boyfriend. We went out for three years.”

“Whoa,” Caro chuckles. “You slut.”

“Not really. I was totally in love.”

“And did you enjoy it then? I mean, I don’t even think I started having orgasms until college,” I say, turning back to the cabbage.



“Really?” Caro asks.

“Yeah. Why, when did you start having them?”

“When I was like twelve.”

“Are you kidding me?” I stop chopping again and swing around, knife in hand, to stare at Caro. “You were having sex when you were twelve?”

“I was having sex with myself,” she replies, reaching for her glass.

“Jesus,” I say, turning back once again to the chopping block. “You guys are too much. Go ahead, Rox. I want to hear about your deflowering.”

“Well, the ‘deflowering’ per se is not such an interesting story. But my first orgasm is. On our first ‘date,’ a little weekend ski getaway in Maine, we were dry fucking on the couch—”

“Oooh,” Caro coos. “Dry fucking was the best,” she says.

“Definitely,” I say. “I remember always wanting to dry fuck and never do the real thing. The guys I dated would get so mad! They said it hurt, but I think it was just a ploy to get my clothes off.”

“Anyway,” Rox continues. “And so I came. Right then, while we were dry fucking. And I was totally blown away by it, and I went home with a little goal: to figure out how to do that to myself. And I did. And I taught Luke, and from there on, it was amazing. I mean, 5 – 7 at-a-time amazing.”

“Oh my god,” I say, mouth open. “Are you for real?”

“Yup,” she says and takes a sip of her daiquiri.

“I’ve never even been able to have two in a row.”

“Poor Tellie,” Caro says. “Go on, Rox, I am fascinated by your sexual awakening.”

“Well, it gets worse from there. It was amazing with Luke, but we broke up right at the beginning of my freshman year in college – before I met you two.”

“Yeah, but I remember hearing about him. You never really got over him,” Rox says.

“Well, it took a while. And, honestly? It has never been as good since. The sex I mean. I know that sounds crazy, but since Luke, I have never been able to come during sex. Not once.”

“Oh my god. What do you do?” I ask. I place the purple cabbage shreds onto three plates and check the broiler to see how the shrimp are coming. Almost done.

“Well, there are other ways, Tel.”

“Yeah, but still. That’s so sad. Orgasms during sex are fun.”

“Multiple orgasms too. So there.” She smiles and tips her glass to me.

“Bitch,” I say, smiling back.

“Well, you can’t have it all,” says Caro, reaching her glass out for more daiquiri. “Some of us get multiple orgasms in ninth grade, and some of us get orgasms during sex with boy scouts.”

“There was no orgasm, Car. Weren’t you listening?”

“Oh, right. Then I guess some of us don’t get anything at all. Pour me some more, love. It’s so yummy.”

Memory: July 1994, seventeen years old

In late July, we drove down to the Cape for a going-away-party for Mike Oberlin, a fellow wrestler and friend of Daniel and Adam's who was heading off to the Naval Academy. It was one of the last times the four of us would be together, since the boys were leaving in just a few weeks for Notre Dame and Colorado College. Lately, every time I was with Daniel, all I could think of was his going away. Notre Dame was hours away on a plane.

"Why don't you try to transfer to Holy Cross or B.C. after your first semester?" I asked once, in the hopes that he might go for it.

"Tel, don't be silly."

"Why's it silly? Don't you want to be near me?"

"It's silly because you can't transfer after one semester. I'd have to start my application now. I'm not even there yet!"

"Yeah, but I'm sure they have everything at B.C. and Holy Cross that they do at Notre Dame. Plus, you'd have me!" I tried to keep it light by giving him a hug around the neck and a quick kiss on his cheek, but I was starting to feel desperate. I honestly didn't know how I would survive the next year without him. Thinking about it made me feel panicky. "I'm not good with people leaving me, you know? Wouldn't it be great to be near each other again next year?"

"C'mon, Tel. Be serious." He sounded annoyed, like an older sibling.

Down the Cape at the party, it was cool and misty. I hadn't brought any cool-weather clothes, so Lizzie lent me a sweatshirt, and I walked around with my hands tucked up inside, clutching the lip of my beer bottle with one finger. Daniel had been acting weird all day. He hadn't wanted to take a walk with me on the beach, claiming he

was tired, but then I saw him out in the back yard with a bunch of guys, playing volleyball in the muddy grass. When I suggested we “take a nap” in the afternoon, which was our little code for having sex, he didn’t even look up from playing cards with Adam when he said, “Nah, go ahead. I’m not tired.”

Late that night, after I’d had a blistered hotdog and three beers and a long conversation with Lizzie and Maya Weinstein about who were our best kisses (Daniel), I convinced Daniel to come to bed. Mike Oberlin’s Cape house was a complex of four different houses, a main house, two guesthouses, and a barn converted into a studio and guest room. We got one of the double guesthouse rooms, and I was eager to get into bed and pull Daniel’s warm body to mine, to feel that he was still there with me. But as I undressed for bed, yawning and saying how I couldn’t wait to curl up to him and just sleep, he said, “Yeah. You know what? I forgot that I left my bag in Adam’s car. I’ll be right back.”

“Want me to go with you?”

“Nah. I’ll be back soon. Just get some sleep.” Which made me a little sad.

“Sure you don’t want me to go?”

“No, it’s cool.” And he was gone, having closed the door all but an inch shut behind him. I listened to the footsteps in the hall as people came and went. I heard Molly Snyder laugh as she pounded up the steps to the second floor. I heard the muffled buzz of voices above me, people settling in and negotiating their sleeping spots before all the beds were gone.

Twenty minutes later, I went looking for Daniel. I stood on the porch of our guesthouse and tried to spot him over by the parked cars, but I couldn’t see anyone. I was

in my p.j.s and bare feet, but I crossed the dewy lawn anyway – soaking the cuffs of my flannel pajama bottoms – and headed to the main house. I found Daniel in the kitchen, chatting with Sophie Linus, a granola-y senior girl who never showed anything but disdain for me. “Daniel? I’ve been waiting for you for, like, half an hour.”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll be right there,” he answered, barely making eye contact with me. Sophie just stared, not making an attempt to smile or say hi. I hated her. Stupid unshaven legs and hemp bracelets.

“Yeah, whatever, Daniel. Do whatever you want,” I said, trying to sound as pissed off as possible. I spun around and stomped out, letting the kitchen screen door bang behind me for effect. I stomped across the lawn, through the guesthouse, and into our room, where I slammed the door, too, just to feel better. I climbed into bed, pulled the covers tight, and tried to let anger fill me so melancholy wouldn’t.

Within minutes, I heard the bedroom door open and Daniel come in. I looked up and saw him, a softer look on his face, and my anger melted like a pat of butter. “Daniel,” I said, sitting up in bed. He left the lights off, but there was enough light from the porch and the main house to see each other. “What’s going on?” My voice was near breaking.

“Nothing,” he whispered.

“Why are you being so...mean to me today?”

“I’m not being mean to you.” He sat down on the bed and stared at the wall in front of him. There was a watercolor there of seagulls hovering just above the surf.

“Did I do something? Just tell me. How come you’re being so cold to me?” He didn’t answer and I reached out for his hand, but he pulled it away.

“I don’t think this is working out, Tel,” he said without breaking his gaze from the watercolor. “I just...I just need a little freedom right now. I want to spend time with my friends. Enjoy myself these last few weeks before leaving.”

“What are you saying?” I could feel a hundred thousand needles all over me, on the inside, running down my throat into my stomach.

“I’m saying, Tel,” he turned to look at me with guilty, sweet eyes, “That I can’t be your boyfriend anymore.”

“Why?” It was barely audible, a mouse whisper. My heart was imploding.

“Because,” he said, turning to me and putting a soft hand on my cheek. “I just don’t feel the same anymore. I just need some freedom right now.” His voice was kind, and he looked worried, worried for me. I could tell he felt bad, but not enough to change his mind. I knew it the way he looked at me, like the way Jesus did at the little kids in the paintings in my old Sunday school room.

And that was the first night of my life that I didn’t sleep; I stayed up, crying in Daniel’s understanding but unpersuaded arms, until the sun came up. I cried for the loss of my first boyfriend, cried because my heart felt like it was shrinking as the hours ticked by, cried because it was so unfair that I had finally found someone and now he was leaving. I cried because I couldn’t take it anymore; I couldn’t stand the freeze-dried feeling of being left by someone who was supposed to love me. It was unbearable.

And that was when I began to search.

Of course, I called Tuck.

“Tuck, he dumped me.”

“Who?”

“Daniel!”

“Oh, T, I’m sorry.” We hadn’t spoken since our argument, the one where he hung up on me. I thought that it was cruelly ironic that the last time we spoke I told him that I thought I was in love. Now I was heartbroken slush. I started to cry. “No, really. I’m really sorry, sweetie,” Tuck assured me. He just listened while I cried for half an hour and he didn’t even make fun of him, or call him Dan the Catholic once.

Tuck, even when I kicked him, always crawled back to lick my wounds.

September 1999, twenty-two years old

I do everything I can to avoid Jake the following week. I bring my bag to all my classes so I don’t have to go back to the faculty room in between to grab books. I skip lunches. I even make up an excuse to get out of a faculty meeting on Tuesday, saying I have an urgent dentist appointment, so I don’t even have to be in the same room as him. Caro is right: sleeping with coworkers is a terrible idea.

By the second week, though, it’s impossible. There is to be a partial solar eclipse on Monday morning, and the headmaster has ordered special viewing glasses for all the students so that the whole school can watch, at least for a few seconds at a time, since more can, according to the biology teacher Ms. Silton, burn your eyes out.

I’m dreading seeing Jake because I hate to let people down. I know that sounds ridiculous, given that I get myself into situations like the one with Jake all the time without thinking through the consequences, but I truly don’t mean to hurt anyone. I always think it’s what I want; later, I realize it isn’t, and then the inevitable letting-down

comes. I think it's worse to see a man get let down than a woman. It's like we women were made for let-downs; we're so emotional anyway. There's nothing worse than a man with a knicked-up heart. It's an ugly, pathetic sight, and I am irrationally hoping that not seeing Jake ever again – if I can swing the timing just right to and from classes – will save us both the misery of his being letdown. But then again there's lunch, which I've skipped every day since the Jake thing and can't do much longer; I'm a total cranky bitch when I skip meals, and my poor sixth-graders who have me last period every day are paying the price. On Friday, I yelled at Cintra Button and told her that she needed to “grow up” for passing a note in class. Poor thing actually cried.

In any case, at least they'll be a million other people around during the eclipse this morning so I won't have to really talk to Jake. Hopefully, he won't pick up on my aversion to him, but likely he will. I'm a terrible liar, even if it's just a matter of a poker face. I'm as transparent as lace undies.

The eclipse has started at 12:45, right at the end of my last class. I just have to bring the kids out into the playground and stick around for the fifteen-minute break. Then I can go home, since today, Monday, is my early day. If I'm lucky, Jake won't even spot me with all the other people out there.

When the bell rings, the students bolt from their desks. I head outside to the playground behind the galloping mass, and I put on my regulation cardboard glasses. I can't see a thing; they don't allow any light through. But when I look up at the sun, I can see it like a burnt orange, with a fingernail sliver of dark black as the moon's shadow moves to cover it.



“Ms. Miller, did you know that it’s only a 78% eclipse?” Lewis Meiner asks from behind. I take off my glasses and turn around to see him. “And did you know that we won’t have a total solar eclipse until 2034? I’ll be 46. How old will you be?”

“Older than that, Lewis.” I try to do the math in my head. 52? 53?

“How old are you now?” He asks, squinting. He always squints when he’s thinking. He looks like a mouse.

“22.”

“Then you’ll be 58. That’s only seven years away from retirement. My grandmother just retired.”

“Oh, cool. You’re good at math.”

“It’s easy.”

“Well, for you. It’s not easy for me. You must get good grades in math.” I smile down at him and think that it’s funny to be so much taller than boys. In just a few years, they’ll all be taller than me.

“Yeah, I guess. But it really is easy. Look! It’s moving so fast,” he says excitedly, holding the cardboard glasses against his face. He turns to his friend, Jeffrey. “Look how fast it’s going! The peak is in eight minutes.”

I turn back and see that Lewis is right; the shadow over the sun now looks like the Cheshire cat’s smile.

“Hey stranger.” I feel a hand on my shoulder. Jake.

“Hey!” I don’t know what else to say, so I just smile. I peer behind me, hoping Lewis has another interesting science fact to offer up, but he and Jeffrey are staring up at the sky like zombies, mouths open.

“I haven’t seen you in ages.” He’s holding a pair of the eclipse glasses in his hand, and I see that his fingernails are bitten to the quick. Yuck. And to think that I let those hands wander all over me. “Are you free later? We could—” he looks around and lowers his voice “—get a bite to eat and catch a movie.”

“Oh, gosh, Jake. I can’t. I just have so much work. A ton of papers to grade.”

“I’m dying to see *The Fight Club*. Have you seen it yet?”

“No.”

“So what about this weekend then? Or do you have too many papers to grade then, too?” He’s kidding. He’s daring me to turn him down, which is even worse than having to turn him down in the first place.

“No, but I’ve got plans. I’m sorry, Jake. Yeah, plans with some friends.”

“All weekend? Can’t even squeeze in a movie with me?” I knew he’d be pushy. I could tell when we were in bed that he’d be the pushy type, the kind who can’t take a hint. Ugh.

“Yeah, pretty much. Yeah, it’s like, a thing we do. A whole weekend. Girl thing.” I can’t be more creative than that on an empty stomach.

“OK, sure. Maybe another time.” He sounds put-off. I can tell he wasn’t expecting this.

“Yeah,” I say meekly, hating myself.

Why am I so, so, so stupid? Why can’t I just keep my legs closed? A kiss would have been fine enough. Why did I have to go and sleep with this guy? Poor Jake. He’s probably a sweet, devoted boyfriend. He seems it. But I can’t help how I feel. I can’t pretend I like him; I can’t take back last weekend, even if I wish I could.

It's getting darker, but not the kind of dark that comes at nighttime. A strange, eerie dark, like being deep underwater. I look back at the sun with the glasses now. The sun is almost fully covered; there is a ring of orange around the nearly centered black pupil. Jake is still standing beside me, as silent as a planet. I wish I could turn to him and say something that would make me seem like less of a jerk. I wish I could explain to him that my true intentions weren't cruel; I wasn't using him, which he probably thinks. I just get confused about what I want, and before I know it, people get hurt. Men get hurt.

I give my retinas a rest and look around the ever-dimming playground. Jake's still staring up, and when I turn, I can see in the space between his glasses and his face that his eyes are closed. He's just pretending to watch so he doesn't have to talk to me. The kids are nervous and excited, glancing periodically up at the sky, laughing, and commenting to each other. A few girls are off to the side, by the steps, chatting and ignoring the eclipse entirely. I realize that one of them is Hope just as she looks over and catches my eye. She looks away fast, then turns to her friend, cups her hand to her ear, and whispers something. The two of them look over at me and start laughing. Man, middle-school meanness still stings, even at twenty-two. But I am the adult here. I stare hard back at them until they look away, deflated and scared. Why couldn't I just have done that to Laurel James back in eighth grade?

The bell rings, and no one moves to go to class. Everyone's going to stay and watch the end of the eclipse. I'm free to go home.

"Hey, well, I'm off. See you tomorrow," I say to Jake.

"See you." His voice is as cold as the light from the sun.

On the bus ride home, I watch the effects of the eclipse on the city: the light is weak and distant, as if the sun couldn't get close enough to warm Earth anymore. I fold my hands in my lap and focus on the bus driver, because the loneliness of the eclipse frightens me.

vii.

*You are a little bit out of control, but you're smart enough to realize this. Besides, you are enjoying the attention from scores of guys, like insects, that have perked up their antennae and taken notice of you. You can handle it. In fact, you're the one in control. You're the one they line up for, like writhing, black ants that devour a wedge of cantaloupe. You are the cantaloupe, a lovely, ripe slice of orange melon, taking pleasure in being bitten into, consumed little by little, by all of these boys. And you have ceased to be just beautiful. Now you are sexy, too.*

Max Jackson had a long, thin penis – pencily, I thought, and planned to tell Lizzie later. He kissed sloppily, with too much saliva, but I had to forgive him since he was drunk. I, myself, was a little tipsy. Also, he was one of the most popular guys in my class – a starting soccer player on varsity – so I didn’t really care how he kissed. His pencily penis lay cupped in my hand, half limp, undecided about whether it wanted to grow or not.

“It’s the booze,” he said huskily. He reached down and made an attempt to rouse it. “It’s a crime what booze does to dicks,” he concluded. “Hold on.” He got up awkwardly and opened the closet door. We were in Miles Moore’s walk-in closet at the first senior party of the year. It was kind of nice in there, carpeted and uncluttered. A great spot for hooking up.

“Sid!” Max yelled hoarsely, holding his unbuttoned pants up at the waist. “Sid! Get your ass up here!” Max’s best friend, Sid, a white-blonde, freckled basketball player who was known for his ability to hit three-pointers at the buzzer, came to the closet door and peered in.

“Wassup? Whoa! What’s going on here, Maxie?”

“I need a break. Take over for awhile.”

“Yeah, sure. What’s up, Tellie?”

“Hey, Sid,” I said coyly.

Sid nodded at me as Max tried a few times to zip up his fly. He finally realized it was a button fly and contented himself by buttoning just the top one. “See you two later,” he said with a little wave and was gone. He closed the closet door, and Sid and I were in complete darkness. I could hear his wet breathing, raspy like a sick child’s. He reached

out for me, and when I felt his fingers on my ribs, I directed his hand under my shirt and up to my breast. My bra was somewhere in the corner of the closet, where Max had thrown it after I took it off, and Sid seemed surprised to find my bare breast in his hand. He let out a little grunt and moved closer to me. I could feel him getting hard fast – not like his limp dick friend – and we quickly crumpled down onto the carpeted closet floor, where I could feel the bass from the music downstairs thumping against my back. We kissed and groped each other frantically until Sid got up to pee. “I can’t do anything, you know, interesting, until I drain the lizard. I’ll be right back.”

But I was thirsty and I had to pee, too, so I followed. I made my way downstairs in bare feet – I couldn’t remember where I had left my flip-flops – and found Lizzie smoking a cigarette and sitting on Josh Ingram’s lap, laughing at something Amy Rydell was saying. “Hey Liz,” I said, tapping her on the shoulder. “Looks like you found a friend here.”

“Shh!” She warned. “Where have you been all night, missy?”

“Busy.” I winked at her and reached out for her cigarette. She handed it over and I took a drag, trying hard not to cough. I still wasn’t used to it, didn’t know how Lizzie could suck those things down to the stubs so easily. I sat on the edge of the couch and listened to Amy Rydell finish some story about some guys she knew from Milton who were trashed and drove home from a party. They got pulled over and the driver, a guy named Kevin, began screaming at the cop that he had no right to pull them over, that they were law-abiding citizens and good drivers and honor-roll students, and everything else he could think of. The officer smiled and asked Kevin to get out of the car. He complied, still mumbling under his breath about his rights, and the cop pointed to the car and

showed Kevin that he had been driving on the sidewalk. The car was leaning at an angle, one side still up on the sidewalk and the other in the street. Josh laughed at the story, and Lizzie joined him. Amy sat back and took a sip from her beer. “Those two fucks are the funniest guys I know. And Kevin got off without a DUI because Rob’s dad is a cop and knew the guy that pulled them over.” Everyone laughed some more, and I decided I needed a drink.

In the kitchen, I grabbed a can of Miller Lite from the fridge that must have been put there recently, because it was warm. I hated beer, but that’s what there was to drink, and I figured that if I drank it enough, sooner or later I would like it. Everyone else seemed to, even Lizzie.

I walked down the foyer to the guest bathroom, because I really needed to pee now. The door was closed, but when I turned the handle, it opened. Inside, on the floor, kneeling in front of the toilet, was Max Jackson. The air smelled like vomit.

“Hey there Max. Have a few too many?” He turned to look up at me. When he saw it was me, he slumped over into a sitting position with his head resting against the wall. “Close the door, Tellie.” I did.

“Hey, seriously, do you want some water or anything?”

“C’mere,” he mumbled, beckoning with a limp hand. I bent down to his level. He looked clammy and tired. “No, c’mere. Here.” He made to undo his pants button and couldn’t. “Fuck,” he said halfheartedly and closed his eyes.

“You want me to get you off here?” I asked, laughing. He nodded. “Are you kidding me, Max? Look at you. You can’t even get it up.”



“Yes I can.” And to prove this, he reached for my hand and pulled it to his crotch. Sure enough, it was as hard as the tile floor.

“Wow,” I said. “Impressive.” I didn’t want to kiss him, so instead I began taking off his pants. He cooperated clumsily, picking at his clothing in an attempt to remove it. “Are you sure you’re up for this?” He nodded, his head still against the wall, in response. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a brown leather wallet and tossed it on the floor. “What is that? Are you paying me?” I didn’t know whether to be offended or amused.

“Condom,” he said, nodding towards it.

“You think you’re up for sex?” I tried to sound as condescending as I could, as if I were the expert.

He nodded.

“OK, whatever.”

I opened the condom wrapper, took it out, and rolled it down over his pencil dick. Then I stood up and took off my pants and underwear, leaving my socks on, because the bathroom floor was cold. I hoisted myself onto him slowly, both of us sitting up – him against the wall, and me facing him – and he exhaled as I came down onto him. His penis was so pencil thin that it went right in, without any effort. So different than Daniel, I thought. Daniel who hadn’t written or called once since he left for Notre Dame. Not that I cared. I was totally over him.

I moved up and down slowly, the way I had done to Daniel that drove him crazy. But Max looked like he was falling asleep. “Ma-ax,” I said. “Maa-ax. Are you there?” He grunted.

“Keep going,” he mumbled. But I could already feel him going limp inside me. I got up off of him and he hardly noticed. I laughed at the sight of him, so pathetic. I sat down and peed on the toilet while Max dozed against the wall. His limp penis, still in the condom, slumped against his thigh, looking as drunk as him.

After I put my underwear and pants back on, I bent down and tapped his cheek with my palm. “Max, do you want to get dressed?” I asked.

“Unh-uh,” he said, shaking his head without opening his eyes.

“Are you sure? I’m leaving, OK? Do you want some water or anything?”

“Unh-uh.” He was leaning over towards the toilet again, apparently feeling sick.

“OK, see ya.” I left and closed the door quickly before I could hear him throw up.

I turned into the first guest bedroom, the one closest to the bathroom, ready to crawl in and call it a night. I was a little drunker than I wanted to be, and I couldn’t remember where my bra was now. No shoes or bra. Serious problem.

I flicked on the lights in the room and a lump in the big bed stirred. “Turn that off!” It groaned, and a pale hand shot up to cover his eyes. Sid.

“Hey! I thought you were coming back!” I complained. He sat up groggily in bed, throwing back the covers. He was still fully dressed. He blinked a few times and squinted to see me.

“I did come back. You weren’t there.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. I had to pee.”

“Well, come here now. I was just...I guess I passed out here. But c’mere. Come keep me warm. I’m freezing.” I shut off the lights and made my way over to the bed. Before long, the two of us were skin to skin, hot enough to sweat, as Sid put on his own

condom, the one in his leather wallet, and pushed his way into me for a full thirty seconds until he came, giddily, and fell – smelling of content drunkenness – on top of me.

“That was the best I’ve had yet,” he said, panting into my neck. He fell asleep there, just like that, and I smiled to myself in the dark. It was good to be the best.

October 1999, twenty-two years old

Annie loves Chinese. There’s a nice dim sum place in midtown that’s not bad, but Annie’s crazy about the lemon chicken at this one East Village restaurant, so I agree to meet her there, even though junky fast-food Chinese is beneath me, culinarily speaking.

I pick at some wilted snow peas in salty, brown sauce and content myself with lots of rice. Annie has already finished her lemon chicken (or god knows what kind of meat it really is) and is digging into a bowl of pork-fried rice.

“I like your hair,” I tell her. It’s a new color, a plummy red with auburn highlights.

“Do you?” she asks, her face scrunched up in doubt. “I wonder if it looks too dark on me. Maybe it’s too severe.”

“I don’t think so. I like it. A nice look for fall.”

“Well, apparently the public thinks so, too. On my way here, a guy on Lex pinched my ass. I suppose that’s a good sign.” She winks at me. “So, who’s the latest?”

“Pardon?”

“Who’s the latest kill?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Tel, who’s your latest man?” Annie’s favorite topic.

“Annie, don’t lecture me today. And, for your information, there isn’t a latest man. I am man free.”

“Ha! There’s a first. So, who was the last one?”

“The last one was Jake. A guy from school.”

“How long did that one last?”

“Oh,” I say, feigning ignorance. “About a weekend.”

“Tellie, you are too much. Hey, are you going to eat those?” She points to the snow peas with her chopsticks.

“No, go ahead. I’m not too hungry.”

“Liar. You just don’t like Chinese.”

“Well, that too.”

“And you’re too sweet a niece to say no to me when I suggest Happy Charlie’s.”

“I am sweet. That’s true.”

“OK, so, can I make a judgmental observation about the way you live your life, Tel?”

“Would saying ‘no’ stop you?”

“Not really.”

“Then go ahead, Annie. I put down my chopsticks and pour some more jasmine tea into my ceramic cup.

“I think...How shall I put this? I just think that you will never fall in love if you keep running from the past.”

“What past would that be?”

“You know.”

“And who says I want to fall in love?”

“Well, don’t you?” She’s right. I do. I do want what everyone else seems to have had at one point or another. Tuck, for one. Tuck met Sasha sophomore year in college and the two of them are about as disgusting and in love as I imagine a couple can be. There’s a part of me that aches for that, to feel the way about someone that Tuck feels about Sasha. Sometimes, just sometimes when I am feeling at my crawl-under-the-covers-and-cry worst, I even wish Tuck felt that way about me. And I about him. But I know that’s just loneliness.

“No,” I lie, and Annie sees through it. She pulls a face. “Well I wish I could want it, but I don’t. Does that make sense? Sometimes I think I’m crazy for not wanting it. I mean, there are all these nice guys out there: Jake, and a guy I dated last year, C. J.”

“And Tuck.”

“Tuck is a friend. Why doesn’t anyone get that? You and Caro and Rox are always suggesting there’s more. It’s like suggesting there’s more there with my brother.”

“You don’t have a brother.”

“Yes I do; Tuck! He’s the closest thing I’ve got. Don’t gross me out by suggesting otherwise.”

“But I remember that time you guys visited me when you were just out of high school. Remember?”

“Annie, we were kids. Tuck just had a crush. That’s all. He’s seriously involved with this girl Sasha, and they both moved to D.C. for his new job, so that’s that. End of story.”

“Fine,” Annie replies, her mouth puckered in smile.

“And getting back to my love life, yes, sometimes I wish I could find someone and fall madly in love, like in the movies. But that hasn’t happened yet and maybe it won’t. And in the meantime, I’m not unhappy. So, I don’t think there’s really a problem. Or that I am running from anything.”

“Well,” Annie says, pushing aside her bowl and resting her elbows on the table, “I just gotta say, kiddo, that you remind me a lot of me in some ways. I’d hate for you to grow up and be alone. I’m a lost cause,” she laughs. “But you’ve got so much to offer. I just think there’s a lot you haven’t dealt with respect to your dad. I think it’s really the root of your troubles here, and you need to take a better look at it. That’s all.”

“And do what, run to the nearest jackass who professes love for me? Like my mom? No thanks, Annie. If that’s what you’re saying, I pass. No offense, but I prefer to be alone than to sacrifice myself for a man. A jerk at that.”

“Penny is not the best example. I’m not saying that you should be like her, Tel. But, on the other hand, she’s happy. She’s moved on. You haven’t. It’s like you’re still waiting for him to come back.”

“I just don’t understand how someone can leave a family and never look back.”

“I know.”

“I mean, divorce is one thing. But how do you leave a child that you seemed happy with, seemed like a good father to, and then – poof! Just disappear for years at a time?”

“He was a good father to you, Tel. He really was.”

“Until he wasn’t. Sometimes I wonder if I dreamed it. If it was all a fantasy, all those summers in Rockport and the stories before bed and the snow forts and drawing contests. Sometimes I think that it can’t have happened.”

“It did. But he changed. He freaked, decided he wanted something else.”

“Well that really sucks.”

“Big time. I’ll be the first to tell you that my little brother is a shit.”

“Where are you going with all this, Annie?” I sigh. These conversations drain me.

“I just want you to know that I think you’re great. That you’ve got a lot to offer someone someday, and if you don’t start to realize that, you may miss your chance. And that you’ve got to get over this thing with your dad. It’s doing a number on you, not to mention the poor guys you date.”

“Annie, I appreciate it, but let’s drop it, OK? I have a headache and this isn’t my favorite conversation.”

“Sure. I’m just trying to look out for you.”

“I know. You always are.”

Memory: Summer 1983, six years old

I reached my hand into the barrel of ice and dug around for the right can. I pulled up a gleaming Pepsi, then a diet Pepsi, then a Dr. Pepper. My hand was growing numb and I couldn’t find it. “Dad? I can’t find a root beer.”

“Let’s see what we can do.” He rolled his shirtsleeve up and dug his hand into the ice up to his elbow. He made funny “yowser” faces, as if he were in terrible pain from the

cold. On the second try, he pulled up a dripping A&W root beer. “Ta-da! They’ll need to amputate my arm, but it was worth it.”

“Can I pick out the lobsters?”

“Yeah, quickly. We gotta get home or Mom’s going to have my head.”

I walked over to the bubbling tank, longer than my parents’ bed and as deep as I was tall. I liked to take my time picking out the lobsters. I tried to find the darkest one in the tank, because my mom always said they were the tastiest. I pressed my face close to the glass and looked for the perfect ones. The man behind the tank stood over me, his net poised.

“That one,” I said, pointing at a fat, dark one in the corner that scratched its legs against the bottom. The man dipped the net into the water and covered him on the first try; two nearby lobsters scurried away. He brought the lobster up, dropped him into a plastic bag, and twisted the top shut.

“And that one,” I said, pointing to one as dark as blackberry syrup, crawling impatiently over the backs of several others.

“Anything else?” the man grunted to my dad after putting the two bagged lobsters in a large paper bag. I could hear them piffing against the plastic inside.

“Just the soda.”

“Eight-fifty.” My dad handed over a ten, and, as usual, I took the change.

“Thanks,” I said, and the man seemed amused. As we left the fish market, I sniffed the bill and coins to see if they smelled fishy.

Later, the three of us sat on the rock wall, pulling the lobsters apart and dipping their speckled-red meat into plastic dishes of melted butter.



“Tellie, use a napkin,” my mother warned as butter ran down my chin and dripped onto my shorts. She sighed.

“She’s alright,” my dad said, sucking the juice from a leg.

“Yeah, I’m alright.” I took a long sip from my root beer and burped. “Scuse me.” My mom sighed again, and my dad laughed.

Down below we could hear the surf rocking against the wall, spluttering and plopping like the water in my bathtub. Occasionally, a little spray would shoot up and spritz us. A few hungry gulls circled overhead, crying, in the hopes that we might be generous.

“I love lobster,” I said, my mouth full.

“It shows,” my mom replied. My dad reached over and mussed up my hair affectionately.

## Book IV

September 1998, twenty-one years old

i.

*You're a little flirty. It's fun. You think of it as something temporary, something a little childish that's leftover, like residue, from your youth. You can still be a flirt and get away with it; you're not really all grown up yet. You don't feel grown up, and you don't see it when you look in the mirror. You feel fun and flirty, old enough to drink legally, pay your own car insurance on the beat-up gray Volvo Grammy bought you after freshman year, sleep with almost-men, to have "relationships"; old enough to rent an apartment by yourself on Route 63, an old New England house broken up into apartments with drafty windows and an overgrown backyard, to convince the landlord to let you paint the walls (all by yourself) a periwinkle blue with turquoise trim, to find an abused dresser at the Hadley flea market, strip it down in the backyard and paint it a slick lemon yellow, with no help. But you still feel young enough that you can watch your favorite movie on video – The Sound of Music – and sing along with it, young enough to drive, a little hung over, with your friends to the greasy diner in Montague on Sunday mornings and smoke cigarettes and dip white toasted bread in syrupy egg yolk and smile about how drunk you all were last night and know that life won't always be this way but hope that it kind of is. Young enough that you can hook up with a guy from your Tuesday-Thursday African History class and it's no big deal; you can see him again the following week and smile hello, not make too much of it, no strings attached. Young enough that the graduate students ignore you entirely, lighting up cigarettes on their way out the English*

*Department door without offering you even a glance. Young enough that you can be flirty – at work, in classes, with the waiter at the pub downtown, and it's nothing but a good bit of fun, of sliding through these last few years; you are something between cute and beautiful, something between girl and woman.*

It's a hot September afternoon, two days before school starts, and Mike and I are hanging out at his new house in South Amherst. I'm sprawled out on the couch with my sweating iced tea bottle propped on my bare stomach, and Mike is sitting in the gray felt lazy boy, wearing only khaki shorts and flip-flops. Each of us waits for the swiveling fan to come back in our direction.

Mike and I have spent the morning moving his things from the rental van into the house, not an easy task with the humidity. Mike's my best guy friend at school. Caro and Rox are definitely my closest girl friends, but Mike is an English major, and we have a more book-y, intellectual connection. I met him sophomore year in Professor Swanger's British Literature 201 class. At first I thought he was kind of a lughead: he had a thick Boston accent, wore his hair all tousled and gelled, and swaggered – a cocky Irish-Catholic Boston swagger. He liked to speak up in class and was constantly needling the professor about her finer points. "I don't think the devil is the devil," he said of *Paradise Lost*. "Milton makes him seem way too appealing. No way he wants us to fear him."

"Well, where do you see that, Michael? Show us." Professor Swanger smiled, tight-lipped and ironically. "Show us Milton's likeable devil."

"It's all over the place. It's not one specific passage, but the tone. The tone of voice he gives the devil, because he's so...so smug. It's like he knows what we're all going to say in defense of God and heaven, he already knows the whole argument. I just think Milton's kind of making fun of the reader."

Swanger would just nod and smile, never quite conceding Mike's points. She seemed amused by his attempts to deconstruct, pleased with herself that someone who

looked like a townie was so interested in Milton's intentions at all. I wondered a few times if she wasn't thinking – behind that ironic little smile – what it would be like to undress him. He wasn't bad looking, and he was in shape – a skinny but muscular guy, like a rock-climber.

Once, over a smoke outside the building after class, I joked that Swanger wanted him. He just smiled. "What makes you think she hasn't already had me?"

"That would explain why you're always getting better grades on your paper, you prick."

"Oh no," he said, looking all serious. "I get better grades because I'm a better writer than you. I'm just in it for the sex. I don't need to bribe her for grades." We were kidding, but there was something so familiar about our banter – something reminiscent of Tuck – that I was drawn to him immediately. We were soon hanging out a lot, drinking coffee at Buzz's and giving each other dating advice.

Two years later, we're starting our senior year. Mike's just moved in with some friends from work: Zoe, a petite adopted Korean girl who weighs about as much as a cat and has a tongue that can slice you open; she's intimidating as hell but the kind of person you desperately want to be friends with. "Whoa, looks like Mike's got a new lady friend," she said flatly when Mike introduced us.

"Nah, this is my good friend. We go way back, right Tel?"

"Yeah. Since sophomore year." I nodded lamely. Zoe was at least a foot shorter than me, but I felt tiny. "English buddies."

“That’s really cute. You guys could be the mascot for the English department. Hey, anyone seen Orange Man?” Orange Man was her overfed tabby. “I can’t find that little dink anywhere.”

“I think I saw him in C. J.’s room. Sleeping in the laundry pile.”

“Gross. You’d think my cat could be a little more sophisticated in his tastes.” She ran a white hand through her chin-length hair. “I’m gonna see if he’s still there. Nice to meet you, Tellie. Hope the mascot job works out.”

I am most intrigued, though, about Mike’s other new roommate, C. J. He was in a world lit class of mine freshman year, and I drooled over him from across the room. Back then he had long blond hair and an embroidered rope necklace with a small crystal dangling from it. It’s the crystal I remember most, a pale amethyst, hanging right into the little dip between his collar bones. C. J. and I never spoke a word to each other outside of class that year. He was a sophomore and the way he spoke in class – about things like the American dairy sham and the ethnocentric, biased journalism at National Geographic – made me shy. I watched *Party of Five* every Wednesday night with my friends, didn’t like pot, and shopped for underwear at Victoria’s Secret; A guy who wore a crystal would sneer at me.

But now C. J. is in his fifth year and he works with Mike at the Brewery downtown. He’s cut all his hair off – it’s glinty-blond and cut close to the scalp – and no longer wears his crystal necklace, which I haven’t had the nerve to ask him about. But he’s just as cute as ever – cuter maybe. He’s gained weight since freshman year, which makes him more attractive – a little doughy and soft looking; huggable. I’m pretty pleased that Mike has serendipitously wound up rooming with my freshman-year crush. I

told him so, and he raised an eyebrow at me. “Is that right?” he asked, and didn’t say more.

Now, after spending the morning helping Mike move in, my curiosity gets the better of me. “Where’re your housemates?”

Mike rolls his head to one side and wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. “Zoe’s working today and I don’t know where C. J. is. He left this morning when I got here with the van.” As if on cue, the screen door hisses open and C. J. comes in.

“Hey! You got moved in.” Mike nods.

“We’re now dying of heat,” I explain, pulling my shirt down over my stomach.

“I was thinking of heading up to Crook’s Dam for a swim. You guys wanna go?”

“Where’s that?” Mike asks.

“Near Northampton. You’ve never been?” We both shake our heads. “Well, shit, let’s go, guys. It’s awesome. Usually there’s nobody there. Is that your car, Tellie?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. Are we going or what?” Mike looks exhausted, sprawled out in the Lazy Boy.

“C’mon, Mike,” I say. “It beats sitting around here waiting for the fan to come to you.”

“Yeah, O.K.”

“My car doesn’t have A.C., though.” I stand up, and the back of my shorts stick to my thighs.

“As long as you’ve got windows, we’re cool. I’ll get some towels.”



C. J. gets us a little lost on the way, but after stopping for directions at a farm stand, we get there. I park in an empty lot behind an abandoned restaurant, and C.J. points us to a path through the tall, leafy trees. With a towel slung over my shoulder, I slide down the pebbly dirt path in my flip-flops, supporting myself against the trees. Ahead of me, Mike – still shirtless – slips a little and slides a few feet like a surfer, arms flailing for balance. “Fuck,” he says, which sounds like “fahk” with his Boston accent. “I stubbed my fahking toe.” He slides to a stop against an oak tree whose leaves are just beginning to turn.

“You OK?” C. J. asks from up ahead. He doesn’t need to hold onto any trees.

“Yeah,” Mike huffs, sounding annoyed, and we continue on.

I hear the rushing sound of water first. Then the smell hits me, a musty, rain-water smell – like freshly turned earth – and suddenly we are standing at the foot of a pond the color of over steeped tea. There are large, sloping rocks at the edge and a man-made waterfall off to one side where the water tumbles from twenty feet above, probably from a local river, and slaps the water below. No one in sight.

C. J. lets out a hoot, a wild yawp – as my dad loved to say – takes three giant leaps over the rocks, and heaves himself up out over the water, crashing into it. He surfaces, as slick as a seal, blond scalp gleaming, and lets out a long sigh. “C’mon, you yellow-bellies! What are you waiting for?” His smile is to die for, and I imagine what that smile would feel like pressed up against mine.

Mike runs and does a jack-knife into the middle of the pond, spraying me with fat droplets. The guys swim in their shorts while I strip down to my bra and underwear. Mike and C. J. – both treading water now – politely make a point of not watching me as I take

off my shorts, then t-shirt, then flip-flops and tiptoe down the hot rocks to the water's edge. I dip my right foot in, and my toes curl at the cold. "It's freezing," I say.

"Nah. Only at first. Just jump," C. J. says, and Mike nods in agreement.

"I'm not a jumper."

"And if we just splash the hell out of you?" C. J. raises an arm, as if to strike it against the surface and douse me.

"Just give me my time. I'm coming." I dip a full calf in and watch my pale leg under the surface. The water is deep brown against my white skin. Sediment and flecks of rock spin by. "It looks like miso soup."

"What the fahk is that?" Mike asks.

"Japanese soup," C. J. answers, dipping his head back into the water, his chin pointing to the sky. "Haven't you ever swam in a river before? Or a lake?"

"Not really," I say, thinking about it. "We're beach people. We were always on the coast." Suddenly, I change my mind. I'll never get in all the way like this. I peer out about three feet ahead of me, to a murky spot that reflects the tops of the trees, and propel myself out in a dive. My father always told me never to dive into water I can't see into, and I feel a flash of guilt when my fingertips break the surface, and then relief as I pass through the water and don't hit anything. The cold shocks my skin, pinpricks me all over. I break the surface, water dripping from my hair and face. "Holy shit that's cold," I say.

"Feels good, though, right?" C. J. asks, his head still dropped back, facing up.

"I guess."

"Makes my balls shrivel up," Mike says.

"Ew. Please refrain from any more descriptions like that."

“Well, it’s true. Right C. J.?”

“‘Fraid so, Tellie. Just a fact.”

The sounds of everything around us fill my ears: the thrashing sound of water from the waterfall, and the wild, electric buzz of those bugs that make noise in the heat. What are those called? Cicadas? And there is a lonely bird or two, twittering up high in one of the trees. I dip my head back and float. C. J. was right; the water is starting to feel less cold. I move my hands and legs to keep me floating and stare up at the trees. The tops of them look burned, as if – like Icarus – they tried to get too close to the sun and were singed. There’s always something sad about fall, something a little raw and dangerous, every time it comes. My dad left in the last days of summer. And Daniel, too, when he went off to college.

Underwater, my ears pick up different noise. I can hear the waterfall’s pounding, like a giant cauldron of boiling water. I hear the sound of rocks on the bottom clicking and rubbing against each other. And an echo-y noise, like an ultra-sound, as everything above the surface – all the sunshine and heat and birds and turning leaves – is dampened by the brown river water. It’s as if nothing above the surface even exists; my face still feels the afternoon sun, but my ears – chilled below the water – pick up a different frequency, one without light. I let the water bob me up and down and I try to stay as buoyant as possible. I remember the summer I was eight, up at our rental place in Rockport, when the coast guard pulled a dead body from the water and I was right there, watching, as they heaved his dripping, leaden corpse from the sea. I remember his legs and bare ass – he was naked from the waist down – white as a fish’s belly. His red parka,

the color of fresh blood, so vibrant against his skin. Just thinking about it now makes me want to throw up.

I straighten up like a pin, lift my head out of the water to hear the noise: the cicadas trilling, the waterfall, the birds, and Mike and C. J. talking. The sounds underneath the water have crept me out, and I realize I can't see my feet. Everything below my waist is obscured by the tea-colored water. I don't like the idea of not being able to see my own feet, or to see the bottom for that matter. Who knows what's down there? Snapping turtles. Trash. Cadavers. I kick a quick little breaststroke back towards the rocks, reach the side, and hoist myself up. I lay face down on the burning, flat rock, water streaming off me in cold rivulets. I catch my breath and try to warm up.

"Hey, Tel, how come you're getting out?" C. J. asks.

"Just cold."

"You're all skin and bones, that's why."

"Yeah." But it isn't the cold that's making me shiver. It's the feeling that something in that water would like to pull me down feet first and drag me to the bottom. A human shipwreck. "I'm just gonna tan a little bit here in the sun. Feels good." And it's true; I have never felt so glad to have a bit of sun on my back.

iii.

*Sometimes you want to be ugly; you don't want men to even look at you.*

*Your mother used to recite that rhyme to you: Monday's child is full of grace, Tuesday's child is fair of face; Wednesday's child is full of woe, Thursday's child has far to go. You can't remember the rest, but you asked her to recite it again and again. You were born on a Tuesday, and every time she came to the part about Tuesday's child, she would take your small face in her hand and gently squeeze your cheeks, as if she were proud of you for being born on a Tuesday. As if you had accomplished something by not being a Wednesday's child, full of woe. "Lucky you," her palms, pressing your face, seemed to say.*

*But lately you don't feel lucky. You wish that people would stop noticing you at all. That men would stop staring on the bus, trying to catch your eye. That your waiter wouldn't flirt with you when he brings you the check. That boys you know would stop falling in love with you left and right.*

*It sounds egotistical. You can imagine what your friends would say if you told them you wished guys would stop falling for you, how they would mock you for your "bad luck." But your friends don't get that it's not that you're annoyed, that it bothers you; it's that you can't say no. You can't stop yourself from falling for them. You are a sucker for any man who loves you. A fool. And knowing this doesn't help you stop. It just makes the lonely feeling inside you swell, like a badly-sprained joint. You still fall over and over again into the same traps, never learning. You're beauty has brought men to your feet,*

*taken you places, but now you see that it's got no intention of stopping. You do not know how to moor yourself; you, my dear, are adrift.*

My mother remarried when I was a senior in high school. Roger. She met him in October and was married by April. I was the maid of honor in her wedding, at which the only other guests were Roger's parents – withered, cold Needham octogenarians – his sister, and Grammy. It was a miserable April day, cracked ice puddles in the middle of the church lawn, a low, gray sky, wind. The service was fast and chilly, the clanking heaters in the back of the parish not enough to warm us. Afterward, my mom's happy smile lighting up the car, we drove to Carla's, the place with white Christmas lights year round, and had champagne, shrimp cocktail, and quiche.

I hated Roger. I hated him from the minute I met him, and not because I was upset that my mom was dating. I was happy that she had started to date. I thought she had given up after my father, and I thought she was too young to give up. So, when she told me in October that she had started seeing someone, I was excited. I imagined a stepfather, stepsiblings, big family dinners on Sundays.

But I realized this would never be the case the first time he came to our house. My mom had been out with him a few times, and I suppose she wanted to introduce him to me before things went any further. I had helped my mom make lunch that day – homemade red pepper and artichoke heart ravioli and salad with a balsamic vinaigrette. I was proud that I had made the vinaigrette on my own, experimenting with ingredients until I found a nice balance of mustard, vinegar, garlic, and – my secret addition – honey.

Roger wasn't how I imagined him, which was tall and blond, kind and slightly awkward, like Ed Begley Jr. Instead, he had hard eyes, like two chips of coal. He had beautiful black hair, wavy and thick enough to advertise shampoo, and wide eyebrows to

match, turned down in a permanent frown as if he were constantly pondering a difficult question or disappointed. He was older than my mom, in his early fifties, and had been married twice with no kids.

“Hello, Telemaka,” he said, his arm straight out to me. “Pleased to meet you.” He seemed about as pleased as a new student on the first day of school. He handed me his coat and gave a strained smile.

During lunch, my mother was genial, asking Roger all kinds of questions about his job and oohing and ahing over the responses. It was enough to turn my stomach to see her so smitten by him; I knew right then that my mom had terrible taste in men. My father had wandered to other beds, warm bodies, and then finally away. Roger had less affection than a tic.

“Interesting dressing,” he said without looking up, his eyes down on the plate, as if facing a tough job. “Sweet.” He made the word an insult. My mother, ever clueless, just smiled and wrinkled up her nose cutely.

“Tellie made it. She loves to cook. She’s a big help in the kitchen.”

Later, after coffee, we three took a walk around the neighborhood, my mother’s suggestion. As we walked, I hung back so the two of them could chat alone. But Roger walked three steps ahead of my mother the whole time, looking up at the trees with his frown. Surely my mom could see that any man who walked ahead of her was not going to offer her a life of warmth and loving, right?

Even after the wedding, in the car on the way to Carla’s, she leaned over on his shoulder affectionately and sighed. “I love you, Rog.” From the backseat I watched



Roger reach up and pat her on the side of the cheek, consoling her for doing something as stupid as falling in love when it was clearly a matter of convenience.

By the end of my senior year of high school, I couldn't wait to get out of the house. My relationship with my mom – which had never been overly close – soured, a squeeze of lemon juice in a cup of milk. We fought constantly. Once she slapped me, but I probably deserved it. I had called her pathetic for letting Roger walk all over her. “You’re pathetic,” I said. “It’s disgusting to watch.”

Come July, my mother packed me off to Annie’s. “You’re going to go to New York for a week to stay with your aunt. You haven’t seen her in years, and she’s really excited to have you.” She tried to make the trip sound like a treat and not a deliberate attempt to get rid of me.

“Whatever.”

“Start packing kiddo. You leave tomorrow.” My mom wavered between pathetic and tough, and when she got tough – which, apparently, she only did with me – there was no arguing with her without making things exponentially worse.

“Why didn’t you just send me today? Then you could’ve had a whole extra day to yourselves without me.” I wanted the remark to sting, to make her feel guilty.

“Because Annie couldn’t have you until tomorrow. I want you packed up by dinner.” She flipped a kitchen towel over her shoulder and walked out of my bedroom, leaving the door open. I slammed it shut for effect.

I filed off the bus with everyone else, and a mother with a fussy baby behind me huffed, “Can you all go *ennie* slower?” I thanked the bus driver who didn’t even acknowledge me, found my bag upside down next to the bus, and thought: what now?

And then Annie appeared, shouting my name sharply over the heads of bleary-eyed travelers coming and going through the terminal. I smiled. It had been at least five years since I had seen her and I had worried I wouldn’t recognize her. But now she was rushing towards me, bony and energetic as ever. She looked like a Twinkerbelle version of my dad; her reddish-orange hair cut boy short and left messy on top. Lime-green reading glasses dangled on a beaded chain around her neck. Her earrings were a complicated layering of triangles that jangled as she hugged me. “Tellie! You are such a lady now! Gosh, the last time I saw you...Are you hungry?”

“No, I’m OK.” Annie studied my face for signs of hunger and decided I was telling the truth.

“Give me that.” She wrenched the bag from my hand and set off. “Let’s blow this Popsicle stand.”

We hailed a cab and squished in the back with my bag. The inside of the car smelled like already-chewed gum. “Twenty-six and Lex,” Annie said to the driver, and then, turning to me, “I’m so glad to have my favorite niece here.” Annie’s old line; I was her only niece. I laughed at the joke that used to annoy me and felt secretly glad that my mom had sent me away for the week.

“So,” Annie said, handing me a warm mug of tea. There was a little stick of rock candy submersed in it. “How’s your mom?”

“Fine.”

“What’s she up to these days?” Annie twirled the stick and blew on her tea. “By the way, careful. It’s boiling hot.”

“She’s still working at the gallery. She hates her boss, but she says the hours are good. I don’t know if she’ll quit or not, though. Roger doesn’t want her to work.”

“Oh?”

“He’s a total asshole.”

“Give him a chance, Tel.”

“No. That’s not what I mean. He’s not nice, even to her. It bugs me that she doesn’t see it. Now she just nods at everything he says, like it’s her job or something. It’s gross.”

“Oh, Tel.” Annie sighed and sat back into the worn, melon-pink chair. A flurry of dust whooshed out of the top and swirled around in the sunlight. “Your mom is a really great lady. Really great. I remember so well when Roland brought her home. My mom – Nance – couldn’t even find fault with her, and she found fault with every single one of his girlfriends. No one was ever good enough for Roland until your mom came along and charmed us all. By then, you know, Dad had died. A blessing, really...But, what I want to say is that you’re mom is a great, great lady.” I nodded, but I wasn’t in the mood for appreciate-your-mom speeches. I was seventeen and my mom had just married a total jerk who hated me and treated my mom like she was a little girl who needed to be instructed on all of life’s issues. “But,” Annie said, leaning forward in the chair, looking as if she wanted to choose just the right words. “Your mom does not have a good *sense* when it comes to men.”

“What do you mean? Like taste?”

“No, not taste. Your mom – at least what I saw with your dad – was too lenient. Too forgiving. I assume you know why they broke up?”

“The affair with that woman at Dad’s school?” Annie nodded.

“Although that was just the icing on the cake, really. Your dad just isn’t the marrying type, Tel. I think he really loved your mom and tried, gave it his best shot, but it wasn’t for him. In the end, I think he started to walk all over your mom a bit, too – seeing other women and not hiding it. I was surprised Penny put up with it, but she did. I guess she figured he’d always come back.”

“I used to think he would come back,” I admitted. I had saved all of his postcards, from all over the world, and the birthday cards that arrived every year just before my birthday, in a box under my bed. It was getting so full that the top could only be half closed.

“I know, sweetie. Oh, I know you did. I wish he had. I wish he had been the father you needed.”

“I just don’t get how you can leave a kid. Poof. Gone.”

Annie nipped at her tea, testing it. She seemed satisfied by the temperature and took a long sip. “I’m guessing that he thought you were in good hands with your mom. That she would be enough mom to make up for his absence.” Annie paused and looked out the window. “To tell you the truth, Tellie, I don’t get it either. I never quite understood your dad. He just lives for himself, I guess, which is one reason we were never that close.” Annie relaxed back in the chair, pulled the mug of tea close to her

chest. She looked satisfied, as if confessing my mom's dependence on men was a weight off her shoulders.

The silence in Annie's apartment was surprising; the only sound I could hear was the knock-knocking of her cuckoo clock in the kitchen. I was feeling the pull of sleep. "I think I might take a little nap, Annie. Is that OK? I'm tired after the trip."

"Of course. I have the guest room all made up. Do you want to finish your tea first?" I nodded and took a sip; it was syrupy sweet. I preferred tea the way my mom made it: bitter.

I slept for what felt like a long time and woke to Annie's gentle shaking. "Tel, sweetie, you have a phone call. Tucker." I scrambled from the sheets and shuffled to the kitchen in my socks to grab the plastic receiver of an old beige phone with a rotary dial.

"Hello?" I croaked, and Tuck laughed.

"How's the Big Apple?"

"How did you get this number?"

"Your mom."

"Are you guys up in New Hampshire?" Tuck spent most of the summer at his grandparents' place at Loon. I hadn't seen him since we had both graduated at the end of May.

"No, Seth and I are in Needham. Hey, listen, Seth's driving into the city tomorrow to see some friends from school. He's only staying one night, but I thought maybe I'd come in with him and we could hang out. What do you think?"

“Great. Shouldn’t be a problem with my aunt. I’m going to be here for a week, anyway.”

“The thing is that there’s no room for me at Seth’s friend’s apartment. It’s a studio that is apparently smaller than a Post-it and there are already a bunch of guys staying there. Do you think your aunt would let me crash one night at her place?”

“Hold on. Let me ask.”

“Tell her I’m house-trained.”

“Hold on.” Annie was in the living room in the pink chair, feet up on the coffee table, reading a book. I asked her if it was OK.

“It’s fine with me,” she chirped over the top of the book. She plucked her lime-green glasses from her nose and, with dramatic seriousness, added, “But he sleeps on the *couch*.”

I puckered my face in a show of disgust. “Annie, we’re just friends.”

I went back to the kitchen and told Tuck it was all set. “Sweet,” he said. “This is going to be so much fun.”

Annie cooked chicken with a mushroom cream sauce while I made the salad for dinner, and my heart pulled at the smell of the dish. It was one of my dad’s specialties, one of the few meals he made. The creamy smell of the mushroom soup filled my nose with him, brought him back sharply.

“Dad used to make that.”

“Yeah, it’s one of Nance’s dishes. I’m surprised that Roland ever learned to cook it. As far as I knew, the only time I saw him in the kitchen was to eat.”

Annie poured two glasses of white wine and the outside of the glasses fogged up. She ladled the chicken sauce over plates of rice, put them on the small kitchen table, and sat down. She toasted to my first year of college and took a sip of wine. “Now, tell me about Tuck. Is he your boyfriend?”

“No, I told you. We’re just friends. He’s my neighbor.”

“Uh-hunh.”

“He’s like a brother to me.”

“So no boyfriends at all? You’re too pretty not to have a boyfriend.”

“Um, I don’t know. I have a couple guys I’m seeing right now.” Annie’s eyes bugged out.

“A *couple*?”

“Yeah, you know. None of them is like a boyfriend or anything.”

“‘None’ of them? As in there are three or more?”

“Well, two from school and one from my town. It’s no big deal though. Nothing serious.” I had been sort of dating this one guy from my class, but he went off to Florida to golf camp and I hadn’t heard from him in weeks. The other two had just been hook-ups.

“Oh, lord, Tellie.” Annie put down her fork and shook her smiling head from side to side. “You’re a little wonder, aren’t you?”

“No. I just like company.” It was the truth.

“Be careful, Tel.”

“OK.”

“I’m serious.”

“OK,” I said, laughing. “But it’s really no big deal. Just fun. I’m young, you know.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus.”

“What?”

Annie pointed her fork at me. “That is what your dad used to say.”

I woke the next morning to rain, the sound of drops hitting the window. I already knew what would be outside: the sky, heavy with gray clouds would be low over the city, smothering tall buildings, cutting them in two. The street would be wet, black pavement made blacker by the night’s rain, the sound of tires rolling over puddles and spraying the curb. Drivers would have on their lights, distorted by clinging rain drops. Umbrellas would be battling for sidewalk space.

I groaned, didn’t feel like walking around the city in the rain. Why couldn’t it be sunny the one day Tuck comes? “Oh, crap.”

“What was that?” Annie shouted from the kitchen.

“It’s raining!” I called from bed. Annie opened the door to my room. She was wearing a fuchsia terrycloth robe, glasses perched on her head. “I know,” she said, turning her mouth down in a mock frown. “Bummer for you and your friend.” She leaned against the doorframe and crossed her arms. “But you better get ready; it’s eleven.”

My hair refused to dry in wet weather. I had pulled it back in a ponytail and it hung in one long, dirty-blond tail from my head, soaking through the back of my shirt. I was



debating with myself whether or not to blow-dry it so it wouldn't frizz when the buzzer sounded. Tucker.

I raced to the front door and pressed all the plastic buttons, since I didn't know which one opened the downstairs door. I heard a sturdy click through the intercom and I realized I hadn't even bothered to see if it was him. I could hear someone jogging up the stairs. "Tuck?" I called down.

"No, pizza delivery," he called back just as he rounded the landing below and came into view. He had on a green rain jacket with a hood that obscured his face. I waited in the doorway, happier than I had expected. When he got to Annie's landing, he flipped his hood back, sending little drops flying. He reached in to hug me, a ring of wetness around my waist.

"Yuck! Don't get me wet, Tuck!"

"I can't help it if you get wet because you're happy to see me, Tel." He grinned.

"Ssh! My aunt is here. No dirty jokes."

I motioned Tuck inside just as Annie appeared. "Well!" She clapped her hands together lightly. "You must be Tucker." She helped him get his coat off and step out of his soggy, gray sneakers.

"It's nice to meet you Mrs. Miller," Tuck said, reaching his hand out. "Sorry for bringing half the Atlantic in with me."

"Good to meet you, too, Tucker. Call me Annie. I think some hot tea is in order, no?" She looked back and forth between me and Tuck.

"Sounds perfect," Tuck replied, and Annie shooed us into the living room to sit down.

After the tea, Annie claimed she had to run a zillion errands. She snapped on a turquoise slicker, dug her feet into waterproof boots, and hooked an umbrella over her wrist. “It’s Warhol,” she said smiling. We stared back at her blankly, and she popped open the umbrella: a cartoonish Marilyn Monroe appeared on each panel of the umbrella in a different color. “Cool.” I liked that Annie was so funky. She was the antithesis of my mom, who was so New Englandy. So Boston WASP.

Annie left an extra set of keys on the kitchen counter, and when she closed the heavy front door and bolted it (just to be safe), Tuck reached over and playfully grabbed my hand. “It’s so good to see you.”

“I know. You’re all tan and blond,” I said, tousling his already-messy hair.

“And you’re so pale. What have you been doing all summer, working in a sweatshop?”

“I wish. It’d be more interesting than hanging out with Roger and Penny.”

“Still a dick?”

“A huge one. Whatever. I’m just glad to be here for a week. I think my mom wanted it to be like a punishment or something, but so far it’s been nice. Maybe I’ll spend the rest of the summer here. I don’t know. Where should we go today?”

Tuck leaned back on the couch, his arm bent behind his head. “Wherever, darlin’. I am a New York virgin.”

“Yeah, well me too.”

“You? A virgin? That’s a laugh.”

“I said no dirty jokes.”

“Your aunt’s not even here. But since I am still officially a virgin in both senses,” Tuck said, turning towards me, “we could just stay here and take care of that.”

“You are unbelievable. OK, let’s check out the Guggenheim. Annie says that’s good.”

“If you prefer.”

“I do. Will you ever grow up, Tuck?”

“Doubt it.”

I was too intimidated by the complexity of the subway, so we zipped around the city all day in cabs, and Tuck insisted on paying. “I got some money from my grandmother for the weekend,” he said, and I knew what that meant. Tuck’s grandparents were loaded. She probably gave him three or four hundred dollars for two days. The cabs themselves reminded me of yellow rockets. Or tanks. So big and thunderous, rolling over potholes, and the occasional curb, with authority. The city was creeping into my veins, a sugar rush, making me giddy. I felt dwarfed by everything – the height, the people, the wet humidity and smell of roasted nuts – made small by it all, in a good way. As if there were more to do and see here than I might get to in a lifetime, but I wanted to start trying right away. Boston was sweet, a candy heart with a familiar message printed on it. New York was like taking my first bite of a lime.

By late afternoon, the rain had stopped and the sky was chopped-up gray. Tuck and I were sitting on a bench in the corner of Central Park, laughing about the time I gave the bus driver the finger in fifth grade. “Oh, Tuck it was awful.”

“It was hilarious, T. I’ll never forget your face. You were sure she hadn’t seen you do it.”

“I know. I didn’t mean for her to see me. I really didn’t. I remember when she opened up the bus door again, yelled out in her witchy voice: ‘I saw that!’ and fear went through me like lightning. Ugh. It still makes me shake!”

“And didn’t she make you sit up front with the little kids for the rest of the year?”

“Yeah. But then I stopped taking the bus. ’Member? I started walking. It was like three miles each way, but I didn’t care. I thought I would make her feel bad by not riding anymore.”

“She was probably glad.”

“I know.”

“You crack me up, T. You were so cute back then.”

“No I wasn’t. I was a total tomboy. And remember when I convinced my mom to let me get a perm?”

“No! I would have remembered that.”

“I did. In fourth grade. I was like this ugly Shirley Temple.”

“No way. I would have remembered.”

“I have pictures. I’ll show you when I get back next week. It was hideous. If I’m ever famous, they will resurface in those celebrity magazines as awful before pictures.” I laughed to myself, remembering, and looked down at the bench. It was a shiny kelly green, painted over many times.

Just then, right as I was thinking about how many layers of paint might be under the final coat, Tuck leaned in and kissed me. I had just enough time to notice that his lips

were soft and that his kiss tasted milky, like his breath, before I pulled away confused, my face twisted into disbelief. I blurted out, “What are you *doing*?” and put my hand against his chest, pushed him back. I looked away and saw from the corner of my eye that he, too, looked away, and I turned to look at him. I could tell from seeing only a fraction of his face that he regretted it. The sun was peaking through sullen clouds, shining down in dusty rays over the city, and we just sat there awkwardly on the hard bench with that kiss between us like a wall, in an instant changing everything.

.

When I woke the next day, I heard Annie humming far off, in her room or in the living room. It was sunny; I could tell from the little corner window that faced the bed. It was going to be a beautiful summer day.

At the kitchen table, I was greeted by a cheery breakfast: two bowls of cereal with the milk in a little ceramic pitcher, sliced banana, two glasses of OJ with pulp floating, and a mug of cold coffee. I put the mug in the microwave for two minutes. Annie even had flowers on the tables. Clean, white daisies.

I sat down with the hot coffee, raised the mug, and took a sip too quickly; the coffee was hot, scalded the roof of my mouth and burned my throat on the way down. I swore, pressed my lips together. I could tell I had burned myself badly, the kind where the roof of your mouth gets shredded. Annie came in and stood in the doorway, a blue-and-white checkered dishtowel in her hands. “What’s up, Tel?”

“Nothing. I just burned my fucking mouth.” I tried the OJ, which stung going down.

“Watch your language, truck driver. Where is Tucker? He isn’t asleep in your room, I hope?” Annie came and sat down across from me. She watched me blow on the coffee roughly, sending ripples across the top.

“No. He went home.”

“When?”

“Last night. Took a seven o’clock bus.” Annie stared at me, not asking anything. “He had some stuff to do, I guess.” I knew it sounded lame, but I didn’t feel like telling the story, reliving Tuck’s embarrassment again. It had been a quiet cab ride back to the empty apartment. The sun came out and shone down on wet New York, blinding me as I looked out the window at the tips of skyscrapers. I spent the rest of the evening alone in my room reading and fell asleep before Annie got home.

Annie understood, got up, patted me on the shoulder as she passed by on her way back to the living room to “catch the dustbunnies.”

I wasn’t sure I could squish everything into my suitcase, which was weird since I hadn’t bought much in New York. The bus to Boston left at noon, and Annie was making a lunch for me to take. Falafel. Whatever that was. Annie yelled from the kitchen, “It’s delish. You’ll love it. A can of cranberry seltzer OK? It’s all I got.”

“Fine.” I was sitting on my bag and trying to zip it up underneath me. When I finally got it closed, bulging on the top, Annie appeared in the door.

“Tel, I thought I would give this to you.” She held out a torn piece of paper with purple writing scrawled over it. “I don’t know if he’s still there or not, but it’s the last address and phone I have for him. From about a year ago. Maybe more.” I took the torn

piece of paper. It was a South Carolina address. I stuffed it deep into the pocket of my jeans.

“Thanks.”

On the cab ride to the station, I felt the paper balled up in my pocket. I wondered if I would dare call, suspected I wouldn’t. I was tired of trying to chase him down. I wanted him to find me for a change. But I would save the number. Maybe tomorrow I’d feel like calling. Or next week. Or in a year. At least it was an address, something he never sent on his postcards.

There was something else I planned to do as soon as I got home, though. I had been thinking about it all week, since the Tuck thing.

When my mom picked me up at the Framingham station, I asked her to stop at the K-Mart. I went in and bought some clippers, \$19.95 with tax. Back home, I dumped my bag on my bedroom floor and called Lizzie, who said she would come over and help me.

“You have to just cut it, like this, first. And then use the clippers.” I held up a long strand of blond hair, using my fingers as if they were scissors.

“OK,” she said, but she looked doubtful. I turned around to face the wall and waited for her to start cutting.

“Go on,” I urged.

“I can’t, Tel.”

“Sure you can. Watch.” I grabbed a clump of hair at the tip, held it out taut, opened the scissors and – *shwip* – cut it all off an inch from the roots. I let the hair fall to the floor in a limp pile. “Now you *have* to. I can’t leave it like this.”

When Lizzie finished with the clippers, which buzzed and vibrated all over my scalp, I had nothing but soft, grayish stubble. My blond hair was all over the floor, like a silk skirt dropped. I ran my hand over my head; little hairs rained down. “I love it.”

“It’s different,” Lizzie said, clippers still in hand, humming. “Sure you won’t hold it against me tomorrow when you decide you hate it?”

In the mirror, my shorn self stared back. I ran both hands over my head several times, letting the stubble tickle them. “It’s perfect.”



October 1998, twenty-one years old

v.

*You have hurt some people, a few boys, along the way. You didn't mean to, but of course you know that wasn't consolation for them. Sometimes you are happy, thinking you've finally gotten through it, the thickety mess of your adolescent love life, and other times you realize that you are still a train wreck waiting to happen.*

*When your father left, your mother would tell you how it was a good lesson for you: Don't ever wind up like that. Don't you ever be as selfish as that man.*

*And now maybe you wonder, despite all the good advice from your mom to not be a cheating, heartbreaking lover like your dad was, if it wasn't your destiny to wind up the same. You study your face in the mirror and see him, and maybe – just like bone structure or the hazel, empty eyes staring back – it's genetic. Maybe you were born to be like this: someone who breaks hearts. Who shreds them, without wanting to but shreds them to a pulp just the same. And the thought makes a blackness spread through your belly and you have to go find something to distract yourself with so you don't completely lose it.*

C. J. is an incredible kisser. We've been sitting on my living room couch – a hand-me-down from Roger's parents, scratchy and stained – kissing for the better part of an hour. C. J. has a tongue ring, which clicks against my teeth occasionally, and I think it's sexy. His dog, a rotweiller named Jackson from the Amherst pound, is circling the living room restlessly, like he's picked up the scent of something. Maybe the promise of sex.

It isn't long before we're fumbling and bumping into one another as we walk to the bedroom. Jackson whimpers and scratches from the other side of my bedroom door as C. J. lays me down on the bed, strips me to just my socks, and runs a flat palm up the length of my bare body, from knee to neck. Jackson barks once, quick and sharp, but C. J. isn't deterred. His dog will have to wait.

I decide to be nice, because I like C.J. I unzip his fly – a floppy, worn corduroy fly – and pull out his hard dick. It's the perfect size – not too long, not too thin, and I slip it between my lips. He sucks in air sharply, and mumbles a little laugh, like, "I can't believe I'm this lucky today." I taste my own bubblegum lip gloss as I slide his penis in and out, sucking when I am supposed to suck, stopping and licking when I am supposed to stop and lick. I read years and years worth of *Cosmo* back in high school to learn the tricks, and the articles have served me well. C. J. groans, and I cup my hands just under his testicles, a kind of choreography I have down now when it comes to blowjobs, and I can feel his dick tense up and get ready to blow. I don't like blowjobs; they're a gagging, spitty mess, but it's a sacrifice I've always been willing to make for the cutest boys. He comes fast into the back of my throat, and I give him one last little suck on the tip for

good measure. He shivers, runs a hand through my chin-length hair. I can taste him all the way down my throat.

“So tell us about this guy, Tel,” Caro says. We’re making smoothies at her and Roxanne’s place, and I’m the official taster.

“Too sour. We need more sugar or something. Or apple juice. Do you have any?”

“I don’t know. Rox?”

“Yeah, up there in that cabinet. I’ll get it.”

“So,” Caro says, swirling the smoothie batter around in the blender. “What’s going on with you and the Dark Crystal boy?”

“Very funny. He doesn’t even wear the crystal anymore. And I told you that it was a freshman crush. He’s really cute. Don’t you remember him? I’m sure I told you about him freshman year.”

“Definitely not. I would have made fun of you for liking a boy who wears crystal necklaces.”

“Why? What’s wrong with guys that wear necklaces?”

“Nothing. It’s crystals that’s the problem. He’s probably one of those weird Qi Gong, incensy vegans. I can’t stand them.”

“You can’t stand hippies, Caro.”

“Exactly.”

“Well he isn’t a hippie. He’s his own person. Not into anything in particular.”

“Well, what does Mike say about the whole thing? And how many times have you slept with C. J.?”

“Just once. I haven’t told Mike yet. Why?”

“Because you’re sleeping with his housemate. Don’t you think he’ll notice when you crawl out of C. J.’s bed at 1 a.m. to light more incense?” Roxanne snorted at this.

“You guys are so mean.”

“You love us, Tel. You love us for our brutal honesty.” Caro winks at me and holds out the blender so I can pour in the apple juice.

Mike and I are driving over to the Book Mill in Montague for lunch and to check out the books. He’s smoking his fourth or fifth cigarette of the car ride. It’s a beautiful late-September day, and we have all the windows of my car down, the wind whipping my hair into my face. I have to hold it back against my forehead to see the road, but I love it. It’s one of the last really warm days of the year.

“So, did C. J. mention anything about me?” I ask loudly over the sound of the air and the radio.

“Nah. Why? You still hung up on him?” He sounds snide, sneering.

“I guess so. I mean, we hooked up the other day.”

“You what?” He turns to look at me, a look that could cut glass.

“We hooked up the other day. He came over with Jackson and, well, you know.”

“Dude, why you gotta mess with my housemate?”

“‘Dude,’ why you gotta say ‘dude’ all the time?”

“I’m serious, Tel. That’s fucked up. I told you I didn’t want you messing around with him.”

“No you didn’t.” I roll up my window to hear him better.

“Yeah I did.”

“No you really didn’t, and what do you care anyway?”

“Forget it. This is just perfect. Just what I need. My best friend and my housemate.”

“What’s the big deal?”

“Just forget it.”

“OK. Whatever.”

“Yeah, exactly.” He turns up the radio – Bruce belting out the chorus of “Glory Days,” – and smokes cigarettes the rest of the way there.

Later, at the Book Mill, Mike is hunkered down in the philosophy section, his nose deep into an Emerson book that looks about as ancient as Emerson himself. Mike has a passion for Emerson I don’t quite understand. For my birthday last year he gave me a copy of his first series of essays, and I could hardly make it through fifteen pages. I tried, but I am more a fan of stories that burn me like a brand, *Anna Karenina* or *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Emerson’s like a stone; he doesn’t ignite.

I’ve picked out a couple books – a first edition of *The Satanic Verses* and a tattered hardcover of Neruda’s poetry – and I’m ready to head back soon. I can see that Mike is engrossed in the Emerson book and that, if I walk up to him right now, he’ll look up at me and recite some quote he finds interesting, expecting me to share his enthusiasm. Instead of subjecting myself to that, I walk out onto the Book Mill’s deck into the bright sun.

The Book Mill is an old mill turned into a used bookstore and restaurant. The view from the deck is of the river rushing by over rocks, moss covered and glossy. I stand

with my arms up on the cracked wooden rail, looking down, entranced by the water slipping underneath me and off down to god-knows-where. Another, bigger river somewhere. Maybe the Atlantic.

I don't really understand why my father became a sailor, how he came to the conclusion that not only he was going to leave us and never really look back, but that he would actually go off and sail. Give up his teaching job and spend his time sailing from port to port. My mom, smoking a nervous cigarette as she sat me down when I was eight and explained, a few days after my dad had left, that he really never was coming back, called him an adolescent Peter Pan. "A mid-life crisis at thirty-four," she spit out. "Sailing. I've never even seen Roland on a boat! Who does he think he is?" She asked the wall. "Anyway...." Her voice was ragged, and she breathed a conical stream of smoke up over her head; that was pretty much the end of her explanation.

I used to get postcards from him from all over the world: Charleston, SC, Valparaiso, Cape Town, Galveston, TX, Jamaica, Ivory Coast, Singapore. I had to look up nearly every single place on a map when they arrived. On the other side, always his big, black scrawl, saying something like: Amazing adventures here in Africa. Ate peanut soup the other night. You would've loved it. XOXO, DAD. No return address, no phone number. In the first years after he left, I used to tape them up on my bedroom wall. I imagined my dad was some kind of Indiana Jones. But in high school, I got sick of his meager correspondence; I was starved for more, and I demoted the cards I had to a box under my bed.

"Hey," Mike says from behind me, and I turn around. He still seems annoyed, which I think is unfair, but he's doing his best to hide it.

“Hey,” I say, leaning further over the railing and staring down at the water.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

“Oh, nothing. My dad. Just remembering how he left. How strange it was.”

“Why strange?”

“Because he just up and left, bought that boat and became a sailor bum. It was really random. Just out of the blue. And then he shows up – like when he invited me to Thanksgiving three years ago – and disappears again. That was the last time I saw him, freshman year.”

“Listen to this,” Mike says, thumbing through the Emerson book. “‘Every ship is a romantic object, except that we sail in. Embark, and the romance quits our vessel, and hangs on every other sail in the horizon.’ I just read that about five minutes ago. Isn’t that weird?”

“I guess.”

“It’s like your dad. You know: off to find something more romantic, exciting, but it’s always just beyond reach.”

“Sounds like him.”

“Weird, huh? Emerson has a quote for everything.”

“If I could send it to him, I would. That’s the first Emerson quote I’ve ever liked.”

“You don’t have his address or anything?”

“Nope.” I watch the moss on the rocks below, wondering why it grows at all.

What its purpose is.

“Doesn’t he live in South Carolina?”

“He left there a couple years ago. I have no idea where he is now.”

“Hold on a sec.” Mike snaps shut the Emerson book and scuffles off, back inside the Book Mill. He’s gone a few minutes and then opens the squeaking deck door, a bottle of wine in hand. I laugh.

“You want me to drink away my sorrows?”

“No, look.” He holds up the bottle and wags it from side to side. “Empty. The kitchen gave it to me. And here’s some paper and a pen. Copy that quote down.”

“Why?”

“Just do it,” he says, smiling, and I do.

“OK. Now what?” Mike folds the paper in half a few times until it’s thin and long, and he uncorks the bottle and slips the paper in. There’s a tiny bit of wine in the bottom, and a small scarlet stain blooms on the tip of the paper. He corks the bottle up tight and hands it to me.

“Launch this baby.”

“Here?” I ask, looking around.

“Yeah. Who cares? Maybe he’ll get it. Probably not, but – hey – at least you sent it, right?”

“What if someone sees me? It’s probably illegal. Littering.”

“No one’s out here. No one’s gonna see you. Just toss it. Good and far, away from those rocks.”

“OK.” I check to make sure there really is no one else around or peaking through the small door window. I take the bottle by the neck and choose a spot about twenty yards ahead of me, where there is a deep pool of river water, just beyond the rocks. I bring my



arm back and throw the bottle as hard as I can. It spins top over bottom and plops into the center of the pool.

“Nice arm,” Mike says, nodding. The bottle bobs to the surface, cork up and angled back, and the current moves it.

“There it goes,” I say excitedly. It skitters over the rocks and under us, out of site, down the river and out to sea.

“Feel better?”

“I wasn’t feeling bad. But that was fun. Thanks.” I squeeze Mike on the arm and he squeezes me back around the waist. It’s a boyfriend-kind-of-thing to do, and for a moment, I wonder if that isn’t his problem after all: maybe he’s jealous of C. J.

Memory: September 1995, eighteen years old

vii.

*Sometimes you feel like a piece of meat. Something hunted down and shot through, sliced open, skinned alive, peeled and exposed while your heart's still beating. Sometimes you wonder how men can live by their groins, a compass that guides them to the next piece of meat. You marvel at this because, while you've hunted, too, it's not the same. You're not in it for sport. You want sustenance.*

Giovani was twenty three, a senior and a marketing major. He had a black beard covering his chin, thick Italian eyebrows. His eyes were hard as bottle caps, cold and gray-green. Giovanni, who always went by Giovanni, worked in the meat department at Good Nature. Like all the other meat-department team members, he wore a long, white coat that buttoned up to his chin and was smeared with pink blood stains by the end of each shift. When he got close enough to me, I could smell the iron odor on him. Little old ladies loved him and he was always flirting with them from behind the counter. “You want a bone with that, Mrs. Reingold? You know what I do with my dog? Stick a little peanut butter inside a bone and let her go at it. She loves it. Here, I’ll give you a bone. No, no. Free of charge for you, Mrs. Reingold. You let me know if your dog likes it and I’ll get you more next time.”

I had never had a real job before. My mother told me that she would pay my tuition but that I was on my own for spending money, so I went out the first week of my freshman year at college and found a job at a health-food store, Good Nature. I didn’t know anything about health foods or customer service or retail at all, but the manager must have seen something he liked in my little bald face, because he hired me on the spot. “We need a grocery team member. A couple afternoons a week and one day on the weekend. Sound good?” I had no idea what my job would be.

“Sounds great.”

During my first week of training with Janine, a local who had dropped out to study polarity healing at a school in Springfield, I met Giovanni. “Nice hair,” he said as I was stacking bags of environmentally friendly charcoal beneath the meat counter. “So are

you a dyke or what?” My fingers instinctively went to my shaved head, to the soft stubble there.

“No,” I said, laughing nervously. “What kind of introduction is that?”

“It’s isn’t an introduction. It’s a question. You never know around here.

Northampton is the dyke capital of the world, you know.”

“I had no idea.”

“I’m Giovanni.”

“Telemaka.”

“Oh, you’re Greek. Too bad.”

“Why?”

“Cuz my grandma hates the Greeks. Says they’re dirty liars. It means you and me can’t get married. At least until my grandma passes.”

“Well, actually, I’m not Greek at all. My dad just loved the Greeks. The writers and philosophers, you know. And why would I marry you?”

“You’ll have to wait and find out, Telemaka.” He pronounced the four syllables of my name slowly, a bad-boy smile on his lips. He had the straightest, whitest teeth I had ever seen; they looked like pure bone.

Janine appeared from behind me. “Are you done yet? I’ve got to show you how to order. You’ll be in charge of ordering for the breads and cereals section, OK? C’mon.” She led me away without speaking a word to Giovanni, who was resting his elbows on the stainless steel meat countertop, watching us.

“Stay away from him,” she whispered in a low voice just as Giovanni called out from behind, “Talk to you later, Greek.”

I loved going to work. The store's smell – a mixture of fresh carrot juice and something bready, like granola – was comforting to walk into on Monday and Wednesday afternoons and Sunday mornings. There was an order to everything: the stocking of items, the re-ordering, the free samples put out daily, the special orders from regular customers stacked up against the basement hall. My favorite job was fronting, pulling all the shelf items forward in twos. We had to front in the middle and end of each shift and after three weeks I became lightening quick. I'd even bitten down my fingernails to accommodate me so I could reach back to grab hold of an item without snagging or breaking my nails. I felt strangely proud at the end of each shift, looking down the rows and rows of expensive health foods and seeing everything perfectly flush. I admitted this to Tuck the first week of work. "Am I a dork for feeling like that? Being proud about lining up a bunch of soup cans?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Thanks, Tuck. Always there to make me feel better." I was pretzled up in my standard-issue dorm chair, a hard, wooden thing with years of ball-point pencil markings all over it. My roommate, Peggy, a desperately homesick girl who cried at night from the top bunk when she thought I was asleep, was watching cartoons on TV, politely ignoring my conversation.

"No, in all seriousness, T, I think it's cool you've got the job. It's probably a good way to meet different people anyway."

"Yeah," I said, looking up at Peggy. Her eyes were fixated on the small TV, a little smile in her eyes. Tom and Jerry. Good lord, I thought. Couldn't they have given me

a roommate who wasn't twelve? I was just glad to have Tuck back; things were dreadfully awkward for us in July after the kiss, but by August, we both sort of agreed to forget about it. Once we were off to school, me to UMass and him to Haverford, it was as if it had never happened.

I wanted to tell Tuck about the other kids on my hall – the guys two rooms down who woke me up nightly with their music blaring, door wide open. A triple of dorky girls who had moved in early to attend marching band camp. Two hippie girls who were sophomores and snooty because of it, not saying hi to any of us freshmen. The only one who seemed remotely normal was a girl down the other end named Caro. She had vintage Spanish film posters up all over her wall, a lava lamp, and a corkboard of beautiful family photographs. When I met her on move-in day, she was wearing a black sweater with buttons made of googly eyes, the kind found on pet rocks. I knew then that I wanted to be her friend. “Yeah, it’s nice to have other options. Socially, I mean.” I didn’t want to make it too obvious how much I disliked my hall already with Peggy right in the room.

But it wasn’t just having non-dorm social options that made work satisfying; it was a little respite, a break, from the overwhelming task of fitting in. It was exhausting to be new to everything, to have to consult maps just to find the right building for class, to not recognize a single face in the dining commons, to keep my head down and try to look as casual as possible walking across campus alone. And having a shaved head didn’t help. Most people did a double take when I spoke to them, a look of disbelief on their faces that a girl like me would have shorn her hair. A few people even asked if I had cancer. So, walking into Good Nature – where I was the only freshman college student worker – was a long, deep sigh. I felt after two weeks that I belonged there. At Good

Nature, everyone wore a nametag and even a college senior marketing major, like Giovanni, went out of his way to talk to me. On campus, he probably would never have looked my way.

“Hey, Greek,” he said to me one rainy October afternoon. I was in the back, piling cases of sparkling water onto a U-cart. “You should work out.” The loading dock door was open and I saw the rain falling steadily outside. It undulated in waves against the green farmland in the distance.

“What?”

“You should work out. How come you don’t work out?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t really get into that so much.” I looked up at him. He was leaning one blood-stained coat arm on the top of the U-cart. He rubbed his beard with clean fingers, and I was suddenly reminded of that game where you drag black magnetic shavings with a little pen over the picture of a man’s face to make him a beard.

“Too bad,” he said. “You should. You’d look real good if you did. Too bad,” he repeated.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” I tried to laugh away the queasy feeling his comment gave me.

“No. It’s an observation. You’d look better if you worked out.”

“Oh well,” I said, waving him away with a hand. “Good thing I don’t really care what you think.” But I did just a little bit. Was he saying I looked fat? Giovanni shrugged and walked away, calling back, “See ya” without turning around. The meat freezer door closed with a thwack behind him.

That night, after work, I was crossing the parking lot – empty except for employee cars – to the bus stop. A car pulled up next to me – a sporty, low one – and the blackened window went down. “Get in, Greek,” Giovanni said. “I’ll give you a ride.”

“That’s alright,” I chirped. “I got the bus right there. It usually comes pretty quickly.”

“I don’t bite, you know.” He flashed his pretty teeth. “C’mon, seriously. I’ll give you a ride to campus. Besides, it’s getting cold at night now. Your bald-ass head must be freezing.” I laughed and reached for the door handle. I knew he would love to do dirty, sticky things with me. I could see it in his face. But I also knew that he was twenty-three, a guy who would graduate in six months and go work in some marketing firm and that he wouldn’t do anything that might make him seem desperate. Putting the moves on an uninterested freshman was desperate.

His car was expensive on the inside: computerized everything, stick shift, leather seats, six-CD Pioneer stereo with flashing lights. The floors were immaculate. “New car?”

“No. Why?”

“It’s so clean.”

“I’m a clean guy. You should see my apartment.” I snorted a laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Well, how can a guy who’s so obsessive about cleanliness work in a meat department?”



“It’s perfect for me, actually. We have to bleach down the counters and floors every night. Love that smell. Here, smell.” He held out a hand in front of my face. I stared at it, looked at him. “Go on, smell it.” I neared my nose just a bit and breathed in.

“Clorox.”

“Yup.” He put his hand back on the steering wheel.

“Don’t you wear gloves or something if you’re cleaning with bleach?”

“Enh, depends. Tonight I was in a hurry.”

“Big date?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, saying nothing more. “Where do you live?” He turned onto University Drive. “Which dorm?”

“Kennedy.”

“No shit. My old stomping grounds. I lived there for two years.”

“Yeah, well I hate it so far.”

“Are you kidding? It was a wild time. You’ll love it.” He turned down the road that led to Kennedy dorm. “Here we are,” he said, pulling up to the curb in front of the building. “Told you I don’t bite.”

“Janine said I should stay away from you.”

“Janine’s a cunt.”

I cringed. “I hate that word.”

“Cunt cunt cunt.”

“Nice, Giovanni.” The heat in the car was beginning to suffocate me.

“What can I say? If you’re a cunt, you’re a cunt. And Janine is.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. She just is. Always has been. She’s never liked me.” He sniffed at the air, stared straight ahead at nothing.

“Well, she’s been really nice to me.”

“Good for you.”

“Ouch, you’re in kind of a mean mood.”

“No. Not really.” It was like scraping at an iron box with a fingernail, hoping to get in.

“See you, then, Giovanni. Thanks for the ride.” I knew now why Janine had warned me.

“Hold on.” Giovanni undid his seatbelt and got out of the car. I watched him trot around to my side and open the door.

“Thanks,” I said, swinging my legs out. He extended a hand and pulled me up gently. It was a sweet gesture, genuine, and made me think he felt bad about being so crass. “Thanks. See you next week.” He nodded and I walked towards the building. I could see in the reflection of the front door that he was standing next to his car watching me. I looked back over my shoulder. “What are you doing?”

His face was stony, serious, arms crossed over his chest. He definitely did work out. “Making sure you get in safely.”

“Aww. You’re a real gentleman, aren’t you?” I was teasing, being ironic, but he seemed not to notice.

“I was raised right.” He waved at me and nodded goodnight. I waved back, turned around and made my way quickly to the door, staring at his reflection until I opened it and he was gone.

Giovani wasn't lying to the little old ladies; he did have a dog that went absolutely nuts for peanut butter scraped onto the inside of a bone. "Gretchen loves this. It's her weekend treat," he told me as we stood over her. She was a gorgeous German shepherd, writhing around on his kitchen floor, trying to reach her tongue inside the bone.

"She's pretty," I said, bending down to pat her on the belly.

"Of course she is. I wouldn't have an ugly dog. OK, here's her food and water dish. She drinks a lot, especially after walks, so make sure it's full. The dry food she doesn't like much, but that's alright. Put it out for her anyway. And in the morning, one of these cans." He opened up a kitchen cabinet, stacked completely full of dog food. The cans were as straight and even as a fronted row in the grocery aisle.

"Got it."

"Leash is here," he said pointing to a hook behind the kitchen door. "If you take her to the commons or something, you can let her off the leash. Otherwise don't."

"I'll probably just leave her on. I wouldn't want her to run off."

"Yeah, you definitely wouldn't, because I'd kill you." Giovani's face was serious.

"OK, I'll keep that in mind."

Giovani bent down to Gretchen. "You're my girl, aren't you? Aren't you?" I'd never been a big animal person. They were OK, but pet owners always seemed a little loopy to me. Giovani was no exception. I wondered if this was his only meaningful relationship.

"Are you sure you want to leave her to me this weekend?"

“I trust you. You’re my other girl.” He reached out and mock-punched me on the chin.

“You barely know me.”

“That’s alright. I’ve got good instincts. C’mon. I’ll show you how to lock the door. It’s a little tricky. And make sure my bedroom door stays closed. Gretchen’s not allowed in there, OK?”

When Giovanni had left for the weekend, I snooped around his place. I didn’t have to stay there, just to come walk her twice and check her food while he was gone, but I wanted to see how he lived. He also told the truth about being a neat freak; his apartment was spotless. He had recently vacuumed the carpeting and there wasn’t a misplaced spoon, t-shirt, or scrap of paper in the whole place. I opened his bedroom door and found a large bed, the black bedspread pulled tight. On the corner of his dresser there were two bottles of cologne, a couple watches, and a small stack of change, all perfectly arranged. Three black-and-white photographs of mountains hung on the stark wall in front of the bed. There was something lonesome about the images, about the idea of waking up to them every day. I imagined doing so, which led me to imagine waking up next to Giovanni, and the thought appealed to me in a grotesque sort of way, like a secret high school crush on someone unpopular. Giovanni seemed so much older than me, so far out of my league, I didn’t even allow myself to think about feeling attracted to him. I knew he liked me, not in the sweet romantic way I might have fallen for, but in a very mature, sexual way. Animalistic almost, as if he had sniffed me out and deemed me fit. And yet I knew there was nothing here for me to pursue, and I was on guard. Maybe I just wasn’t

attracted to him, a purely chemical incompatibility. Or maybe, like any good prey, I was wary of my predator.

But now, standing in his clean bedroom, I thought about it. About what kind of sex the two of us might have, here in his perfectly made bed. Would he be aggressive and take-charge, or unexpectedly sweet and gentle? I had never been with anyone in his twenties, and the idea sent a little thrill through me. Giovanni had a full beard, muscles the way men – not boys – did. He owned a car, paid his own tuition. He was, in my book, a man.

Before I changed my mind, I slipped off my sneakers and carefully crawled onto his bed. I lay down on my side, right in the center, and dropped my head back on one of his pillows. I burrowed in as best I could. I breathed in, the smell of a man – so spicy and thick compared to the smell of a woman. I looked at the mountain pictures and wondered what he liked about them: their cold snow-dipped peaks, the gray sky against the black outline of the mountains, or the solitary sliver of moon hanging in the corner of all three? I tried to make myself as heavy as possible, sink down deep into his black sheets, make my mark. I breathed his smell in one last time, turned my face into his pillow and imagined his kiss: tickly and hot. Then I carefully sat up and scooted off the bed, stood on the soft carpeting and examined my indentation there, the comforter wrinkled in the shape of my body. It was obvious where my butt had been, and the deep impression in his pillow stayed, as if a ghost rested there. “Let’s see if you like this little mess,” I said, and Gretchen came panting into the room at the sound of my voice. She stood next to me, licked my hand with a sand-papery tongue. “Wanna go out?” I asked. She bounded out of

the room towards the kitchen, my words registering. I closed the door behind me so that nothing would disturb my imprint. I wanted Giovanni to find it just as I had left it.

I didn't see him when he came back. I had left the key in his box at work, as he told me to, and our shifts didn't cross paths for a full week. He had never called me before, but he could have easily looked up my number at work. I was surprised he didn't and worried that maybe he hadn't come back after all and Gretchen would starve. I checked his box Wednesday afternoon when I went in to work and the key was gone.

When I did finally see him, he was different, boyish and more playful. "Greek, c'mere," he said, beckoning me with his finger from behind the meat counter. I put down my pricing gun and walked towards him.

"So you're alive. Is Gretchen OK?"

"C'mere."

"OK, I'm here."

"No, closer." He was whispering now, secretive. I stood on tiptoes and leaned in as close to him as I could. He cupped his hand to his mouth, and his fingers brushed against the curve of my ear. "I have something I want to show you," he whispered.

"Later."

"OK," I whispered back, smiling and a little embarrassed. A customer was watching us from the dairy aisle. "When?"

"I'll find you, Greek." My stomach fluttered the next hour as I moved down the aisles, pricing and putting up grocery items. I couldn't stop thinking about Giovanni, about the way his fingers felt against my ear, about what he would show me.

Later that afternoon, when I was down in the basement stockroom loading up a U-cart, Giovanni appeared. “Hey Greek. You got a minute?”

“Sure.” My heart pounded.

“C’mere. In there.” He pointed to a rusty-looking door down the other end of the wall.

“There’s nothing in there,” I said.

“C’mon.” He swung open the door and waited for me to walk past him. When I did, he flipped a switch and a dull fluorescent light winked on overhead. The boiler room.

“Giovanni, I told you there was nothing in here. C’mon, I got to get back to work.”

“No, look. Over there. He pointed behind the door, a dark little space. He put two hands on my shoulders from behind to make sure I saw what he had pointed at. My eyes adjusted and I saw a sink, old and stained with brown water streaks. I turned around facing him, just a few inches away.

“I told you there was nothing here. I really got to go back to work.” He pulled me by the shoulders just an inch or so forward, and stared hard into my face with his green-gray eyes.

“Someday,” he whispered, “I’m going to rape someone. Maybe it will be you, Telemaka. Maybe it will be you.” Before I could say anything, he leaned in as if bite me and pressed a hard, wet kiss on my mouth. I shook him free, threw open the metal door with a bang, and ran out, wiping his kiss away with the back of my hand. I gave a panicked glance behind me and saw that he wasn’t trying to follow me. I ran back up the basement stairs and into the bright store, grateful for all the work I could lose myself in, work that would allow me to avoid Giovanni.

I finished the couple hours I had left on my shift trembling, unable to forget the scratch of his beard against my face. When I got off, I ran to the bus stop and hid in the corner. I wasn't able to relax until I opened my dorm room and found it empty. I locked the door from the inside and immediately went to the phone to call Tuck, whose number I already knew by heart. But his phone rang and rang and no one picked up. I called my mom, too, but she wasn't home either. I hung up the phone and saw that my hands were still shaking, like my mom's uncle Sal who died of Parkinson's.

I knew who I wanted to call, whose voice I needed to hear. I opened my desk drawer and rummaged around, searching for the piece of paper Annie had given me. Finally I found it, tangled up in several rubber bands, and I smoothed it out on the desk and dialed. It rang four times and I thought I might cry if no one picked up, but, suddenly, someone did.

"Hello?" It was a woman's voice, airy and affected.

"Is Roland Miller there?" I traced a nervous pattern on the desk with my finger.

"Just a minute please," the breathy woman replied. "Who's calling?"

"His daughter." I thought she might be surprised, might say, "His *what*?" but she appeared unfazed. "Just a minute," she said, enunciating every syllable in whisper, and put the phone down to rest on something hard.

It had been over two years since we last talked, since he had called to ask my mom about some legal stuff. I could hear the muffled sounds of his house in South Carolina. The TV was on and someone was watching a baseball game: the announcers spoke in that slow, unexcited way between plays. Someone was nearing the phone,



getting close to the receiver, banging it clumsily against the counter or table so that it rattled in my ear.

“Hello?” It was his voice. Unmistakable. The one that used to coax me to pull out my teeth, not be afraid to yank them out when they were already so loose I could bend them at ninety-degree angles.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, kiddo,” he said. “How ya’ doin?” I could hear a smile in his voice, but not surprise. As if we did this every week.

I wanted to tell him about Giovanni, about what had happened to me at work that evening, but I couldn’t. As I imagined explaining it to him, to anyone, I suddenly realized how stupid I had been. Naïve. A dumb freshman girl. I should have known that Giovanni was bad news, that he wasn’t a nice guy at all. Why hadn’t I listened to Janine? Or for that matter my own gut? When I thought about what I did in his bed, how I had imagined the two of us there and then left my imprint for him, I felt sick. He probably fantasized about raping me. He probably thought about it this morning. I felt disgusting and started to cry.

“What’s a matter, kiddo?” My dad asked. “You OK?” I sniffed and wiped the tears away with my thumbs.

“I just really miss you, Dad.” I cried a little more and he let me, not saying anything. Just the sound of his breath in the phone, coming all the way from South Carolina to my ear, made me weak with sadness. I hadn’t realized how much I missed him.

“I know you do, kiddo. I know you do.” We went on like that for a while and I realized that I had been wrong before, with Giovanni: I wasn’t ready at all for the world of men.

*November 1998, twenty years old*

*ix.*

*Your heart is as mixed up as your head; trying to determine what it says is like reading tea leaves. Why is it so hard for you to figure out what you feel? It seems like everyone else knows who they love, who they want to sleep with, who they're attracted to. But you are as confused as they come. Your specialty is imagining you're in love when you're not, falling for boys you'll never really fall for. When you saw Titanic with your two best friends, you wept and wept – and not because of the stupid, tragic ending. You wept because you felt, with a frozen slush in your gut, that you would never, ever have that. You would never be able to feel that much love for anyone.*

C. J. always brings Jackson, his dog, over, and he scratches up my living-room floor while C. J. and I are going at it in my bedroom. C. J. is not the best lay I've ever had, not by far. But he's good enough, and I love the way that he'll just drop by on a Tuesday afternoon, truck up the stairs in his half-laced boots, his dog jumping up the steps behind him, knock twice and then come in, grab me and pull me into the bedroom. It's sexy and spontaneous.

Mike doesn't really know. He knows about that one time, but C. J. and I have agreed to keep things quiet so as not to piss Mike off.

Afterwards, when C. J. and I are catching our breath, twisted in my flannel sheets, we talk about anything that comes to mind, like books and why Professor Rinnel had a black eye the other day and what a cool place Vietnam must be. C. J. doesn't have any complexes about his body. He's a little out of shape, a little rounded, but he doesn't care, which is, in a way, sexier than his having a perfect, rock-hard body. And he loves to be naked. Sometimes we spend entire afternoons naked, hanging out in my kitchen and tossing a slimy tennis ball down the hallway for Jackson.

"You're playing with fire," Caro says, and Rox nods, wide-eyed. "You're going to *arrepentirlo*."

"Can you stop speaking Spanish to me? I haven't taken it since eleventh grade and you always think I'll somehow intuit what you're saying."

"I can't think of the word in English." She looks back over her shoulder at Rox, who shrugs. "Arepen?" Caro scrunches up her face in a doubtful look.

"That's definitely not a word," I say.

“Feel bad about it. Wish you hadn’t.”

“Regret?”

“Yes! Exactly, Regret it. See, Tellie? This is why we’re friends. You always know what I mean.” She flashes me a grin and reaches out to pinch my arm. Then her face turns stern. “But I’m serious. You’re gonna regret this.”

“Why? Why would I regret having fun? It’s my life.”

“Yeah, but you’re going to hurt Mike. You guys are pretty close and you’re pushing the limits there.”

“I don’t see how. He’s my friend and that’s all. If he wants something more, it’s just not possible. And I can’t not date people just to please him.”

“Are you actually dating C. J.?”

“Well, we’re fucking.”

“You’re so vulgar, Tel.”

“No I’m not. I’m honest.”

“Anyway, just remember that I told you so when you find yourself swimming in a little pool of regret. We’ll be there to pick up the pieces, as usual. Right Rox?” Rox nods. The two of them are annoying me today. Especially Caro, who’s always on her high relationship horse. Caro’s very picky about dating and she just doesn’t understand that I don’t have the same requirements. I wish she’d not moralize me just once.

It’s Friday night, a cold November weekend and they’re talking about the first snow. My car, with its practically bald tires, can’t handle the snow well and I’m not looking forward to another winter. Mike’s over and we’re eating pizza out of the box on the living-room

floor, backs up against the couch, watching a movie. He brought beer, a six-pack of Guinness for him and Sam Adams for me.

“Thanks, sweetie,” I said when he handed them to me. “You’re so nice to get me my own.”

“I still don’t understand how anyone in their right mind can not like Guinness.”

“It’s like drinking liquefied bread. It’s disgusting.”

“To each his own,” Mike said, clinking a can against my bottle.

Now, after making our way through several bottles and forgetting entirely about the movie, the two of us are laughing about the time we drove down to Foxwoods last year and lost five hundred bucks between us.

“I’ll never forget the look on your face when you put a hundred dollars on black and lost,” he said, pulling himself up onto the couch.

“I know. I was sure it was going to be black. I could feel it.”

“Well, you’re not too good at premonitions, Tel.”

“Yeah, well you are even worse at blackjack, Mike.”

“I’ll give you that.” He sighed and tipped back his can, finished it. “But I’m really good at poker. You got any cards?”

“Yeah. In the kitchen. But I don’t really know how to play. You’ll have to refresh my memory.”

“Yeah, but we’re not playing for money.”

“OK, what for?”

“Clothes.”

“You must be kidding me. What are you, fifteen?”

“No. Just lonely.” He winks at me and I know that he’s kidding, but underneath I think he’s serious. He is lonely. It’s been ages since he’s really dated anyone. I feel a little guilt creep up my throat, like bile, but I will it back down. I don’t think now is the time to tell him about C. J.

“Alright, Mikey, you’re on. But I’m a pretty lucky girl. And if I win, you’d better believe I’m going to make fun of you, sitting there naked. I’m going to take pictures.”

“Deal. Get the cards.”

Mike wins the first three rounds easily, and – thanks to layers – I’m down to no socks, pants, and a t-shirt. I’m starting to feel chilly and it occurs to me that there is no heat.

“Hold that thought,” I say as Mike wipes up the round and begins to shuffle. “I gotta check the heater down in the basement. I think I’m out of oil, which really sucks. It’s gonna be cold tonight.”

“We’ll have to find other ways to keep warm,” he says, tipping back another beer, and I can tell that he’s on a mission tonight. I’m surprised. He’s never tried anything with me. We’ve been friends for three years now, so, any initial attraction we might have had has been replaced by a kind of filial love, at least for me. As I make my way down the creaking steps into the musky, dark basement, I call back, “No cheating!”

“No way. I’m not you,” Mike hollers back, and I feel an arrow of fear through my stomach. Does he know about C. J.? Is that what he meant? I decide it can’t be. Besides, how can I be cheating on him if we’re not even a couple?

The oil tank’s black needle is below empty. “Shit,” I mutter. I can’t get anyone out here to fill it until tomorrow, and they’ll charge me extra for Saturday service. Why

can't I ever remember to check the gauge before it drops? It means no hot water or heat tonight. But there's no way I'm staying at Mike's. I don't want to run into C. J. with Mike. Too weird.

"Alright," I say, stomping back up the stairs. "Looks like I'm gonna freeze tonight. Oil's out."

"Want to stay at my place?" He's shuffling the deck in the way I always wanted to and never could, cards flipping in a perfect bridge.

"Nah. I'll be OK."

"Suit yourself. But you're going to be awfully cold in a few minutes when you're sitting there in the buff."

"That's what you think. I need another beer. Want one?"

"Sure. Get ready to lose it all, Tel."

In the end, Mike and I both lose equally. He's down to just his boxers and me to my bra and underwear, but neither of us can go any further. "It's freeeezing," he says, his teeth chattering.

"I know. Not that I wouldn't love to beat you at this, but let's call it quits until I have heat again. I'm gonna get some blankets from my room so we can finish the movie and not freeze to death."

Mike races to pull on his pants again. "My god it's cold. You're going to freeze tonight. Why don't you stay with me? We have heat."

"I'm picky about my bed. I like it." I hurry to pull on my t-shirt and sweatshirt and rub my fingers together. It might just snow after all.



“Let’s just watch the movie in your room, under the comforter.”

“Alright, but the TV in there sucks. It’s so small.”

“That’s alright. It’ll be warmer in bed.”

It is pretty cozy. After fifteen minutes or so, we both begin to warm snuggled up together. It’s not unusual for us; over the past few years we’ve stayed over at each other’s a few different times, sharing a bed with no problem. There’s never been any weirdness, but something about tonight feels different. We are often flirty with each other, but in a harmless way. Like just friends. But I can sense that the way he’s holding me is not like the other times. Not so platonic. He’s got his cheek pressed up against mine, his breath down my neck like hot steam.

“Too bad we didn’t finish the game,” he says.

“Yeah. I would hate to beat you and humiliate you like that.”

“Yeah, well I was looking forward to seeing you nudie.”

“You pig,” I push him away, playing, and he comes rolling back, nibbles a little at my ear, something he knows – from endless conversations – drives me crazy.

“What are you doing, Mike?” I ask, playfully. I’m not even sure what I want at this point. It doesn’t feel wrong to be all snuggled up, not like it felt with Tuck at Annie’s four years ago in New York. This feels cozy. Safe and warm.

“Nothing,” he mutters, breathing into my ear and tugging on my earlobe. I turn to look at him, our lips meet, and suddenly his tongue is inside my mouth and it feels so natural that I don’t even try to stop him. I push away the thought that C. J. was over just yesterday and today Mike is kissing me and nibbling my ear in the very same bed. I don’t want to think about that. All I want to think about is Mike’s hands – long and sure –

moving up the inside of my shirt like he's practiced it a thousand times. I never in a million years thought that I could be this turned on by Mike. Mikey.

"Never in a million years," I whisper, throaty and parched.

"What?" he asks, gently undoing my jeans, sliding them off into a crush of comforter and blankets and flannel sheets. I've got nothing on, and the freezing air pricks my skin, raises goose bumps all over my chest and arms.

"Nothing. I just can't believe this."

"Believe it," he says, kissing my belly and moving all the way down, disappearing under the covers. Mike isn't very talented in the going-down department, but I forgive him because he's sweet and he tries hard. I fake it, clutching his hair and moaning a little, and then I let him have sex with me from behind, because guys always love that. Mike really loves it and lasts about three seconds. It's OK. I'll get off by myself later in the bathroom.

When he's done, I turn over and let him fall onto me, weak with exhausted pleasure.

"Well, you got to see me nudie," I laugh, the movie flickering over his face.

"Not as well as I might have liked. But this was certainly more interesting than just seeing you naked."

"This was definitely interesting." I reach out and run my hand up the inside of his thigh. "I can't believe we just did that. We can't do that anymore."

"Why not?" He kisses my bare shoulder.

"Because. It's bad. We can't"

"How come? We just did."

“Yeah, but it was just a one-time deal.”

“Why?” He props himself up on one elbow, rolls over to look at me.

“Because, Mike. I don’t think we can be getting it on and still be friends.”

“OK.”

“OK, like, you’re in agreement with me?”

“OK, like, maybe we should be more than friends.”

“Oh, god. Don’t start. Please. I can’t deal with that right now.”

“Why not? Why can’t we try it, Tel? I mean, this feels nice. You and me.”

“It does, Mike, but I don’t know. I’m not really...I don’t know. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“You’re not really what?”

“I’m not ready for that. For you and me. I can’t deal with that right now.”

“It doesn’t have to be any more than this, Tel. Fun. Two friends who love each other and have sex. Sounds good to me.” I feel that guilty bile come back up.

“Look, Mike. I need to be straight with you. I just can’t do this. I’ve kind of been seeing someone. And I don’t think it’s right to do this, you know?”

“Who are you seeing?” He’s surprised. I can tell he didn’t expect that.

“C. J.” I scan his face for a reaction, but none appears right away.

“You’re kidding, right?” I shake my head. “What does that mean?”

“It means he comes over sometimes.”

“You’ve been messing around with him?”

“Yeah. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“Oh, that makes perfect fucking sense.”

I wince. “I’m sorry. But I didn’t expect this to happen. Tonight I mean.”

“It doesn’t just ‘happen,’ Tel. It’s a fucking decision you make.” Mike throws off the covers and begins to search for his clothes down at the bottom of the bed.

“Mike, don’t. C’mon. I messed up. I really did. I’m sorry. Please understand I never expected this – you and me – in a million years. I just need a little time to think.” He turns around and stares up at me, a look of curious disgust on his face.

“Let me ask you this, Tel: When was the last time C. J. came over?”

I drop my eyes down to the comforter. “Yesterday.” It sounds horrible coming out of my mouth. I can hardly believe I’m saying it.

Mike tears the sheets out from under the mattress and his clothes drop to the floor. He jams his legs into the pants and zips them up, won’t even look at me. He grabs his shirt in one angry swoop and heads for the bedroom door.

“Mike, don’t.” I move to get up.

“Save it, Tel,” he says without looking back. “You make me sick.” His words stop me and I sit up in bed, sheets around my waist, without moving. I hear him grab his keys and open and close the front door loudly. I watch from my window as he gets in his car and speeds out the gravel driveway. He doesn’t look up.

In the morning, I wake up frozen, an early sun coming through the blinds. The comforter is ice cold, and pulling it tighter around me only makes things worse: cold air seeps in each time I move. I breathe out and can actually see my breath, a white plume in the grainy morning light. I’m too cold to move, to get up and get out of the house, go somewhere and warm up. I just lie there, listening. I hear a plow scrape by outside. My apartment must be covered with the first snow of the year, insulated in white. Frozen and

alone. And I'm too cold, too fucking freezing, to feel anything. Not my feet, or my nose.

Not even regret.

xi.

*You have never really been able to let go with boys, be sexually free. You're only eighteen, of course, but you've slept with more than a few now. You're nearing double digits, and while you feel aroused, flushed in the cheeks and agitated and like you could just press into whatever boy it happens to be until you exploded with all that pressing, you know it's not what women – older women – experience. You've seen movies. You've seen the restaurant scene in When Harry Met Sally. You know that there are women who moan and scream, who can't control it, and you know you've never felt that. Little rolling waves of pleasure lapping at you, sure. But an oceanic whirlpool sucking you down into its abyss and spitting you back up, spent and exhausted with satisfaction – no. Nothing so good has ever happened to you, no man's touch has ever had that effect.*

I couldn't rest the entire flight. It was late – nearly midnight – and I should have been tired after a day of classes, the train ride to New York, and now the flight to South Carolina, but I was wired. I couldn't sit still, wondering about my dad and what it would be like to see him again. Should I hug him? Would that be awkward? I had ordered wine from the stewardess wearing too much brown lipstick, and she had brought the wine to my tray table without even making eye contact, knowing full well I wasn't twenty-one. The liquid swirled in the plastic cup, but I was too nervous to even drink it.

The last time I saw my father was when he walked out, ten years ago. I had talked to him a dozen times and received a few cards every year, but I hadn't laid eyes on him – touched him or shared the same air – in ten years. I couldn't believe that I was actually going to spend the whole weekend with him and his girlfriend. When I called him a few weeks ago – the night Giovanni kissed me in the boiler room – I never expected him to invite me down to South Carolina to spend Thanksgiving with him. It seemed almost unfair that all I had to do all these years was just pick up the phone and call; it was that easy. And now we were spending a holiday together, like fathers and daughters do.

The plane circled for half an hour before it landed, and I finally finished off the wine out of anxiousness. I peered out the window to try to get a glimpse of the city below, but there was nothing but a deep, purple blackness. When the captain finally informed us that we were descending, we flew through cloud cover that made the plane toss about as if it were nervous as me about settling down onto the ground in Charleston.

The smell of fuel filled my nose as I walked up the ramp towards the gate, and I could feel the humidity and warmth in the air, balmy like a spring night in Massachusetts.

I saw a blond man at the other end of the ramp, his arm moving back and forth in one, swift motion from his side to his head, and I smiled. It was him. As I got closer, smiling like a dope, I saw he was holding a woman's hand. I hurried past other passengers, bumping them with my backpack, apologizing but not stopping. Suddenly I was out of the ramp and into the airport, just feet from him. He let go of the woman's hand and reached out with both arms to pull me into a hug. He smelled the same: like Sunday *Boston Globes* and old faded cotton t-shirts, Dire Straights records and cream-of-mushroom chicken over rice.

"Tellie! Let me get a *look* at you," he said, taking my face in his hand and staring at me as if he couldn't quite believe I were his own daughter. "Just look at you; all grown up. And short hair."

"I shaved it this summer. Lizzie helped me. Member her?" My hand brushed at the bristly blond hair on my head; it had grown in an inch or so and was dyed a platinum blond.

"Yes, of course. Lizzie. You look so great. Tel," he said, backing away and motioning toward the woman, "I want you to meet my friend, Kerika." Kerika extended a long, thin arm and gave me a limp handshake.

"Hello, Tellie" she breathed, as if sighing. She smelled of cigarettes and cinnamon and looked like a fairy: short, petite, and muscular. I knew she was a dancer by the way she stood, rod-straight, shoulders pulled back like wings. She had long, curly brown hair and tan skin, and she wasn't wearing a bra. Her breasts were small and proud enough to stand on their own, without apology, under a stretchy orange top.



“Hi. Nice to meet you,” I mumbled. I was a little annoyed that my father had brought her. I had been hoping to have him to myself, at least for the car ride to his house.

Despite my best efforts, I fell asleep in the back seat of his old VW. I woke when he turned into the driveway, made of seashells that crunched under the car’s tires.

“We’re here, kiddo,” my dad said, cutting the engine and pulling the emergency break. I brushed away the hair that had stuck to my face and sat up, looking around. A floodlight, perched on the corner of the house, washed over us in a fan of silver light. I saw bugs, probably moths, diving in and out of the light at its source, making it flicker across my face as I pulled my backpack from the floor and slid it over my shoulder. What was it about moths that always made them bump and fight to get closer to light?

“This is where Kerika and I have made our little home,” my dad said, closing the car door and pointing to the small, weathered one-story house. Kerika sighed happily, as if she were full, came around to his side and leaned against him. I could tell she was younger than he was. Maybe twenty years younger. I wasn’t sure, but she was definitely not out of her thirties. “Listen,” my dad said, holding one finger against his lips and stopping in the middle of the driveway. I listened.

“The ocean,” I whispered. I could hear it now, beyond the house. I couldn’t see it, but I could faintly smell the salt on the breeze and could hear it like a song, a song left on repeat, over and over again.

“It’s just two blocks away. Tomorrow we can go for a walk on the beach,” my dad said, excitedly. I could tell he was proud of his beach house, of living near the water. My dad, the sailor. My mom was right: it *was* ridiculous.

“That’s cool,” I said and began to walk towards the house. I suddenly felt tired and wanted to be alone in a warm bed, safe under the covers.

When Kerika opened the front door, a shadow darted out at my feet, and I jumped back. “Jesus!” I hissed.

“Oh, that’s one of Kerika’s babies,” my dad laughed, reaching down to grab the cat.

“I hope you like cats?” Kerika asked, turning to look at me. There was only one answer.

“Sure.” I nodded, lacking the courage to tell her that I despised them. They freaked me out. My dad pulled the squirmy, all-black cat to his chest and pet it beneath the chin. It surveyed me suspiciously with jaundice-yellow eyes. Kerika walked through the door and two more cats slinked up to her, winding their bodies and tails around her legs.

“Hello my babies. Hello,” she whispered, bending down to kiss each one on the top of the head. My dad dropped the black one and it tiptoed quickly up to Kerika and meowed, begging for her attention. “Oh, and you, too, Lancelot. I love you too.” She plunked a kiss on his head, too, and stood up to turn on some lights. I looked back at my dad who shrugged and smiled.

The house was L-shaped, with a galley kitchen and dining area in the corner of the L. The two bedrooms were off the long hallway, and my dad set me up in one of

them: a tiny little library that had a pull-out futon against one wall and rows of books lining the opposite walls. He helped me pull out the futon and fit some old, cotton sheets and a blanket with satin edging over it. I could hear Kerika in the kitchen, running water and talking baby talk to the cats.

When we finished making up the bed, my dad pointed to the bathroom next to my room, a small square room with only a shower and floor-to-ceiling dark-brown tiling. It smelled of dampness and Pert shampoo. After washing up, I padded down the short hallway to the galley kitchen and peered around the corner. Kerika was standing in front of the sink like a ballerina – straight up, shoulder blades back, her bare feet in fifth position. She was rinsing out a coffee mug as my dad read her something from the newspaper.

“G’night. See you in the morning,” I said to both of them.

“G’night, sweetie,” my dad replied, smiling at me over the top edge of the paper.

“So glad you’re here.”

Kerika turned her head, a cascade of curls, and peered at me from over her shoulder. “Sleep well, Telemaka,” she breathed before turning back to her dishes.

I found it hard to sleep right away. There was a small window in the room that looked out over the street behind the house, and even though it was closed, I could hear the ocean’s lapping. I listened to it for a while, to the repetitive washing. Occasionally a bigger-than-usual wave would break against the shore, and it broke my thoughts; I imagined its dark, blue water sliding up over the sand, stretching itself into white foam, dissolving into the earth. I couldn’t decide whether the sound of the waves was comforting, like a good memory, or unsettling, a reminder of voyages I wasn’t invited on.

Thanksgiving smelled and tasted entirely different. I had spent every Thanksgiving of my life at Grammy's, who always made a beautiful, glazed turkey, whipped potatoes, Stovetop stuffing, slices of cranberry sauce from the can – my favorite – and pumpkin pie with vanilla ice cream.

But Kerika did all the cooking in the relationship, and – since she was a vegetarian – my father had become one too. There was soy product shaped into a loaf that looked nothing like a turkey, cold seaweed salad, and matzo ball soup. “My grandmother was Jewish,” she said when I made a confused face. “She always made matzo ball soup on Thanksgiving. Comfort food.” I looked at the glob of matzo floating around in broth and felt a pang of sadness at not being at Grammy's today with my mom and Roger.

“Looks great, Ker,” my dad said, rubbing his hands together.

“I love soup,” I said because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

My dad and I sat down at the table, and Kerika put the cats' food bowls right underneath. “They like to eat as close to us as possible. I swear they're just like people.” I smiled as sincerely as I could and tucked my feet deep under the chair so no cats would wind around my legs. I sliced a piece of the soy loaf – as thin as possible – and served myself. It made a smacking sound when it hit the plate.

“Would you like some wine, Telemaka?” Kerika asked, pointing an open bottle at my glass. I looked at my father, who was expressionless, waiting for my answer.

“Uh, sure. Thanks.” I moved my glass awkwardly towards Kerika and thought that maybe she was cool after all. My mom never let me have wine, not even on holidays. She always said that when I was twenty-one I could drink to my heart's content.

I managed to get down a whole slice of soy turkey by taking big gulps of red wine with it. Kerika seemed pleased that I liked it. “Maybe your daughter’s a veg at heart, too, Roland,” she said, smiling at him.

“No, I’m definitely a steak girl,” I said. “Sorry.”

She tipped the wine bottle at me for a refill, and I complied. I needed more to get the seaweed salad down. “Well, when you get older and learn more about the treatment of cattle, you might change your mind.” She gave me a knowing look, the kind grown-ups loved to give kids who thought they knew everything. It pissed me off.

“I once even ate cat,” I blurted out, feeling one of the critters below sidling up next to my calf. “In a Vietnamese restaurant.” It was a lie that had tumbled out, but I thought it was kind of funny. I already couldn’t wait to tell Tuck about the look on Kerika’s face, which was one of pure disgust.

“That’s repulsive,” she whispered in her breathy voice.

“I know. I didn’t know it at the time, but later I found out. It was actually tasty.” I took a swallow of wine to keep from laughing.

“I don’t know how anyone can find flesh of any kind ‘tasty,’ let alone a domestic animal’s.” I had clearly fallen about twelve notches on her totem pole. But I wasn’t there to visit her, and I knew my dad better than she did; in another six months he’d be gone and wouldn’t even leave an address. There’d been dozens of them, just like her, throughout my childhood, only I never got to meet them. Kerika was the first, and I discovered with a little surprise that my dad had worse taste than I thought. He must be in it for the sex. She turned her attention back to my dad and engaged him in a long conversation about politics without once asking me for my opinion, but I didn’t mind. I

just sipped wine and listened, watched as she patted her thigh and the black cat jumped up onto her lap, settled down and let himself be stroked for half an hour until dessert – a weeping flan – was ready to be served.

The three of us walked on the beach that night before the sun set. We walked for miles down to the end, where the sand turned into a bouldery needle that pointed all the way out to sea. The gray clouds were breaking up in the distance and the sun glowed dully on the horizon, a sad reminder that summer days were far off.

“I just hate it when fall ends,” I said as we walked in a line, barefoot in the sand.

“Oh, but winter is so gorgeous,” Kerika countered. She looked at the sky, smiling up at its grayness, and proclaimed, “Roland, you’re going to love winter here. It’s perfectly chilly and brisk, and the sea turns a deep gray. And we can come home every night and make fires and drink warm whiskey. It’ll be divine,” she sighed. “Right, Rol?”

“Sure,” he said and reached over to squeeze her hand. I was related to him by blood and felt like a stranger. My dad kept saying how great it was that I had come down for a couple days, tousling my hair like I was a little kid, asking me lots of questions about school and life. But I still felt uncomfortable, as if I were interrupting them or something. I was secretly glad that my flight left tomorrow, the holiday weekend cut short because they had plans to visit friends in Greenville.

In the middle of the night, I got up to pee and tiptoed to the bathroom hoping that I wouldn’t find any cats underfoot. I didn’t flush the toilet because I didn’t want to wake anyone – human or animal – and I quietly made my way back into the warm spot I had

left behind in bed. As I was nestling down in the covers, I heard noises from the other side of the wall, from my dad and Kerika's room. It began as a slow rocking, splintered by an occasional high-pitched laugh. The noise grew louder, a frenzy of wood scraping and springs squeaking; I heard the violent sound of flesh smacking flesh, a current of groans and purrs and inhuman sounds that made me worry that something was wrong with my dad. It didn't sound like him, the guttural noises and the short, shallow breathing peppered with words I couldn't make out. Was it really him? Their pace quickened, the noises became more desperate and rushed, and something – probably the bed frame – was tapping impatiently against the wall that stood so inadequately between us. The two of them were like an incoming tide, moving uncontrollably up the sand, closer and closer, threatening to swallow everything in its path. And finally the tide swelled and broke like a warm rubber band stretched to its limit. I heard my dad sigh loudly, then small sucking and kissing noises. Kayla said, "That's not *true*!" once between giggles. After that, silence.

I knew by the way the house felt that they were both asleep shortly after. My face burned, and I could feel the cool air against my cheeks. I felt embarrassed about having heard them, but I felt guilty, soaking with shame, that I had liked it. There, in the hot guilt and silence all around, my hand found its way down to the slipperiness between my legs, quietly, in and out, in and out. I closed my eyes, as if it to shut out what I knew to be real: the dark sound of the waves, the heavy, humid Carolina air, the unprecedented pleasure that spread through me as I came, twice, fully and as never before, thinking of my own father.

## Book V



Labor Day Weekend 1985, Eight Years Old

i.

*Last summer, your dad taught you to ride waves, and you fell in love with it.*

*You spent hours in the salty, frigid Atlantic, waiting to catch the right swell. And when you did, the amazement at having it lift you up, like a palm on your belly, and push you inland, your head floating just above the crest, until finally you came to a rough, sand-scraped stop, and said: Again.*

*You spent all last August in the sea, undeterred by cool drizzle or your mom waving you in for lunch, riding waves that kept pulling you to shore like gravity, like magic.*

*In late August, after a bad summer storm that knocked down a tree in Needham, you were at the beach, as excited as champagne about the boiling surf. It was rough, each wave churning into white spray that filled the air with salt. You dashed in, legs faster than your body, hardly hearing your mother's call to be careful. The water was cold, took the wind out of you at first, but it quickly warmed and then you were diving under, feeling the pull and strength even as you dove deep.*

*You picked up a wave a little late, and it tossed you twice and dumped you in the shallow water. You scrambled back out and caught one right at the dip, in its sweet spot, that lifted you up and up, and you came streaming in, elated by the speed.*

*But then, suddenly, you were too fast. The wave pulled you headfirst into its muscle, sent you tumbling head over tail, unable to break free or come up for air. Rocks pelted you and your right side slammed against the ocean bottom, scraping against the hard sand, and still it wouldn't let you go. You somersaulted fifteen or twenty times and felt the lightening shot of terror: you were drowning. You never knew a wave – a single wave – could be so powerful.*

*And just then, when you felt the last of your breath go, the wave spit you out onto sand, slack-muscled and coughing up seawater. You lay there, heaving, and scanned the beach for your parents' faces. They sat in the usual spot, unaware that anything had happened to you at all. Your mother, a book pinched in one hand, looked irritated. Your father gazed dreamily out at the waves. They'd fought before coming to the beach; you'd heard it from your room as you changed into your suit. You had just nearly died and no one, not even your parents, had noticed.*

*And now, just one year later, you feel like that all over again. You're being pulled down by the undertow, sucked to the bottom like a piece of driftwood, tossed about. It's worse than drowning, because drowning ends quickly. But this, this sorrow, is eternal, like sucking on a stone and waiting for it to melt.*

My mom said I was growing like a weed, practically scolding me for it. She had bought me a pair of clear jelly shoes in spring, and my feet were breaking through them by Labor Day. Two of the little straps – scratched up and gray – had sprung loose on each shoe and my pinkies poked out from the plastic latticework. I jammed my feet into them anyway.

“I don’t have time to go with you now,” she huffed at me as she packed. She was jerkily folding a white linen sweater across her chest. I knew she was angry and hoped she wouldn’t take it out on me.

“I can go alone,” I suggested. I fancied myself an independent child, something my father had always encouraged. My mom looked up from her packing, took me in doubtfully. I can imagine what she saw: broken jelly shoes, lavender shorts a size too small, and a yellow-and-white-striped shirt with a chocolate ice cream stain on the front from two days before. My mother never quite knew what to do with me, a girl as skinny and tough as a wild chicken: gray lines under my fingernails, toenails bitten down to the quick, a tangle of dirty-blond hair down my back.

“Fine,” she sighed, long and low, as if giving in to some great argument. I realized that she had been crying. I hadn’t noticed it before, but her eyes were dark and tired, like she had brushed brown eye shadow under them, and I knew it had something to do with the argument I had heard from my parents’ bedroom the night before. “Just do whatever, Tellie. I need to pack.”

I hadn’t heard much last night, just the trading of hot whispers like steam blasting from my mom’s pressure cooker. And today she was still upset. I wanted to go to her, to put my arms around her waist and have her take me up in her arms the way she had not so

long ago. I stood in the doorway staring at her, trying to think back to a time when she didn't seem so angry. So fierce and defeated.

"Tellie, either go to the store or stay and help me pack. But don't just *linger*." She tossed a hairbrush into the suitcase to punctuate her point.

"Sorry," I said.

I was sick of her constant irritability. She rarely laughed anymore. I vaguely remembered a time when I was younger, three or four, when my parents would get dressed up and go out together on weekends. How my mother would sit at her makeup table and drag red Dior lipstick over her lips, press them together in front of the mirror, and smile at her reflection. How she would dab Chanel no. 5 on her wrists, then press a wrist to mine to rub some of the smell onto me. How'd she'd tuck me into bed and kiss me on the forehead, laugh at the red stain left there, and wipe it away with the fat part of her thumb. Even ten minutes after she had turned the lights out and left, the smell of her makeup and perfume would hang in the air, sweet and spicy.

But they didn't date like that anymore. Now my mom busied herself with clients at the gallery and avoided being home, especially when my dad would go off on one of his work retreats. Sometimes he'd be gone for a weekend, sometimes a week. My mom never knew when he'd be back, and if I asked, she'd twist her mouth into a dried apricot and say, "I don't know, Tellie. Soon."

I left my mom to her packing and went out to the porch, where my dad was reading the *Boston Globe*. He sat deep in a slack-seated canvas chair with his legs crossed, which always embarrassed me. It didn't seem like something a man should do.

When I opened the screen door to pass him, he looked over the edge of his paper and smiled.

“Where you goin’, kiddo?”

“Glass Factory,” I said, rubbing my thumb back and forth over the wad of dollars in my fist. “For my unicorn.”

“Great.” He folded his paper and laid it down on the splintery, bleached-out floor. “I’ll walk with you. I’m going to pick up some fish for lunch down at the wharf.”

“Mom said I could go alone.” If my dad came, I knew he’d make me walk over to the used bookstore across the street. We’d be there for half an hour.

“Oh did she?” He raised his blond eyebrows, the skin under them whiter than the rest of his face.

I nodded.

“OK,” he said, smiling. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

“I’ll let you go ahead, Miss Telemaka,” he teased. He grabbed his red pullover from the back of the chair and zipped it up. It was an overcast day, gray and chilly for August. “Go on. I’ll go get my fish all alone so as not to bother you.” He pulled a dopey, sad face and I rolled my eyes, a new trick of mine.

“Bye, dad.” I stepped off the porch and onto the path, careful to step only on the stones and never the dirt as I walked down it, my superstition.

I had been saving up my allowance all summer for a hand-blown glass unicorn at the workshop in town. Some afternoons, after the beach, I’d go and sit on one of the high,

wooden stools in the workshop and watch the owner, Amy, blow glass, orange-hot and dripping like caramel in the flame, right in front of me.

As I reached the end of the path, I could feel my dad staring at me, and I turned around to give him one of my looks. But he had an elbow resting against the faded shingles of the cottage, newspaper in hand, head down, and his blond eyebrows furrowed as he read something. I let the gate click shut, rattling, behind me.

I turned onto The Neck and felt the chill in the air. The two shops that flanked our house prevented any kind of cross breeze, something my mother always griped about on hot nights. I had been fine at home in my shorts and t-shirt, but now on The Neck the sharp breeze warned of the looming inevitability: falling leaves, back to school, sweaters and socks. I crossed my spindly arms across my chest, remembering what Granpop had told me once: If I was ever stranded in the cold, I should always put my hands in my armpits, since they were the warmest part of my body, and that way I would avoid frostbite and losing my fingers.

There weren't many people today because of the weather. Usually on Labor Day weekend, the place was pulsing with tourists buying and locals selling. Bearskin Neck, a little finger of land jutting out from the northern Massachusetts coast, was famous for its crafts – like little shellacked lobster magnets – and fudge. The thick smell of fudge often drifted down the Neck and into our rented cottage, turning my stomach. It smelled like burnt chocolate and reminded me of the one time I tried it, so rich I said to my dad, “It tastes like too much sweet.” But the tourists loved it and bought it by the pound. Today, even though there were a fraction of fanny-packed tourists wandering around, most of them carried blue bags with “Millie’s Homemade Fudge” printed on the side.

I walked quickly to the store, alternating between rubbing my arms vigorously to get the goose bumps to go away and sticking my hands deep into my armpits, which didn't feel so warm when a gust of salty wind picked up and seemed to whip through my body. The sky was rippled with dense, gray clouds, and it smelled like rain. I hoped it would wait until I got home, because I knew that if it started to rain and I got wet, I would be really cold, and then Mom would get mad at me for getting wet and catching my death. Even if it wasn't my fault. She was like that.

The Glass Factory was my favorite store on the Neck. There were toy stores and a candy shop with a piano that played by itself, but Amy's workshop was the most special place. It seemed impossible what she did to glass, melting it down as if it were wax and shaping it into the most beautiful figures: baby seals, a sensuous mermaid, a unicorn with a purple-tinged horn.

The bell above the door jingled when I opened it, and Amy looked up from behind the counter that separated the shop from her studio, and pulled off her protective glasses. "Hi, Tellie."

"Hi. I'm here for my unicorn." Amy had seen me several times that August admiring the row of unicorns on a shelf by the window. She knew I was saving up to get one.

"Okay. You know where they are. I'll be right over. I just need to finish this piece." She pulled the goggles down over her face and twisted the knob of the flame so that it shrank to a short, blue point.

I picked out the unicorn I liked the most, one that kneeled down and looked straight ahead, her lavender horn pointing right at me. I brought it up to the register and

waited for Amy to finish. When she finally shut off the flame, the room went silent and I could hear the wind pushing against the shop, the old windows creaking in their frames.

“Oh, she’s a beauty,” Amy said, as she wiped her hands on a dirty towel. “Nice choice.”

“Fifteen dollars, right?” I handed over the crumpled-up bills, and Amy smiled down at me.

“Right.” She took them and smoothed them out, one by one, and lay them in a pile on the counter. Then she wrapped my unicorn in tissue paper and put it in a bag.

“When are you guys leaving?”

“Today.”

“But you’ll be back next summer, right?”

“Of course.”

“Better be. You’re my favorite customer.” She rang up the sale and put the bills into the old metal cash register, handing me the receipt.

“Bye,” I said. I couldn’t wait to bring my unicorn back to Needham and show Lizzie. I knew she’d be sick with envy.

I’d warmed up in the shop and hadn’t remembered how cold it was outside. When I opened the shop door, a gust of wind ran across my exposed belly and right up my shirt. I had planned to head straight home then to change into warmer clothes, but then I noticed the crowd. They were standing over by the wharf, where the fishermen unloaded lobster traps.

My curiosity pulled me on, and I nudged my way through the tall adults, happy to discover that they blocked the wind. When I came near the front of the crowd, on the



other side, I saw a police car – no siren, just lights – parked next to an olive green truck. I read on the side of the truck: CAPE ANN REGIONAL DIVE TEAM. The back of the truck yawned open, a steel, green mouth, and a diver in a black rubber suit from neck to toe was trying to untangle some netting from a waxy coil of rope. “Fuckin’ hell,” he said, sounding more bored than annoyed.

But the crowd wasn’t watching him. They were looking past him, beyond the railed-off spot, and down at the wharf. I used to love to watch the boats unload the lobsterpots there with my dad, the crusty fisherman stacking them high. The lobsters danced around in their pots, moving and flexing like giant scorpions, and I was amazed that the trap was so simple: an open hole that they could swim right into but never out of because they can only swim one way, backwards. They can’t get back out the same hole. It’s so simple it’s cruel.

I got to the railing and wiggled some room for myself. I hooked my arms over the metal railing, hoisted myself up onto the cement stoop, and peered down at the wharf. I held the bag with the unicorn in one hand, and it dangled over the shifting green water below.

A small motorboat idled in the water there. A balding man in a yellow polo stood with one foot on the boat and one foot on the dock. His left leg bobbed up and down with the boat as his other foot stayed planted on the cement wharf. “Charlie!”

“Yeah?” the diver by the truck yelled from behind us.

“You got that net yet?”

“Yeah, yeah. Comin’.”

A moment later, the diver trotted down the stone steps in his bare feet, fins and net in hand, skipped the last step, and hopped in the boat. The bald man picked up his right leg and stepped down into the well of the boat, turned the engine on, and shifted the gear into drive. I smelled a gasoline belch as the boat rumbled away, and that was when I noticed it, about a 100 yards out: a small, white boat, capsized, its rudder sticking straight up from the water.

There were a half-dozen other divers already out there, floating around the sunken boat like slick, black sea lions. The motorboat dropped anchor near them and the man in the yellow shirt barked instructions, though I couldn't hear them. The divers lined up in the water like buoys and, when the man shouted something, they all disappeared, head first. A second later their fins kicked up behind them and they were gone, down to the bottom of the harbor. They came up a half minute later, all within a few seconds of each other. They lined up again and, when the man in the motorboat shouted, disappeared.

"Do you think they'll find a cadaver?" A lady whispered to her husband next to me. I didn't know what a cadaver was.

"I sure hope not," her paunchy husband replied, not taking his eyes off the divers for a second.

Finally, after a dozen dives, one of the divers came up waving his arms, and the rest swam over to him. They disappeared together, one after the other in the same spot, and were down a long time. The wind was picking up, coming in like sheets off the water, and my teeth began to chatter. But I wasn't moving an inch. I wanted to know what they were going to bring up. I wanted to know what a cadaver was.

When the divers' heads finally broke surface, I could see them shifting about in the water, struggling with something. The motorboat drew closer, partially obscuring our view from the railing. Two divers swam around and climbed up the back into the motorboat. The three divers in the boat leaned over the side, where I couldn't see, and awkwardly pulled and grabbed at something there. The bald man at the wheel just watched, rubbing the back of his neck impatiently. At last, the divers heaved their load into the boat, a blur of white and red.

"Oh my god," the women next to me whispered, covering her mouth with manicured fingers.

I heard the engine chuckle and the motorboat came to life. It looped around the divers still bobbing in the water and headed straight for the wharf. As it neared the wharf, the bald man cut the motor and glided into neutral towards the dock. He looked up briefly and regarded us with irritation. My eyes remained fixed on the boat like the rest of the people around me, silent, trying to get a peek.

Finally, the floor of the boat came into view. A blond man, naked except for a bright red jacket, lay face down on, soaking wet. The woman beside me gasped, and I knew right away he was dead. One of his bare legs crossed over the other at an odd, uncomfortable-looking angle, and his butt was so white it looked blue. Blond hair was plastered to his white scalp. I couldn't see his face, but it didn't matter: I was sure it was my father. I knew just from the back of his head that it was him, dead and naked, his red coat bleeding a cold, gray puddle of seawater all around him.

I dropped off the cement ledge, spun around, and pushed my way through the crowd. Running home, my jelly shoes smacked the pavement, and I felt it like steel rods

up my shins. I turned into the path, skidding a little on the dirt and wiping my face with the back of my arm. I had trouble opening the gate with my small, nervous fingers. On the third try I got the latch up, tore through the gate, and ran to the screen door, pulling it open so hard it slammed into the side of the house.

My mother was still in her room, standing over the suitcase as if pondering something. Her arms were crossed at her waist and I didn't notice then how tired – how profoundly tired of everything – she was. Her face arched into concern as I rushed in, chest heaving and tears streaking my dirty face.

“Tel, what happened?”

“Daddy,” I was able to say, and couldn't go on. I couldn't bring myself to form the words “is dead.” I went to her, just wanting to feel her arms around me.

“What about Daddy? He went to get fish.” She pulled me to her absent-mindedly, let me catch my breath as she stroked my sweaty hair.

“No,” I argued. “No.” My chest heaved up and down. I began to hiccup. “Daddy is—”

From behind me, his joking voice called out, “Daddy is what?” I turned to see him standing there in the hall, next to the galley kitchen, in his khakis and red jacket, zipped up to his throat where a little triangle of tan skin showed through. He held a paper bag in one hand, the fish for lunch. When he saw me crying, he stopped smiling and put the fish on the counter. “What's a matter, kiddo? What happened?”

I just shook my head, relieved.

“What happened, Tellie?” He moved towards us. My mother let go of me and took a step back, folded her arms. I waited until my father came to me, until I hugged him around the waist and felt his cold metal belt buckle against my neck, to speak.

“I just got scared,” I admitted. It was as much of the truth as I wanted to share. I was still afraid; even though I had my arms around him, I couldn’t shake the feeling that it *was* him, lying dead, in the boat.

“Well, you’re OK now. Hey,” he said brightly, “where’s your unicorn?”

I looked down at my empty hands. I must have dropped the bag. “I lost her,” I said, starting to cry again.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you another one this afternoon. Right, Pen?” He looked up, hopeful, at my mother. She glared at him. “We can get another one, right?” he asked her pointedly.

“That’s your favorite solution,” my mom replied, her voice as flat as three-day-old ginger ale. My dad’s face dropped and he looked hard at her.

“Well,” he said, and didn’t say more. He stood up, his knees cracking, and went outside, slamming the front door behind him.

I looked up again at my mother, and her face softened. She plunked a hot kiss on the top of my head, rubbed my back with her hand, and pushed me gently out of their room.

“Go play, Tel. I need to pack.”

When I got to the front door of the cottage, I turned to look back at her. She wasn’t folding or organizing; instead she just stood over the suitcase, her shoulders bobbing up and down, her face covered by a sad hand.

That afternoon, we drove back to Needham and my parents didn't speak to each other once. There was no mention of replacing the unicorn, and I was too afraid to ask.

That night, my dad left.

I watched him from the living room window, calmly packing the trunk of his car with three boxes and a suitcase. He sat me down on our front steps and explained that he was going away, that he loved me, and that he wouldn't be coming back this time.

"Be good to your mom, kiddo," he said, pulling me tight in a bear hug.

"But why?" I asked, crying into his shirtsleeve.

"It's time for me to go. I need to do some things," he said as if this explained everything.

He drove off in his car, a peeling silver Mazda, with a timid wave for me. I waited on the steps for a while, thinking he might change his mind and come back. I looked down the street as far as I could, got hopeful every time I saw a car in the distance. But it was never his.

I went inside to my mother, who sat smoking a cigarette at the dining room table. "Is he coming back, Mom?" I asked, sniffing. She shook her head no without turning to look at me. She took a drag on the cigarette and the tip glowed an angry red.

"Go play, Tellie," she said softly, staring at the wall. "I need to be alone right now."

I found Tuck in his basement, playing video games.

"Hey, T. What's wrong?"

I told him everything. When I finished, Tuck looked worse than I did. I thought he was going to cry. He reached out and took my hand. He had a wart on his index finger and I hoped he wouldn't touch me with it.

"T, it'll be OK," he assured me. "You'll see." He sounded like he desperately wanted to convince me.

"I guess," I replied, feeling the futility of everything: his sweet concern felt so useless against this problem.

"You'll see. I'll make sure of it," he said, nodding. "I'll take care of you, T. I'll even tuck you in at night. Kiss you on the forehead like your dad. Anything."

It was the kindest thing Tuck could say at eight years old. We had been friends since birth, and he had always looked out for me, treated me like a little sister. But I didn't feel any better, and suddenly I just wanted my mom.

When I got home, my mom was washing lettuce for salad. "There you are," she said. "Can you bring in your beach towel from the car and put it in the dryer, please? It will get mildewy out there."

"Yeah," I said, sitting down at the kitchen table.

"Now, Tellie. Before you forget."

"I won't forget."

"I said do it now!"

I pushed the chair in hard against the table, angry that she was being so mean to me. I went out to the car and got my towel, fighting back tears. I stomped past her, the towel dragging behind me, and turned into the downstairs bathroom where the washer

and dryer were. As soon as I closed the door behind me, the tears spilled over. I put the towel in the dryer, mumbling to myself about how unfair she was.

On the way out, I caught my face in the mirror. My dad's face. Everyone always said how much we looked alike, but I had never thought much about it. Now I could see it, too. Something in the eyes, the way our eyebrows turned up at the ends. And I knew then, like a skewer through my heart, that he really wasn't coming back. His eyes, my own staring back at me, told me. He was gone.

I looked at my own reflection, crying, and decided that the only thing I could do, because I couldn't – just couldn't – accept it, was to go and look for him. To go out and find him and bring him home.

But how? I thought to my reflection. You are only eight.



## Epilogue

January 2005, twenty-seven years old

i.

*You are ugly. People look at you in shopping malls, on subway station escalators, on the corner of Seventh and West 4<sup>th</sup>.*

*They see the same thing that stares back out at you from the mirror: a blonde in her late twenties with green eyes, high cheekbones, and a mouth turned down in disappointment. Something truly hideous. Who you are, what you are.*

*You are ugly. You see it in your eyes, eyes that have won you hundreds of compliments over the years, even as a newborn in your mother's arms. Those green eyes that have so easily hunted and trapped, set their sights on something – someone – and gone in for the kill. And now when you look into them you just see ugly names for things you've done. Insults. Low-down, dirty words.*

*But you think you might know how to change it. How to fix things. You think you can find a way to be beautiful again. Or, actually, a way to be beautiful for the first time.*

I didn't want to risk an argument – or worse, a serious discussion – over the phone, so I called Tuck when I knew he'd be at work on Friday and left him a message: "Tuck I'm on the four o'clock train that gets in at seven twenty. I'll be at your place by seven forty-five. Please be there. I have to talk to you. Please just be there."

It has been over a month without speaking to him. At Christmas, I went to my mom and Roger's for the obligatory Christmas-Eve dinner at Carla's, a few presents – sweaters and books mostly – Christmas morning with coffeecake and tea, and then back on a bus again to New York so I could wallow in my own self-pity in private and not risk running into Tuck in the driveway. Christmas Eve night, I lay in bed knowing that he was probably fifty yards away, lying in his bed. I wondered if he was thinking of me. I wondered if he hated me.

I have never, not in all my life, gone so long without speaking to him. It feels like a piece of my heart has been amputated. And sleeping with Patrick last weekend at Caro's party only made things worse. Just remembering that makes me want to take a shower. Poor Patrick. He called me on Wednesday and I haven't returned his call. I won't, either.

Since my talk with Annie, I've spent the week incubating. I haven't gone out, I haven't returned many calls, and mostly I've just cooked for myself, read in bed, and cried frequently. I don't really want to see anyone, but I'm not depressed. I feel like I'm sick and need to be alone. Like I'm healing, the way pink, tender skin emerges under a scab and you see, with relief, it won't scar. Right now, I'm the pink skin when you peel back the scab: an ugly reminder of an accident, sensitive as a blister.

I haven't told anyone about heading to D.C. I brought a bag with me to work today and went straight to the train station, where I called Tuck and left the message. Now, as the train rolls steadily through the D.C. suburb stops, I'm starting to get terrified. What if he's not home? I think. What if he refuses to even speak to me? My heart pounds at the thought of seeing him. My throat closes up. I haven't felt this nervous since I gave my senior chapel speech in high school, a requirement for graduation. Every student had to get up and speak to the whole school for ten minutes about the things most important to them. I spoke about Rockport, about the summers I spent there before my dad left, about eating lobster on the breakers and learning to ride waves. And Tuck was in the audience. He skipped his first period class at Needham High to come hear me give my speech, and my heart quieted when I looked out and saw him sitting there in the senior section, smiling back at me.

"What the hell have I got to lose?" I say under my breath to myself, and across the aisle an older woman as thick as a linebacker, wearing a polyester sweater set, cuts me a suspicious look. I look away, out the window at the lights of D.C. suburbs whizzing by.

When I get out of the taxi and peer up at Tuck's living-room windows, I see a light on. Tuck's lived in the same apartment for five years without a roommate, and Sasha doesn't live with him, a sign – I have always told him – that he's not willing to commit. I pray he's alone right now, though. I think that if Sasha answers the door, I'll crumple like a silk scarf. But then again, if Tuck got my message, he knows better than to have Sasha around. I doubt he's told her anything about what happened between us. If my mom heard right from Tuck's mom about his impending proposal, there's no way he came

clean. Which gives me some hope; if he had come clean, it'd be a sure sign that he really loves her.

It's a clear, cold night and I can see a few stars in the sky as I walk up the building steps. It's hard to imagine those lights come from other galaxies, traversing all that nothingness and poking through our night sky just to give us something to wish on. As I ring the buzzer to Tuck's apartment, I suddenly realize the ridiculousness of wishing on a star. What a stupid concept: thinking that some far-off sun will grant your secret desire. The buzzer sounds back and startles me; I reach for the door before I miss it.

When Tucker opens his front door, there's a look on his face I've never seen before, a hardness I'm not used to and didn't really expect.

"Hey, T," he says neutrally.

"Tuck," I say, trying to make my voice soft and apologetic. I want him to know that this is about being real. About owning up to things. About truly being sorry. He's wearing his favorite navy zip-up hoodie, the one we bought together at Wal-mart four or five years ago. "Can I come in?"

"Of course." He opens the door wide and grabs my bag from me, a gentlemanly gesture, but that's all. There isn't much affection. He closes the door.

"Are you alone?" I ask.

"Yeah." He puts his hands in his hoodie pockets and stares at me, waiting. "What do you want, T? Why'd you come?" He sounds suspicious and a little weary.

"I'm sorry, Tuck. I have really fucked up. And I just want you to know how bad I feel. That's why I came. I talked to Annie last week, and she said you called and..." Tuck hasn't moved, hasn't changed expression. "...and I just had to see you. I needed you to

know how bad I feel.” I look right at him, into his blue eyes. “I’m sorry, Tuck,” I say again, quietly.

“OK.” He still hasn’t moved. His hands in his pockets, he just stands by the closed front door, sizing me up. “Apology accepted.”

“It doesn’t really sound that way. You sound all formal and distant. C’mon, Tuck. I came here to clear this up. To let you know how sorry I really am.”

“OK. Now I know. I appreciate you coming.” I make a doubtful face, and he adds, “I do. I really do. But it doesn’t change anything.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I still feel shitty, T. I still don’t really feel like being around you much.”

“Ouch,” I say.

“Yeah, well you should have thought of that before you did what you did. I just shouldn’t have been so dumb as to think I was any different.”

“No, Tuck. You *are* different. You’re my boy. You’re my best friend. Please don’t give up on me, Tuck. I’m ready to try. To try this with you.”

Tuck huffs, an amused puff of breath. He doesn’t say anything, just looks away at the kitchen door for a minute. “Tuck,” I say, moving towards him and putting a gentle hand on his arm. How many times have I felt Tuck, touched him, and never thought of him as anything but a brother? How many times had I passed on him? I just hadn’t noticed, or hadn’t wanted to. “Please. Please give me a chance. Nothing more. I just want a chance to make this right. To try to let you in. To stop fucking up all the time.” I’m pleading softly, clinging to the soft sweatshirt.

He turns to look at me. "It's too late, T." He says it with a gentleness that is heartbreaking.

"How can it be too late? What about Annie? Why'd you call her then?" I am on the verge of whining. I feel desperate, trying to spoon water with a fork, trying to pull him back to me.

"I was feeling pretty low last week. I wanted to talk to her about it, to just...vent. It was a bad idea. I don't know. I just wanted to talk to someone close to you, but afterwards, I just felt like I knew this wasn't meant to be. That's the truth, T."

"Tuck," I say, but I don't know how to finish the sentence. "OK. OK," I say, looking down at the floor and realizing that in some small place inside of me, I knew this is how it would go. This is how it would end. I let go of his sleeve. "Can I just ask you one question?"

He nods.

"I heard you might propose. To Sasha. Do you really think that's the right thing to do? I mean, after all this?"

"I think it's time for me to move on." He says it simply, without any meanness, and I realize only then how badly I've hurt him. How much he loved me and how I had mistaken it for a sweet, homey crush all these years.

And what can I say to that? This ship has sailed.

I'm able to get a ten o'clock train back to New York. I sit at the far end of the car, two seats to myself, and slump against the window to sleep, but all I can do is think. I can't

stop my mind from spinning. I wish I could just cry, but I feel like that would be selfish. I've done this to myself. There isn't anyone else to blame.

It's late by the time my cab pulls up to my building, quarter past two in the morning. I'm exhausted, a medicine ball of sadness. I hand the driver a twenty, eight dollars more than the fare, and say, "Keep the change."

Inside, I stop to get my mail. As I'm standing there in the foyer, sorting through the junk catalogues, Charles' door squeals open and he and a brunette tumble out, laughing. "Hey, Tellie," he smiles wide, reminding me of a crocodile. "Long time no see." His words are mocking; I think he's drunk. The brunette looks me up and down.

"Hey," she says curtly and looks away, at Charles, to let me know she doesn't think much of me.

"Hold on a sec, Alex," Charles says, and disappears back into the apartment, patting his pants' pockets to check for something. Alex, all 110 pounds of her, stands in the door looking uncomfortable. She feigns interest in her nails, long and squared off, perfectly French manicured.

"You know," I say to her as sweet as I can, "Charles is a really great guy." Alex looks up, surprised. "A total catch." I smile, and she nods, a little unsure.

"Yeah, he's great," she says with a little edge, letting me know she's got dibs on him.

"He is," I assure her. I close the door to my mailbox with a clang, and add, "Just watch out. He has a terrible case of herpes. Really awful." I smile and brush past her up the building stairs, which creak under me.



“What?” she demands from the doorway, her neck craning forward and her arms at her side, slack in disbelief.

“Very contagious,” I call over my shoulder. “Be careful.” I jog the rest of the way up and slam my door. In spite of the day’s horrible events, I smile. At least something good has happened.

I’m exhausted, but I know I can’t sleep. I sit down at the kitchen table and continue to sort through the mail and that’s when I see it: a postcard from Nova Scotia. An aerial view, deep, green forest on a craggy shoreline.

*Telemaka, I’m headed to Montauk in early February. I’ll be staying with friends, and the number’s at the bottom here. Would love to see you. Will you come? Love, Dad.*

I stare at the card for several minutes, reread it a half dozen times. No explanation. No reason for not having written me in years. Just a phone number and an invitation. *Would love to see you. Will you come?*

I sometimes wish I were one of those rancorous people, writing off my dad forever, cruelly telling him all his shortcomings and insisting he never contact me again. But I can’t. It’s just not who I am. Whether I wanted him to be there or not is beside the point. Whether he fucked up or not, whether he hurt me when he left, whether he strung me along for years, whether or not he could have been the hero I wanted – needed – doesn’t matter. I’m his daughter. Will I come? Of course I will. Of course I’ll go to Montauk. Because I’m a part of him, and wherever he goes – whatever silly places he decides to sail to – that won’t change. He made me. No amount of years or oceans between us will ever erase that.

I smile down at the card, the black scrawl I know so well – probably better than his face by now. It’s been almost ten years. And despite being dead tired, I feel the surge of excitement: I’m going to see my dad.

The phone cuts through the silence in the apartment. I jump up, startled, and run to the living room to get it. “Hello?” I ask, and there is no answer. “Hello? Hello?” I’m about to hang up.

“Hey, T.”

“Hey. Oh, *hey*.”

“I just...I just....” Tuck doesn’t finish. There’s something soft in his voice now, and I blurt out the first thing I think.

“I miss you, Tuck.”

“It’s only been four hours, T.” Hearing him tease me feels good, like I’ve been forgiven.

“No, I mean I really miss you. I love you. I love you so much.” I curl into a ball in the corner of my couch, huddle there in the dark. It’s like we’re kids again, connected by the phone, and I’m able to say anything. “I’m so sorry for freaking out. I just wasn’t ready to deal with so much shit, so many *emotions*, you know? But I love you. I really do. And you know what I realized on the train ride back here? You always got me. You just knew exactly what I needed. You’re the only guy in my whole life who has never told me I was beautiful. The only one.” I can hear his breathing and I imagine him the way I still do – a boy of fourteen with frizzy blond hair and breath that smells milky. “The only guy who’s never tried to win me over with that. You saw right through me, you knew that was the worst thing to say. You were the real deal, Tuck.”

“I have been in love with you since I was about four years old.”

“And I blew it. I didn’t see it, or I ran from it. I’m sorry. I’m probably the worst thing that’s ever happened to you.”

He’s quiet for a while and I wonder what he’s thinking. Then he says, with a sharp intake of breath, “Do you remember when your dad left? The day you guys got back from the beach? Do you remember what I said?”

“How could I forget? You said you’d always take care of me. That’d you tuck me in and kiss me on the forehead. It was the sweetest thing ever.”

“What time is it?” My heart sinks. Is he trying to get off the phone? I don’t ever want to get off the phone.

“Two thirty.”

I hear him rustling around with some papers. “If I go this second, I can just make it.”

I fight the urge to cry. “Make what?”

“The three o’clock train. I’m coming to tuck you in.”

“What? Now?”

“When I get there, will you be up? Will you let me in, T?”

I don’t even pause to think. The word escapes me from somewhere deep and long ago, like a piece of wood dragged to the bottom of the ocean and held under. When let go, it shoots for the surface as if it were a matter a survival.

“Yes.”

When I put the phone down, I feel like I’m going to explode with happiness, euphoric about having a second chance.

I look down, grinning, at my hands and realize I'm still holding onto the Nova Scotia postcard. I read it again, imagining the sound of his voice saying the words written there. For the first time in my life, I feel sorry for my father. I've spent so long lamenting his absence that I never realized he was out there, searching, lamenting something he had lost or never had. With a sudden piercing compassion, I hope that my father finds what it is he's looking for someday, because we just can't live adrift forever. At some point, we have to recognize beauty when it's in front of us. And when we do, we need to drop anchor, and say, "I've come back. I'm home."

## Vita

Alexis Wiggins hails from Massachusetts, and she received her B.A. in English from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2000. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Fresh Yarn*, *Ruminator*, and *Creative Nonfiction*, among others. In 2004, she was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She currently divides her time between Madrid and New York.